

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL ROMAN AND LATE ANTIQUE THRACE CONFERENCE

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1892 - 1921 - 1948

SOFIA 2018



PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
FIRST INTERNATIONAL  
ROMAN AND LATE ANTIQUE  
THRACE CONFERENCE

SOFIA 2018

National Archaeological Institute  
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Bulgarian Academy of Sciences



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On the covers: Building inscription on the eastern *parascaenium* of Philippopolis' theatre, AD 116-117  
(photo: N. Minchev); *hedera* carved on the seats of Philippopolis' theatre (photo: N. Sharankov).

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Printed by Bulged Ltd.

ISSN 0323-9535 (print)

ISSN 2603-4603 (online)

ИЗВЕСТИЯ НА НАЦИОНАЛНИЯ АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИ ИНСТИТУТ, ТОМ XLIV, 2018  
BULLETIN OF THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE, XLIV, 2018



National Archaeological Institute with Museum  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL ROMAN AND LATE ANTIQUE THRACE CONFERENCE

“CITIES, TERRITORIES AND IDENTITIES”  
(PLOVDIV, 3<sup>RD</sup> – 7<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2016)

EDITED BY  
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SOFIA 2018



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## Preface

Can Balkan researchers of Antiquity work together – and systematically – on a common topic?

The present volume is an expression of precisely this kind of scientific and organisational collaboration.

At the end of 2015 we put forward a suggestion to our neighbours with whom we share the geographic area of Thrace: to establish a series of academic conferences dedicated to Thrace's Roman and Late antique history. At that time, we did not expect such vast international interest. Eventually, it justified the choice of topic and gave meaning to our effort to be good hosts of the first edition of the conference in Plovdiv in the autumn of 2016.

Dear Chrysa (Karadima) and Mustafa (Sayar), thank you for believing in the idea and turning it into reality – as hosts, partners and friends!

Let us hope to be good Marathon-runners!

Sofia, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2018  
*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lyudmil Vagalinski*  
(Director of NAIM-BAS)

# Thracian Influence in Asia Minor Mystery Cults in the Eastern Parts of the Roman Provinces in the Central Balkans<sup>1</sup>

Nadežda GAVRILOVIĆ VITAS

**Abstract:** During the period of Roman rule in the Central Balkan Roman provinces, among other oriental cults, like the Syrian cult of Sol Invictus or the Persian cult of Mithras, Asia Minor deities and theologies were considerably favoured. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence confirms the existence of the cults of Magna Mater, Attis, Iuppiter Dolichenus, Sabazius, Iuppiter Turmasgades, Iuppiter Melanus, Mên, and Artemis of Ephesus. However, in the eastern parts of the Central Balkan Roman provinces, certain religious syncretism is emphasized, which can be connected to the strong Thracian influence in the mentioned territory. This paper examines the ways and the degree to which Thracian culture penetrated the religious beliefs and funerary rites of the population that inhabited the eastern parts of the Central Balkans in Antiquity.

**Key words:** Asia Minor cults, Central Balkans, mystery religions, funerary rites, snake.

## INTRODUCTION

In the period of Antiquity, particularly during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD, in the territory of the Roman provinces in the Central Balkans many cults of oriental provenance flourished. Among them, beside the cult of Mithras, as most influential prevailed the Metroac and the Iuppiter Dolichenus ones, but also cults like that of Sabazius had their devotees, particularly in the eastern parts of the Central Balkans. The reasons for such popularity of mystery religions are quite understandable – as a form of a more personal religion, depending on a private decision of the participant, quite voluntary and of secretive character, mystery cults offered hope of rebirth after death – to summarize, *blessedness* in eternity (Burkert 1987, 12, 21, 99-101; Turcan 1996, 18-22, 24-26). Through very emotional liturgies, arousing strong feelings in ordinary audiences and aiming at some form of salvation through closeness to the god or goddess in question during the ritual of initiation, mystery religions promised eternal life to their *mystai*. The whole religious experience was further enhanced by myths, nature allegories or metaphysics, on which sacred tales of mysteries were based, but also by colourful festivals full of music and dance, visual effects (the look of mystery priests, nocturnal liturgies, sacrifice rituals etc.) and initiation rituals (Burkert 1987, 89; Alvar 2010, 10, 146-148, 216-221)<sup>2</sup>. Some of the mystery texts were saved in, for example, Greek romances like *The Golden Ass*, Gnostic and Hermetic literature, Egyptian papyri and the writings of early Christian authors; archaeology also provides infor-

<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of the work conducted within the project *Romanization, urbanization and transformation of urban centres of civilian and military character in the Roman provinces in the territory of Serbia* (# 177007), financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

