



In memory of Zharin Velichkov

Lead plaques of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* and the surrounding territory

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ABSTRACT

The lead plaques of the so-called Danubian Riders significantly outnumber their stone counterparts. In the last fifteen years several new items have been discovered in Sofia and its surrounding territory. The reliefs have identical form and iconography which suggests their manufacturing in the same workshop that should be located in *Serdica* according to the recent finds. The archaeological context of the monuments provides good evidence for the date of the reliefs in the last quarter of the 3rd – beginning of the 4th c. AD. Several characteristics of the plaques suggest their use rather as phylacteries and personal amulets or in domestic shrines. The growing influence of Christianity most probably is the reason for discarding the discussed reliefs of the Danubian Riders around the middle of the 4th c. AD.

KEYWORDS

Lead plaques, Danubian Riders, *Serdica*, cult

Introduction

The monuments of the so-called Danubian Riders are spread mostly in the territories of the Middle and Lower Danube provinces of the Roman empire – two Pannonias, two Moesias and Dacia. Significantly smaller is their number in other provinces as Dalmatia, Thracia and Noricum (Tudor 1976, 52; Szabó 2017, 13). In the last decades, the number of items has increased almost nine times especially with finds from the territories of modern Serbia and Hungary (see Ertl 1996; Szabó 2017, 12; Malbašić 2021, 223–224; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 157–159). New monuments are published from Bulgaria as well (Tacheva 2000, 240–248; Tsarov 2004; Lyubenova 2008; Ivanov 2011; Gushterakliev, Dimitrova 2017, 116, № 446). The primary aim of this article is to publish several new lead plaques from *Serdica* that form a homogeneous chronological and iconographic group along with the already published examples. Most artefacts are found in archaeological contexts during regular excavations. Here, their sudden appearance in the study area will be discussed, as well as the possible reasons for discarding the items in 4th c. AD.

State of research

A detailed overview of the increasing bibliography on the so-called Danubian Riders cult is



*Fig. 1. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from the village of Rebro, municipality of Breznik
(photo M. Ivanov)*

Обр. 1. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от с. Ребро, община Брезник (снимка М. Иванов)

unnecessary for the aim of this study. A comprehensive insight is offered in some of the recent publications on the matter (Tudor 1976, 23–50; Szabó 2017, 19–25; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 156–157). However, the main stages in the development of the concept should be presented in brief.

The scholarly interest in Danubian Riders' monuments dates back to the middle of the 19th c. The reliefs are considered to represent pre-Roman local religious beliefs as well as Greek, Thracian and Asia Minor mystery cults connected with Kabeiroi-Dioskouroi, Mithra and the monuments of the Thracian Horseman. In 1936 D. Tudor collects all known reliefs under the name "Danubian Riders". In 1969 and 1976, his *Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Equitum Danuviorum* is published in two volumes that became the most important study on the matter for the next twenty years (Tudor 1969; 1976). This comprehensive analysis is based on 232 monuments. In 1996 R. Ertl publishes 323 new plaques of the Danubian Riders and creates a new, more detailed typology of the lead items (Ertl 1996). The increasing number of reliefs is followed by the changes in interpretation. The new studies consider the female figure and the Sun god as the principal deities in the cult (Zotović 1998;



Fig. 2. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from the Arbanas quarter in Radomir town
(after Lyubenova 2008, 199, fig. 1)

Обр. 2. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от махала Арбанас на гр. Радомир
(по Любенова 2008, 199, обр. 1)

Tóth 2003). In 2007, a lead plaque with inscription *Domino* on it was published. This unique votive mention gives arguments for the Danubian Riders' reliefs to be connected with the anonymous deities *Dom(i)nus/Dom(i)na* attested epigraphically in Illyricum. On the Danubian Riders plaques the divine couple *Dominus/Domina* is identified as the Sun god and the female deity between the Riders (Szabó 2017, 27–54). According to other scholars the epithets *Dom(i)nus et dom(i)na* are characteristic for the healing gods *Asklepios* and *Hygeia*, questioning this way the identification of the deities on the Danubian Riders' reliefs (Hainzmann 2017, 268–270; Matei-Popescu 2021, 285–286). In the last years, other 304 items have been published, mostly from the region of *Sirmium* (Malbašić 2021, 224; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 158–159, note 29)¹.

D. Tudor's corpus listed 25 monuments from Bulgaria, predominantly from the northern part

¹ There is information for another ca. 800 unpublished lead plaques from a private collection (Szabó 2017, 12, note 1).



Fig. 3. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders E 05-001 of unknown provenance (after Ertl 1996, Tafel LI)
Обр. 3. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници E 05-001, неизвестно местонамиране
(no Ertl 1996, Tafel LI)

of the country. In Bulgarian historiography, the Danubian Riders' reliefs are studied more or less sporadically. Except for the several early articles of G. Katsarov, the icons of Danubian Riders are discussed mainly by Y. Mladenova and M. Tacheva (Mladenova 1958; 1984; Tacheva 2000). New items are published from *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, Arbanas quarter of Radomir and Slatina, municipality of Lovech (Tsarov 2004; Lyubenova 2008; Gushterakliev, Dimitrova 2017, 116, no. 446). Several new plaques have been discovered during archaeological excavations in the last years in Sofia and its vicinity. These monuments form a homogeneous group with some of the earlier examples regarding style, iconography and chronology.

The first plaque (fig. 1) was found by chance near the village of Rebro (fig. 8), Tran municipality (today in municipality of Breznik). It was published by G. Katsarov and later included in the corpus of D. Tudor (Katsarov 1924; Tudor 1969, 48, no. 81)². In 1988, during the excavations of

² The relief is wrongly placed among the plaques from Lower Moesia by D. Tudor (see also Lyubenova 2008, 189, note 3). The village of Rebro is in the Roman province of Thrace, respectively in the Late Roman Dacia (Mediterranea). In the article of V. Lyubenova, the plaque from Rebro reproduced on fig. 2 is not the right one. The visual comparison with the photos published by G. Katsarov (Katsarov 1924, 137, fig. 103) and D. Tudor (Tudor 1969, Pl. XLII) undoubtedly shows that this is not the same item (compare here fig. 1 and fig. 2). It seems that instead of the Rebro plaque, the item from Arbanas is presented two times, probably before and after the restoration.



Fig. 4. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from the *Serdica* amphitheatre (photo M. Ivanov)
Обр. 4. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от амфитеатъра на Сердика (снимка М. Иванов)

archaeological site located near Arbanas quarter of Radomir town, a second lead plaque was found with an identical relief (figs 2, 8), which was published twenty years later (Lyubenova 2008). One plaque (fig. 3) of unknown provenance (supposedly from *Sirmium*) is published from the private collection of R. Ertl (Ertl 1996, 67–68, Taf. LI, E 05-001). In 2009, during the excavations of *Serdica* amphitheatre in the central part of Sofia, another lead plaque was discovered with the same relief images (fig. 4)³. Another find from Sofia (fig. 5) derives from the excavations in the northern part of the fortified Roman town (Ivanov 2011). In 2019, a new lead plaque (fig. 6) was found in Sofia with reverse images in the lower part of the relief. The monument was discovered during archaeological excavations to the north-west of the fortified Roman town, in the Late Roman enlargement of *Serdica* (Stanev, Borisova-Katsarova 2020, 765, fig. 5). The last item (fig. 7) is from the recent excavations of the archaeological site near the village of Aldomirovtsi, municipality of Slivnitsa⁴ (fig. 8).

Type and iconography. The seven plaques in question have the same dimensions⁵ and identi-

3 The untimely death of Zh. Velichkov, the excavator of *Serdica* amphitheatre, prevented him from publishing this important find, which is presented here for the first time.

4 The lead plaque from Aldomirovtsi will be published separately after the end of the excavations and restoration of the item.

5 See the description of the plaques at the end of the text.



Fig. 5. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from the north part of *Serdica* (photo M. Ivanov)
 Обр. 5. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от северната част на *Сердика* (снимка М. Иванов)

cal form (type III by D. Tudor) that are typical for Lower Moesia and Lower Dacia (Tudor 1976, 66). According to the classification of D. Tudor the items from *Serdica* and the surrounding territory belong to class B, subdivision “b” (Tudor 1976, 96–97). According to the recent typologies of R. Ertl and V. Malbašić, these reliefs should be placed in types E 3/ E03 and E 5/ E05 (Ertl 1996, 18–19, 66–68; Malbašić 2021, 18–19, 30–31, Tabla 10–11).