<sup>2</sup> As W. Burkert describes, mystery religions were based on a 'sacred tale' (*hieros logos*), presumably contained in a book (Burkert 1987, 69-70). Ancient writers like Aristophanes and Diodorus of Sicily note that Greeks thought that Orpheus was an inventor and teacher of rituals (*teletai*), particularly those in connection with Dionysus. Of course, in the writings of Pindar, Plato, Empedocles and Parmenides, the essence of the above mentioned sacred tale is present and it is very clearly pointed out by the stoic Chrysippus, who believed that the transmission of *logoi* is of essential importance for the performing of *teletai*: see Burkert 1987, 70; Graf / Johnston 2007, 62, 229.

mation – for example, in the wall paintings of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii or at Dura Europos. Of course, each mystery religion had its own form of organization, whether it was the clergy at a sanctuary, a *thiasos* or a *collegium* – we find out about them through votive or funerary inscriptions, like the votive monument found in the locality of Turres (now Pirot), dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. and dedicated to *Theos epēkoos Hypsistos*, by his *thiasos*<sup>3</sup>.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

As for epigraphic and archaeological testimonies to Asia Minor cults and the possible Thracian influence, alas, in terms of the Metroac cult of Magna Mater and Attis, as well as concerning the cult of Iuppiter Dolichenus, there are none. The cult of the Asia Minor Great Goddess, the Phrygian and Hellenistic Cybele and the Roman Magna Mater, has been confirmed mainly in the northern, central and southern parts of the Central Balkan Roman provinces, with clearly outlined Roman influence in the northern parts and emphasized Hellenistic impact in the central and southern areas of the mentioned territory<sup>4</sup>. As for the cult of the goddess' consort Attis, apart from a few archaeological finds, it is confirmed mostly by funerary monuments with the image of *Attis tristis* (*Attis funerarius*), concentrated in some areas in the territory of the Central Balkans – in the area of Podrinje and Polimlje, except for several monuments from the locality of Municipium S[---] where the syncretism with the Mithras is expressed in the detail of a torch in the god's hand (Gavrilović 2010, 102, cat. 29, 34, 35, 51, 52), or in the locality of Komini, where syncretism with the Illyrian Silvanus is perceived in the oversized genitalia of Attis' body (Medini 1981, 174, # 135). A similar situation can be observed in regard to the cult of Iuppiter Dolichenus – confirmed by 17 epigraphic monuments – whose popularity was at its height in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, when many of the sculptures, statues and objects representing the image of the god and his *paredra* Iuno Dolichena are dated.

However, the situation completely changes in the case of an Asia Minor-Thracian deity – Sabazius<sup>5</sup>. The cult of Sabazius is confirmed by two epigraphic monuments, along which different archaeological monuments represent testimonies to how popular this deity was among the inhabitants of the Central Balkans<sup>6</sup>. This fact can probably be attributed to the strong cultural and spiritual influence and popularity of the cult of Sabazius in neighbouring Thrace. As it is well known, the cult of Sabazius was quite popular in Moesia Inferior and Thrace, and is confirmed through 17 epigraphic monuments and various archaeological objects (marble votive tablets, bronze and ivory Sabazius hands), dating between the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Tacheva-Hitova 1983, 180-181). It can hardly remain unperceived, however, that another god enjoyed even greater popularity in the Roman provinces of the Central Balkans – Dionysus. Unlike Sabazius, Dionysus represented undoubtedly a Greek god and the influence of Dionysian beliefs was so strong in the Central Balkans during the period of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, that even today relicts of Dionysian theology can be recognized in the folklore tradition of Eastern Serbia, primarily among Vlach population, in the celebration of agrarian feasts and the cult of the dead<sup>7</sup>. The popularity of these two gods in the eastern and southern parts of the Central

<sup>3</sup> The votive monument from Turres dedicated to *Theos epēkoos Hypsistos* by his *thiasos* provoked very different opinions among scholars, basically because of the word Σεβαζίανος, which some authors, like A. von Domaszewski, M. Rostovtzeff, M. Macrea, Ch. Picard, Sh. E. Johnson and P. R. Trebilco, accepted to be the name of Sabazius and therefore concluded that the monument was dedicated to a Sabazian *thiasos* (and not such of Zeus Hypsistos). Other scholars, however, like D. Detschew, B. Gerov, M. Tacheva-Hitova and I. Levinskaya, thought that the word Σεβαζίανος represented a personal name and not the name of the god and, therefore, the monument is a dedication to Theos Hypsistos by his *thiasos*, see Gavrilović 2010, 243-247.