The relief images on the plaques represent identical iconographic scheme (in two variations), that for the moment has no parallels among the other known monuments of the Danubian Riders⁶. The four reliefs from Rebro, Arbanas and two items from *Serdica* (fig. 1–2, 4–5) form a homogeneous group with identical iconographic scheme, which could be labeled as “*Serdica* scheme 1”. The plaque from the private collection of R. Ertl (fig. 3) is the same as the third item from *Serdica* (fig. 6). The iconography of both reliefs is very close to the remaining plaques but the secondary symbolic images and elements are represented in reverse position. The discovery of one of the plaques in *Serdica*, together with the similar iconography to the rest of the items from the town, indicates manufacturing in one and the same place or even the same workshop. For this reason, the iconographic

6 The plaque from Aldomirovtsi has different iconographic scheme and will not be discussed here.



Fig. 6. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from 27 G. Washington Str., Sofia (photo A. Stanev)
Обр. 6. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от ул. „Г. Вашингтон“ № 27, София
(снимка А. Станев)

scheme could be named as “*Serdica* scheme 2”.

***Serdica* scheme 1.** The lead plaques have a form of aedicula topped with triangular pediment. The relief field is outlined with spiral band. An eagle with slightly spread wings is depicted in the pediment. The body of the bird is turned right with a head to the left⁷. Around the eagle there are three stars – two to the right and one to the left. The main relief field is flanked by two columns with spiral shafts and schematically represented bases and (Corinthian?) capitals. A female figure of larger dimensions is placed between two riders in the middle of the upper register of the relief. The figure wears a long, draped dress fastened at the waist. Both hands are holding the muzzles of the horses. Two horsemen are placed symmetrically on both sides of the Goddess. They hold the reins with their left hands while the right ones are raised up and back so as to swing a spear that is not visible clearly. On the plaques from Arbanas and the amphitheatre a stick-like object (spear?) could be distinguished in the right hand of the right horseman whose end touches the body of the snake behind the rider. The left horseman wears a Phrygian cap while this is not certain for the right one (see also Lyubenova 2008, 190). Above the horses’ heads there is a single star (better visible at the plaques

7 The description of the relief images is from the beholder point of view.



Fig. 7. Lead plaque of the Danubian Riders from the locality Izvora, near the village of Aldomirovtsi, municipality of Slivnitsa (photo K. Petkova)

Обр. 7. Оловна плочка на Дунавските конници от м. Извора при с. Алдомировци, община Сливница (снимка К. Петкова)

from Arbanas, Rebro and the amphitheatre). Under the horses' hooves are represented prostrate human figures. The head of the left one is slightly raised. Behind the two riders stands a human figure of indistinguishable gender with raised right hand to his/her mouth. D. Tudor identifies the left figure as female (Nemesis) and the right one as male (soldier?), while V. Lyubenova considers both of them as Nemesis because of the characteristic position of the right hand (Lyubenova 2008, 190, note 10). The other two plaques from *Serdica* rather support the latter opinion. In the top left and right corners are presented busts of Sol (right) and Luna (left). Two snakes are placed behind the figures of Nemesis.

The lower register of the relief depicts symbolic images. From left to right there are: candelabrum with lamp on it; seven round objects (fruits, loaves?) and two other lamps above them; a lion jumping to a three-legged table with a big fish placed upon it; under the lion there is a bird to the right (a cock?); the unclear image under the table should be identified most probably as a ram's skeleton (see below the identification of the images); to the right of the table another bird (a raven?) is placed and a four-legged animal turned to the right with head to the left; in the bottom right part of the field there is a naked (?) human figure to the right with hands raised to a square grid above.

***Serdica* scheme 2.** The two plaques of this scheme (figs 3, 6) have a form of aedicula with triangular pediment identical to the rest of the discussed monuments. The relief field is outlined with spiral band consisting of two columns with bases and capitals on the two vertical sides of the plaque.