<sup>4</sup> However, no solid arguments for a deeper knowledge among the Romanized population in the Central Balkans on the subject of Metroac religion and theology, nor the existence of temples, *cognatio*, *collegia dendrophorum* or the practice of *taurobolium* or *criobolium* rituals, have been confirmed so far.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars like T. Eisel, H. Schaefer, F. Cumont, Ch. Picard and M. Macrea were of the opinion that Sabazius represented an ancestral Thracian deity, that is the god of Thracio-Phrygian tribes, while authors like M. Tacheva-Hitova, Sh. E. Johnson and R. Gicheva thought that Sabazius was of Anatolian, that is Phrygian, origin (Gavrilović 2010, 127-129). In E. N. Lane's detailed examination of ancient sources, it can be clearly seen how they differed too on the subject of Sabazius' origin (in the context of the god's relation to another deity of similar functions, Dionysus) – Aristophanes, Lucian, Cicero, Hesychius, Clement of Alexandria and Arnobius thought that he was a Phrygian god, while Diodorus Siculus and Cicero regarded Sabazius as an early form of Dionysus. Strabo thought that he was a Phrygian (in some way son of a Great Goddess) and Mnaseas of Patara wrote that Sabazius was Dionysus' son (Lane 1989, 54-60).

<sup>6</sup> The cult of Sabazius was confirmed by an epigraphic monument from the locality Kuline (his name in Greek also appears on a marble plate found in the Više globalja necropolis in Viminacium) and several archaeological monuments, see Gavrilović 2010; 2015, 340-342.

<sup>7</sup> K. Rabadjiev writes that some aspects of Dionysus (his association with the solar cult, his popularity among the Thracian elite and his image on royal coins) may suggest assimilation between a similar indigenous Thracian god and Dionysus (Rabadjiev 2015, 446).

Balkan Roman provinces can be attributed to the strong influence of Thracian spiritual and religious beliefs, mainly routed by Thracian inhabitants and soldiers who were stationed in bigger and important centres like Naissus and Timacum Minus, but also in the inland parts of the Central Balkans.

## DISCUSSION

Although the influence of Thracian culture is confirmed in epigraphic monuments and archaeological material, more explicit impact on mystery religions that existed in the discussed territory can be noticed in the specific funeral features of a few graves from the Late Roman necropolis at Slog in Timacum Minus, where essential beliefs in rebirth and celestial immortality – common to all mystery cults – have been registered. The necropolis constitutes part of a larger necropolis, located near the fortress and settlement of Timacum Minus in the village Ravna, near Knjaževac<sup>8</sup>. Archaeological excavations which started in 1975 identified Timacum Minus as the administrative centre of the mining region of *Territoria metallorum* in Moesia Superior, later in the provinces of Dacia Ripensis and Dacia Mediterranea. The earliest fortification was built at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. and abandoned after the Hunnic invasion in the Morava Basin in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. To the north and south of the fortress of Timacum Minus, a civil settlement was formed, with *thermae* from the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. (to the northeast of the fort), urban villas, workshops, temples and necropolises (Petrović 1995; Petković et al. 1995, 16-17). The large necropolis of Slog was excavated from 1994 to 1996, with rescue excavations continuing in 2013 and 2014. One hundred and forty graves were discovered, of which 75 were dated to the Late Roman period<sup>9</sup>. It is necessary to emphasize here that the period to which the graves were dated represents a period of religious syncretism in people's beliefs, but also in practice – as Gwynn and Bangert (2010, 1-8) observe, an 'ever increasing religious diversity between religions and also within religions', which, as a consequence, presents a perplexity for scholars in their interpretation of archaeological evidence. Bearing this in mind, our thoughts and hypotheses about the funeral rite observed in the case of the Late Roman necropolis of Slog must not be comprehended as final.

As already mentioned, certain graves from the Late Roman necropolis of Slog drew our attention to the possible Thracian influence on funerary rites performed in connection with some mystery religion. In the grave of a four-year-old boy (grave # 53) whose cause of death could not be determined, egg-shells were found, while at his right side a snake skeleton was laid lengthwise, parallel to the child's body (fig. 1)<sup>10</sup>. The snake was killed before being deposited in the tomb, so its purpose as an offering to the protector deity of the deceased, is more than clear. As grave goods, egg-shells have been found all over the Roman Empire, both in inhumation graves, and in or around cremation urns, regardless of social status (Alcock 1980, 56-57; Watts 2014, 42). However, it is interesting to note that egg-shells have been mostly found in women's and children's graves<sup>11</sup>. This kind of grave goods, apart from its obvious role as funerary offerings, i.e. food deposited for the deceased, has been interpreted as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration. As Nilsson believes, the egg is a potent principle of life with special vital power to awake or enhance the vital powers of those

<sup>8</sup> As archaeological excavations showed (at the site Kuline), the earliest fortification of Timacum Minus was garrisoned by *cohors I Thracum Syriaca*, then *cohors II Aurelia Dardanorum*, until the late 4<sup>th</sup> c., when *pseudocomitatenses Timacenses auxilarii* came. The fortification was reconstructed in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. and archaeological excavations also confirmed building activities in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. (Petković et al. 2005, 13-15).

<sup>9</sup> The 75 graves belonging to the Roman period were dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. (Petković et al. 2005, 18). From 140 excavated graves, 75 graves with remains of 78 individuals belonged to the Roman period and 65 graves to the Middle Ages (the early medieval necropolis was dated from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> c., judging by the grave goods found in the graves). All deceased were buried, and beside the individual graves, 7 graves belong to the so-called 'double graves' (four inhumations of two deceased individuals in the same burial pit and three graves divided in two chambers), (Petković et al. 2005, 134).

<sup>10</sup> The remains of egg-shells were found at the left side of the boy's skull.

<sup>11</sup> Analogies for egg-shells as grave goods are known from various Roman provinces and are numerous. However, our analysis of the graves with egg-shells from neighbouring Roman provinces (for example, the Dalmatian localities Gajine, Plana, Brodski Drenovac, Župa Dubrovačka etc.), show that egg-shells have been found beside the deceased or placed under his or her hand, again in women's and children's graves (Petković et al. 2016, 23).

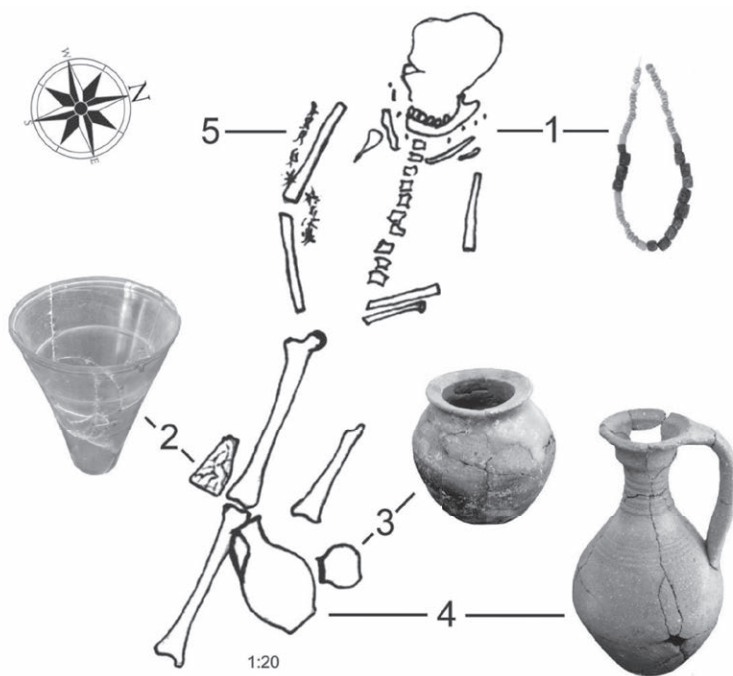


Fig. 1. Grave # 4, Late Roman necropolis at Slog, Timacum Minus  
(after Petković et al. 2016, 89, Plate 1)



Fig. 2. Grave # 53, Late Roman necropolis at Slog, Timacum Minus  
(after Petković et al. 2016, 91, Plate III)

to whom it is offered (Nilsson 1907, 530-546), so its eschatological dimension is very clearly underlined<sup>12</sup>. As for placing the egg-shells in the context of pagan religions, it is well known that the egg was one of the attributes of the Dionysian mysteries and, having in mind the Orphic concept by which the world is an egg where the god comes from (therefore, as grave good, the egg represents a symbol of new life, rebirth and immortality), further elaboration is not necessary. But apart from egg-shells in the boy's grave, by his right side the skeleton of a snake was also found, placed in a parallel position with the body of the deceased. It is generally known that the snake accompanies different deities, but it is most frequently the faithful companion of Dionysus, his Asia Minor-Thracian counterpart Sabazius, healer-god Asclepius and goddess Hygieia. The cult of Dionysus has not been epigraphically confirmed in Timacum Minus, although a corpus of monuments related to the god implies that his cult was not only known, but indeed very popular in this part of the Roman Empire (Petković et al. 2016, 39-50). In the theology and iconography of Dionysus, as a hypostasis of the god, the snake has a chthonic, eschatological and apotropaic dimension, and is usually shown beside or behind the deity, or at the bottom of the scene and inside or next to a *cista mistica*. Regarded as a chthonic and fertility symbol, the snake represented the respective functions of Dionysus.

In the context of the possibility of the cult of Dionysus being associated with the funerary rites in the grave from the Slog necropolis, the thought of another deity with similar functions imposes itself – Sabazius. The snake represents a basic zoomorphic image of the god himself, judging by Demosthenes' passage in *De Corona*, the narrative by Theophrastus in *Characters*, and the writings by Clement of Alexandria, Firmicus Maternus and Arnobius (Lane 1989, 52-53,

<sup>12</sup> In eschatological context, the egg symbolizes resurrection and new life, therefore the remains of egg-shells in children's graves bear a very clear message – the hope of their rebirth, since they were taken from this world too young.