Lead plaques of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* and the surrounding territory

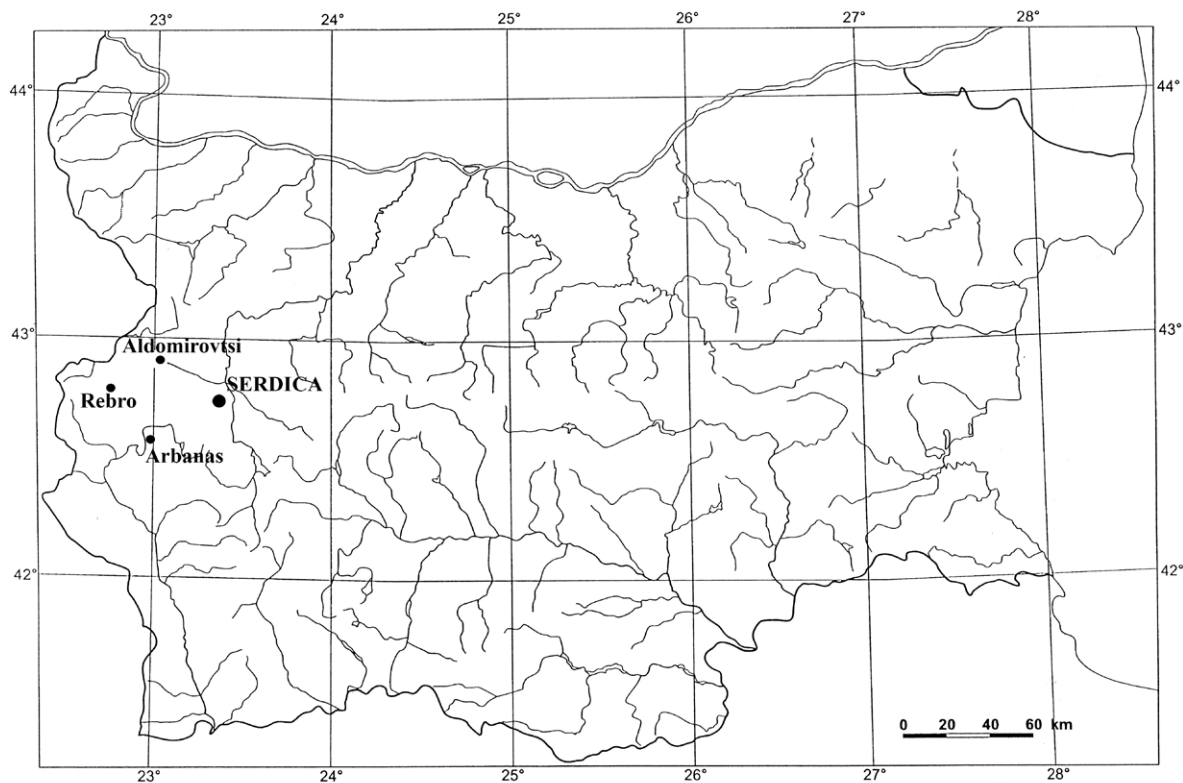


Fig. 8. Map of the findspots of the Danubian Riders lead plaques in the vicinity of Serdica (author M. Ivanov)
 Фиг. 8. Карта на селищата в района на Сердика, където са открити плочките на Дунавските конници (автор М. Иванов)

An identical image of eagle is placed in the pediment, this time facing left with head to the right. To the left of the bird there is a single 8-ray star (on the plaque from the R. Ertl's collection) and to the right – two other stars (on the plaque from *Serdica*)⁸. The figures in the upper register are composed in the same way as at first scheme. The image of the Goddess has more natural plasticity and proportions. The snakes are larger and with more curved bodies. The images of Sol and Luna are badly damaged, but their positions seem identical to the first scheme – i.e., Sol to the right and Luna to the left.

The riders are depicted in their usual appearance with floated cloaks and Phrygian caps on the heads. The left rider on the *Serdica* plaque is almost entirely damaged by deep crack in this part of the plaque. The right one is presented identically to the scheme 1. Behind the backs of the horsemen are placed upright human figures with hands to the mouth that should be identified as Nemesis. A single star is placed above the head of each horse, better visible on R. Ertl's relief. Under the horsemen are presented the images of prostrate humans.