<sup>13</sup> E. N. Lane (1989, 59-60) analyses the writings of all ancient sources and notes that Arnobius called the rites *Sebadia*, implying sexual stimulation of the initiates by the act (passing of the snake from the top of the clothing to its bottom).

<sup>14</sup> As it is confirmed, too, by the monuments from the territory of the Central Balkans (bronze statue of a pine tree with Sabazius' bust, pine cone, eagle and snake from Vidin; three ivory hairpins with heads in the shape of so-called hands of Sabazius making the *benedictio latina* gesture from Pontes and Viminacium; a gem of a gold ring with the image of a standing Sabazius turned towards a column with a snake from the locality Vinik, near Naissus), (Gavrilović 2010, 137-147). For Sabazius monuments from Moesia Inferior and Thrace, see Tacheva-Hitova 1983, 162-181.

<sup>15</sup> Demosthenes mentions Aeschines' (his opponent's) involvement in a Sabazius cult, and the initiation ritual, describing it as a nocturnal event, during which the initiates were wearing fawn-skins and were cleansed with mud and bran. After the purification, the devotees said the formula '*I have left evil, I have found the better*', which marked the end of their successful initiation to the cult (Dillon 2002, 159-160).

<sup>16</sup> For the complete bibliography on the subject of Sabazius votive hands see Gavrilović 2010, 138-139.

<sup>17</sup> The earliest datable Sabazius monument is a bronze hand found in the Roman camp at Dangstetten, South Germany, dated from 15 to 9 BC, followed by several votive hands from Pompeii and Herculaneum (Lane 1989, 9-10).

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that an enclave or a small community of people from Asia Minor existed in Timacum Minus already, venerating the deities of Asia Minor origin, since anthropological analysis showed that three female skeletons, from the earliest burial horizon of the necropolis of Slog (graves ## 8, 9 and 42) were of oriental origin (Petković et al. 2005, 145).

<sup>19</sup> Female dedicants to Sabazius from the Roman period are: Attia Celerina, from the inscription of a marble statue from Rome (Lane 1985, 29, # 58); Servilia, from an inscription on a stone tablet (Lane 1985, 31, # 63) and Myrtina from a bronze statue of a boar on a base-plate (of unknown provenance, now in the British Museum), (Lane 1985, 36, # 76).

59-60). The works of the last three authors mention that in Sabazian mysteries an initiation ritual was performed by putting a golden snake through the garments of the initiated (the golden snake symbolizing Sabazius)<sup>13</sup>. This act meant the union of the believer with the God, because the snake was his embodiment and thus, the performed act represented the initiation of the devotee to the Sabazian mysteries. As in other mystery rituals, the basic idea of an initiation ritual was the symbolic death and rebirth of the devotee – the day of the initiation constituted a new birthday, for the initiated was *natus et renatus*. In almost all so far known archaeological monuments of Sabazius, the snake is present, thus making it an important part of his iconography<sup>14</sup>.

Furthering the hypothesis that the funeral rite from the Late Roman Slog necropolis could mirror the beliefs contained in Sabazian mysteries, in another grave (grave # 4), where a young woman was buried, a snake skeleton was found wrapped above her elbow (fig. 2). Like in grave # 53, the snake was first killed and then put around the upper arm of the deceased. We cannot help but remember Demosthenes' description of religious ceremonies, where worshippers (although not namely of Sabazius), with wreaths on their heads, were dancing on the streets, squeezing snakes and lifting them over their heads while shouting '*Euoi Saboi*', which led some of the ancient scholars to assume that the ritual was in connection with Sabazius (Lane 1989, 53-54)<sup>15</sup>. However, there is another element which should be considered in the context of the possible influence of the Sabazius cult on the ritual of placing a snake around the arm of the deceased – that is the characteristic artefacts known as Sabazius votive hands<sup>16</sup>. These bronze artefacts represent a right hand with three fingers pointed up, with various attributes on them like animals, plants, objects, musical instruments etc.<sup>17</sup> Frequently, there is a snake coiled around the wrist of the hand, thus signifying that the votive hands of Sabazius bore clear eschatological and apotropaic dimensions of putting the dedicant under the god's protection. Turning towards the possibility of the existence of a Sabazius cult in Timacum Minus: one votive monument dedicated to *Sabazius Paternus Augustus* was found in the locality, implying foreign, possibly Thracian or Asia Minor origin of the dedicant (Petrović 1995, 70-71, # 13)<sup>18</sup>. We should mention as the geographically closest analogy a votive monument from Tures (Piro; in the province of Thrace), dedicated to *Sabazios Kyrios*, who was venerated with that epithet also in several other monuments discovered in Thrace (votive monuments from Serdica, Tacheva-Hitova 1983, 166, # 8; village of Dragoman, Ibid., 168, # 12; village of Tavalichevo, Ibid., 169, # 15; Sportela (Rila), Ibid., 170, # 16). Although not confirmed in epigraphic monuments from the Central Balkans (in the context of the female name of Sabazius' dedicant), women were allowed in Sabazius' worship, as for example can be observed in a plaque from Ampurias where a woman is making an offering at an altar (Lane 1985, 40, # 85), and they constituted significant part of his devotees, maybe even priestesses (Lane 1989, 43)<sup>19</sup>.

Whether it was particularly the cult of Sabazius or not, in terms of the funerary rites performed in the Slog necropolis, the question of dead snakes put on the body of the deceased, i.e. the placing of snakes as grave goods, is raising some other thoughts as well, in connection to grave goods consisting of animal figurines in the shape of a snake,



and jewellery in the shape of a snake or a snake's head (also found in the graves as grave goods). The example of the Rhineland graves show that various animal figurines were discovered in them as grave goods, like objects in the shape of lizards, frogs, tortoises, but also snakes. As Green points out, the analysis of the objects suggests a clear religious context of one of the mystery cults – probably of Sabazius or the Cabiri (Green 1981, 265). In that context, it is necessary to emphasize again that the period to which the graves from the Slog Necropolis are dated is the period of Late Antiquity and religious syncretism, when Dionysian eschatological ideas could have been transferred to the underworld in different ways, sometimes not so transparent – for example, objects like small terracotta maenads in the hand of the deceased, were found in a grave, probably symbolizing, as S. Cole writes, 'a talisman of initiation or a reminder of the rewards that initiation guarantees' (1980, 237). Bearing in mind that the snake as a symbol in mystery religions has various meanings (chthonic, apotropaic, eschatological), but also represents a zoomorphic image of different mystery gods (Dionysus, Sabazius etc.), and a faithful companion of other deities like Asclepius and Hygieia, it is possible that its placing in the grave bore complex symbolism in which it is quite impossible to isolate one primary meaning or belief<sup>20</sup>.

With regard to snake-shaped jewellery as grave goods, one must tread very carefully, since not all examples of chains with snake pendants, gems with snake images, bracelets with ends shaped like stylized snake protomes etc., can be regarded in a religious context<sup>21</sup>. However, in the particular case of the Slog necropolis, bracelets with ends shaped as stylized snake protomes have been found in three Late Roman graves (Petković et al. 2005, 71, 75-76) and one cannot help but question whether these items of jewellery represented cult paraphernalia and were worn in ritual rites or formal worship. Again, whether the jewellery of this kind was integral part of the costume of female inhabitants in Timacum Minus, or held some other symbolism, possibly in a religious context, remains an open question.

While discussing snake symbolism, we cannot omit the thought of the cult of Hygieia perhaps being connected in some way, not only in the terms of snake jewellery as grave goods, but also in the religious context of the Late Roman graves with snake skeletons. The cults of Asclepius and Hygieia enjoyed great popularity in the Central Balkan provinces and in Thrace as well<sup>22</sup>, and it is possible that in some way maybe, the influence of a Hygieia cult could be reflected in religious rituals and funerary rites<sup>23</sup>. Among other functions, as protectress of women's health in all stages of their life and women's well-being, Hygieia was also protectress of children, their health and their prosperity, and in that context, her protection could have been sought not only in this world, but also in the next one<sup>24</sup>.

At the end of the elaboration about the possible identity of the cult practices and mystery religion in question, and the strong Thracian influence on funeral rites in the Slog Necropolis in Timacum Minus, it is important to emphasize the continuation of the ritual of placing a snake in graves in the Middle Ages as well. Snake skeletons have been found in medieval graves ## 11, 37 and 73 (along with egg-shells, Petković et al. 2005, 182, # 11, 186, # 37, 190-191, # 73)<sup>25</sup> and these examples show not only the conservatism of funeral rites performed in

<sup>20</sup> On snake symbolism in the Central Balkans in pre-Roman and Roman periods, see Šašel Kos 1991, 183-193.