The main difference between these plaques and the reliefs of scheme 1 is the position of the symbols in the lower register of the plaques. Identical figures and objects are displayed following the same sequence, but in reverse manner. At the reliefs of scheme 1 the symbols begin with the candelabrum to the left and end with the human figure with raised hands and "grid" above it to the right. At scheme 2 the sequence of symbols begins with the human figure and "grid" to the left and ends with the candelabrum to the right. All the images accordingly are placed mirror-like: the lion is depicted to the right of the table, respectively all the animals and the human figure are turned to the left. The unclear image under the table is to the right. Despite some differences with scheme 1, the plaques

⁸ On the plaque of his collection R. Ertl supposes that the eagle holds a wreath of victory in its claws. On the *Serdica*'s example is clearly visible that this is not true.

follow the same composition⁹.

Identification of the figures and symbols

The main characters and symbols on the reliefs of the so-called Danubian Riders are analyzed many times in the historiography on the matter. As a whole, the discussed plaques from *Serdica* and its surrounding territory repeat figures and elements known from the other monuments although in specific iconography. Bearing in mind the chronology of the plaques (see below), the discussed items should be placed in the latest stage of development of the so-called Danubian Riders' cult. The analysis will emphasize some specific iconographic details and new possibilities for interpretation of the components and reliefs as a whole.

The Goddess – in all reliefs with two symmetrically displayed horsemen (class B of D. Tudor) the central place is occupied by a large standing female figure. Her arms are often open toward the muzzles of the horses. The image is considered as syncretic female deity with a general characteristic of the Great Mother of the Gods (Tacheva 2000, 254). Different scholars see in her Artemis–Anahita–Kybele–Rhea–Venus–Diana Ephesiana, Demeter, Magna Mater, Selene, Artemis–Bendis, Despoina–Nemesis, Aphrodite Spandarmat (Tudor 1976, 99–109; Oppermann 1981, 522; Ertl 1996, 7–8; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 156), Atargatis–Dea Syria, Epona (Ertl 1996, 7; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 156), Luna (Zotović 1998, 68–69), Hekate–Psyche (Benžarević 2011; Malbašić 2021, 242–247). The iconography of the Goddess is similar to the one of the iconographic types of Epona depicted between two horses holding their reins or spreading her arms to the muzzles of the animals. The identification with Epona is denied by D. Tudor mostly on the ground of the presence of a fish offered to the Goddess (Tudor 1976, 104), although some recent studies have revived this thesis again (Ertl 2014, 101, 107–108; Plemić 2013; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 157). The connection with Epona is particularly obvious in the images of the female figure on the lead plaques of types Ertl B 1 and B 2 where the dress of the Goddess is presented like a sort of a pouch feeding this way the horses (see Tudor 1969, nos 67–69, 127, 132–133; Ertl 1996, Taf. XXI–XXXIII). The connection with the Celtic deity is visible only on the monuments of class B (Plemić 2013, 59). It is supposed that this iconography of the Danubian Riders of class B takes its form in the north-western part of Lower Moesia (the area around *Augustae – Oescus* and the territory across the Danube), from where it was spread to the west and north-west toward the Middle Danube (Plemić 2013, 67–68). Two votive plates from *Novae* and the village of Tsarevets, district of Svishtov could be added to the Epona plaques from the area, as well as items from other military sites such as *Augustae*, *Montana* and *Abritus* (Ivanov, Donevski 2008, 187). In regard to the possible identification of the Goddess as Hekate (see Malbašić 2021, 243–247) an intriguing find from *Ratiaria* provide a good parallel. On the one side, the goddess is presented standing, with long, fastened chiton and a kalathos on the head. Both her arms are spread in identical way to the female deity on Danubian Rider's reliefs (Dimitrova-Milcheva 1980, 93, № 266). On the other two sides, Hekate has a female body and a head of a lion and a snake, respectively. Both symbols (snake and lion) are almost always present on the plaques of the Danubian Riders.