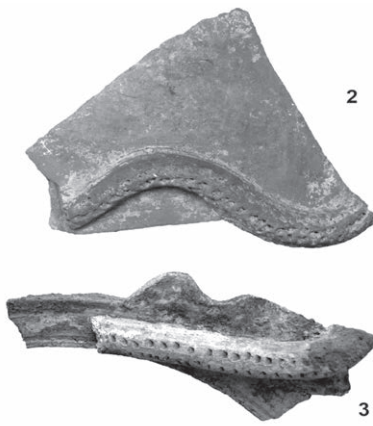
<sup>21</sup> Very interesting and useful considerations about snake jewellery hoards in Roman Britain and the same kind of dilemma – whether this type of jewellery can be regarded in a religious context and if it can, of which religion, are presented by H. E. M. Cool (2000, 29-40). In the author's opinion, the majority of finger-rings with the image of a snake are clearly depicting the Asclepian snake and in that context, a short review of the snake as a sacred animal of different deities like Asclepius, Mercury, Sabazius, Mithras, Glycon etc., is presented. However, H. E. M. Cool restrains herself from a final characterisation of snake jewellery, since she proposes that it could have been votive deposits to a certain deity or maybe that this kind of jewellery presented objects with a definite cult dimension, probably an apotropaic and/or eschatological one (Cool 2000, 39-40).

<sup>22</sup> The majority of epigraphic and archaeological monuments confirm the cults of Asclepius and Hygieia in the Roman provinces of the Central Balkans, as in Moesia Inferior and Thrace. As for the snake as a symbol of Asclepius and a companion of Hygieia, a zoomorphic image of a snake as Asclepius from Epidaurus' Asclepium, was sent to Rome in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC, thus making the god entering the city as his epiphany – the snake.

<sup>23</sup> Iconographic presentations of Hygieia established as early as the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC present the goddess almost always with a snake (and a *patera*), and some of the known images, for example a marble sculpture from the House of the Abduction of Europa in Kos (dated to AD 150-200), represent Hygieia holding a snake and offering it an egg (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, 25).

<sup>24</sup> I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Dilyana Boteva, for her thoughts and constructive suggestions, during our talk on the subject of protectress-goddesses.

<sup>25</sup> A question of possible Orphic beliefs and expressed hopes for the deceased in the underworld also arises, since it has been noted that in mediaeval grave # 73, the bones of the snake were found by the right upper arm and in the area of stomach of the deceased female, with egg-shells (as in Late Roman grave # 4, of a four-year-old boy). To our knowledge, three or four of the Orphic tablets were found in women's graves (two from Pelina, one from Hipponion and one presumably from Rome, now in the British Museum (Gitcheva 2002, 934; Guthrie 1993, 174).



**Fig. 3.** Fragments of ceramic vessels ornamented with a snake motif from Timacum Minus (after Petković et al. 2016, 92, Pl. IV, figs. 2-3)

Without any intention of entering into a deeper elaboration of Orphic beliefs regarding the hopes and the fate of the soul after death, it is an intriguing thought that a snake placed inside the grave could have had the same role as the Orphic tablets put in the graves of the deceased – beside other symbolism, to present the carrier of the belief in life after death and resurrection, with an apotropaic dimension (with its clear symbolism as a chthonic animal) and eschatological function for the deceased.

<sup>26</sup> F. Staehelin bases his hypothesis about the snake vessels belonging to the Sabazius cult on the fact that some vessels with the images of reptiles, lion, eagle etc., are very similar to the attributes presented on the votive hands of Sabazius (Staehelin 1948, 551-556). However, in her analysis of the vessels from Vindonissa, E. Ettlinger observes the similarity between the shape of the Vindonissa snake vessels and the cult vessels from Mithraic reliefs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD, although no Mithraeum has been found in Vindonissa (Ettlinger 1951, 111; Alvar 2008, 380).

the locality, but also the continuous religious beliefs of the population which inhabited these parts of the Central Balkans.

As for the presence of mystery religions in Timacum Minus, evidence of other mystery cults' existence is possible, since finds like the marble plaque with an image of Iuppiter Dolichenus, the head of a fragmented Sarapis statue and epigraphic monuments dedicated to Mithras were found in this area, all of which can be partly attributed to soldiers who constituted *cohors I Thracum Syriaca*, which was relocated from Asia Minor and garrisoned in Timacum Minus, and partly to an enclave or a community of people of oriental origin. In addition, some facts favour the hypothesis that cults of Asia Minor deities and the knowledge of mystery religions and probably cult practices were known to a certain part of Timacum Minus' inhabitants:

1. Fragments of ritual ceramic vessels plastically decorated with snakes have been found in the fort of Timacum Minus (**fig. 3**). These vessels, usually large amphorae or two- or three-handled krater vases, have ornaments in the form of a snake on the recipient and/or handles (Petković et al. 2016, 33). This kind of vessels has been found in other Roman provinces, in secular or funerary context (Collins-Clinton 1977, 33; Swoboda 1937, 1). Although most of the scholars are inclined to attribute this kind of vessels to Mithraic cult practices (Swoboda 1937, 1-27; Beck 2000, 145-180; Clauss 2000), the discovery of so-called 'snake vessels' in localities such as Lentia, Isthmia, Vindonissa, Timacum Minus, Viminacium etc. question the function of these vessels solely in the cult of Mithras. Authors like Staehelin, Collins-Clinton and recently Alvar discussed the question, with no definite answer<sup>26</sup>. Our opinion is that, on the one hand, vessels ornamented with motifs in the shape of a snake have not been found solely in Sabazian context and therefore their certain use in Sabazius cult rites cannot be confirmed, but on the other hand, there is no argument either that they were not used in Sabazian cult rituals as well. Unfortunately, the exact place and context of discovery of these fragmented vessels with snake ornaments in Timacum Minus is not known, but their existence affirms their relation to the content of the rituals of a certain mystery religion.

2. The undoubted strong influence of Thracian religion has been confirmed in Timacum Minus, with the discovery of a marble votive plate with the image of Zeus Zbelsurdos, a Thracian deity assimilated to Zeus, whose name loosely translated supposedly means 'light, lightning', and makes him analogous to the Geto-Dacian god Gebeleizis (Tudor 1978, 1276). On the marble plate from Timacum Minus, Zeus Zbelsurdos is presented naked, holding a lightning bolt in his raised right hand, while he feeds two snakes with raised heads, with his left hand (**fig. 4**). By his left shoulder, an eagle is presented standing on a branch. The somewhat crude and unskilfully modelled relief with a Zeus Zbelsurdos image from Timacum Minus is analogous in an iconographic aspect to a more skilfully made marble relief from Alba Iulia, where the god is presented also nude (apart from the himation over his back), with a raised right hand, in which he holds a fragmented lightning bolt, while his left hand is placed on a snake's head (Popa / Popa 1982, 353-355, pl. VIII-IX, fig. 1-3).

3. Specific iconographic syncretism, which may mirror the religious beliefs in mystery cults of the inhabitants of the south-eastern

parts of the Central Balkan Roman provinces, and a certain Thracian influence, can be perhaps observed in the very interesting gem from a golden ring found in the grave of a wealthy citizen from Vinik (Naissus), dated from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. (fig. 5). On the gem, a figure of a standing mature, bearded man in a short chiton, presented in profile, turned towards a column with a snake coiling around it. The god has a helmet on his head, he holds a staff in his right hand and an unidentified round-shaped object in his left hand (perhaps a pine cone?), which he is giving to a snake. On the top of the column is an eagle and in front of the god – a four-legged animal (a ram?). It is clear that we are dealing with a syncretistic image of Sabazius, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars and Attis. We are not aware of a direct iconographic analogy, but strong similarities can be observed in a bust of Sabazius from the Vatican Museum and in a mould with the negative of Sabazius' image from Zadar (Gavrilović 2010, 143, 292 etc., for further iconographic analogies). The placement of the ring in a funerary context (as a grave good) and the very complex syncretistic rendition which assimilates the zoomorphic representations of Jupiter (eagle) and Mars (ram), and attributes of Mercury (helmet) and Attis (the staff probably represents a *pedum*), point to its apotropaic, soteriological and eschatological symbolism, which it had for the deceased, in their journey to the underworld.

### CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, there are no elements upon which it would be possible to estimate how well or not the inhabitants of the eastern parts of the Central Balkan Roman provinces were acquainted with mystery religions, theologies and rituals, but the strong cultural and religious influence from their western neighbours in Thrace did not cease with the end of Antiquity – in medieval burials in Timacum Minus, we find snake skeletons again, in tombs where children and women were buried, and as in Late Roman graves, snakes were killed before the burial and placed around the waist, right arm or beside the body of the deceased. The continuity of belief in afterlife and rebirth, along with evident eschatological and soteriological aspects, is clear.

The relicts of Dionysian beliefs, regardless of the subsequent Christian superstructure, are very strong in the folklore tradition of today's eastern Serbia, among Vlach population, as we already mentioned – they celebrate the agrarian feast associated with a belief in the cyclical renewal of nature and life, reincarnation and immortality of the soul, which is again in connection with the autochthonous tradition of worship and ritual practices in the Dionysus cult. The contemporary celebration includes the ecstatic trance of the consecrated women called *rusalja* – which is derived from the Vulgar Latin name for a Roman holiday of Dionysian type, the *Rosalia* – and who are believed to communicate with the dead. A similar custom can be recognized in the Bulgarian ritual Lazaruvane, especially in its eastern Bulgarian version *Buenek*, a traditional festival possibly connected to the *Brumalia*, dedicated to *Dionysos Bromios* in Antiquity (Gitcheva 2002, 927-940), when, with songs and dance, the belief in life after death was celebrated.



Fig. 4. Marble relief of Zeus Zbelsurdos, from Timacum Minus (after Petković et al. 2016, 93, Plate V, fig. 5)



Fig. 5. Syncretistic representation of Sabazius on golden ring from Vinik, Naissus (after Јовановић 1977, 87-90, сл. 1)

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