The two Riders are the second main figures in the composition of the reliefs. They flank the female deity from both sides. The horsemen are identified as local deities of Geto-Dacian origin, whose iconography is formed under the influence of the cults of the Thracian Horseman and the Dioskuroi (Tudor 1976, 109–118, 281; Tacheva 2000, 249–251; Plemić 2013, 59, note 2). The em-

⁹ In his description of the plaque E 05-001 R. Ertl identifies in a different manner some of the symbols and figures in the lower part of the relief field, especially in the right part where the images on both plaques are less discernible. The comparison with the other item from *Serdica* and the reliefs of scheme 1 is rather in favour of the proposed here identification.

Lead plaques of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* and the surrounding territory

phasis of the Goddess as a central deity of the reliefs leads to the inferior position of the Riders. In the recent studies they are considered as minor deities of lower rank (*paredroi*), twin-sons of Dom(i)nus and Dom(i)na (Szabó 2017, 24, 67, 72). The triumphal and victorious character of the Riders often is pointed out in the relevant historiography, expressed most clearly by the prostrated enemies under the horses' hooves (Tudor 1976, 118–119; Tacheva 2000, 248–249). On some reliefs the horsemen or at least one of them are depicted in military equipment (helmet, officer's cloak, shield), armed with spear or double axe/hammer, wearing a draco-standard or accompanied by a soldier with weapons and armour (Tudor 1969, nos 11, 18, 19, 22, 35, 36, 42, 43, 49, 51, 55, 56, 64, 67, 68, 69, 72–75, 77, 81, 104, 126, 127, 132, 133, 135, 147, 149, 150, 155, 174, 183–185, 189, 190, 194, 195; Ertl 1996, 61, Typus C 2; Tacheva 2000, 242–244). It is necessary to note that the Dioskuroi are considered as special protectors of the Roman riders and as such they often are presented as relief decoration on weaponry and armour of the riders and horses (see Walde 2005, 135; Junkelmann 2008a, 232; 2008c, 146, Abb. 127, 209, Abb. 191).

The presented draco-standard is a real military sign that suggests a connection with Roman cavalry. Accepted by the Romans from the beginning of the 2nd c. AD, the draco-standard gradually gained popularity and by the end of the 3rd c. AD became the most widespread banner in the Roman army. It is presented in the reliefs of the column of Trajan and the arches of Galerius in Thessalonica and Constantine in Rome (Junkelmann 2008b, 137–141; Fischer 2012, 56, 58–59, 232, Abb. 49, 55, 352).

A standing (female?) figure is depicted behind the two Riders on most reliefs usually identified as **Nemesis** because of the characteristic gesture of her hand to the mouth. Due to the mediocre quality of most reliefs, it is often impossible to identify the gender of the personage. Some plaques depict one female (with the gesture of Nemesis) and one male (soldier) figure (Tudor 1969, nos 68, 69, 127, 132, 133, 135, 185, 189). The differences in relief composition most probably are determined by chronology and regional specifics of the monuments. The presence of Nemesis and a soldier is also an indication for the military nature of the Riders. The Goddess of retribution Nemesis is depicted as attendant of the main female deity on the monuments of class A, but also as an attendant to one or both Riders on the items of class B. Her presence at the scenes of sacrifice, magical and occult practices is rather as a Goddess of silence, a keeper of the secret of mysteries (Tudor 1976, 130–136; Malbašić 2021, 258).

Prostrated human figures are always present on the monuments of Danubian Riders and being one of the main differences from reliefs of other rider Gods (Tudor 1976, 118). Sometimes, a snake or a fish (also a lion and a dog) is depicted under the hooves of one of the Riders. The prostrated humans are usually naked, lying on their backs or with faces to the ground, sometimes slightly turned to the beholder. Female figures are also depicted under the horsemen (see Ertl 1996, Taf. XCVII–CX, no. 55; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 161, fig. 7). The personages in question are considered almost unanimously as symbols of evil forces conquered by the Good in the face of the Riders (Tudor 1976, 118–122). Most authors believe that these figures are inspired directly by Roman triumphal monuments and funerary reliefs of the soldiers, especially of the Rhein provinces on which the fallen enemy under the horse is a common motif (Tacheva 2000, 255–256). Unlike the monuments of Danubian Riders, in most of the cases the enemies on military tombstones are clothed, fallen on their backs but still defending themselves with weapons (Schleiermacher 1984, 28–30). Long time ago it has been observed that prostrated human figures could not be representations of evil forces because of their nakedness, lack of weapons and direct confrontation with the Riders. The images of prostrated women under the horses are also an argument in this respect. In mysteries nakedness usually denotes preparation of a neophyte for the act of consecration (Zotović 1998, 67) and the proposed interpretation of the prostrate figures as representation of a ritual, simulated death or symbols of the death as gateway to future life deserves attention and should not be rejected (Toynbee 1957, 262).

The prostrated figures lying on their bellies look very alike images of believers in act of repentance and prayer to the deity, and therefore could not be of evil nature (see also Malbašić 2021, 255–256).

The busts of **Sol and Luna** are often depicted on the reliefs of the Danubian Riders. Usually, they occupy the upper register of the field. In most cases Sol is represented to the left, unlike the monuments from *Serdica* and its vicinity, on which the deity is presented in the right top corner of the plaques and Luna is depicted in the left corner. It is considered that these images are borrowed from the reliefs of Mithra (Tudor 1976, 181–184).

The two **snakes** behind the horsemen's backs are a very common image in the Danubian Riders cult. Their meaning varies from chthonic symbol to attribute to one or another deity. As a rule, they are presented in the upper part of the relief field. Most probably the snakes are considered as *agathoi daimones* – helpers and allies of the Riders (Tudor 1976, 219–223; Oppermann 1981, 525).

The image of **eagle** is missing on the earlier monuments of Tudor's class A which suggests its introduction as early as beginning of the 3rd c. AD (Tudor 1976, 199–201; Ertl 2014, 112–113). The eagle is a common emblem of the Roman army depicted on reliefs and sculptural monuments of any kind. In a broader aspect, it relates to the images of Zeus-Jupiter, Sabazios and Hypsistos (Tacheva–Hitova 1982, 329–332). On the reliefs of Danubian Riders the eagle is presented occasionally and its position in the pediment of the plaques is rare. It is noteworthy that the image of the eagle is attested mainly on the plaques of types Ertl C 1 and C 2, on which the military character of the Riders is emphasized (see Ertl 1996, Tafel XLVII–XLVIII). According to other scholars' opinion, on some monuments the eagle replaces the supreme deity associated later with the Sun-God (Katsarov 1924, 140; Szabó 2017, 14–15; Malbašić 2021, 269–270). Regarding the lead plaques from *Serdica* and its vicinity the image of the eagle should not be perceived as having a deeper meaning than a mere indication of the heavenly sphere, and as a military sign and symbol of victory, as well.

The **candelabrum** and the **two lamps** on the plaques from *Serdica* and the study area are most probably reduced version of the images of three candelabra visible on other items (see Tudor 1969, nos 37, 71, 74–75) which seems to have been the original idea. It is believed that the candelabrum is introduced later in the reliefs as an indication for the secret character of the cult and its practicing in dark underground places (*megara*) (Tudor 1976, 265; Ertl 1996, 16).

The **seven round objects** next to the candelabrum are one of the peculiarities of the plaques from *Serdica*. They are not attested in this way on other monuments. In the bottom right corner of the numerous plaques of type Ertl F 1 is depicted a kantharos with three round objects (fruit?) placed on its rim (see Ertl 1996, Tafel LI–LXVIII). Most probably this is the initial symbol that should have been presented. Due to misunderstanding by the local craftsman the rounded body of the vessel, its curved handles and the three round objects on top of it are transformed in seven round things on the plaques from *Serdica*. It is also possible that these objects, although in different number, to be identical with the three round items depicted on other (earlier?) reliefs (Tudor 1969, nos 35, 37, 43, 56, 71, 72, 75, 113, 120, 125–126). The latter are considered as loaves or fruits (Tudor 1969, no. 71; Ertl 1996, 66). Objects like these are visible mainly on lead plaques.

Several other **animals** are present in the lower register of the plaques: a lion, a sheep and two birds. The bird to the left of the table, under the lion, is identified as a cock (Lyubenova 2008, 191) which seems probable. The other one, between the table and the “grid” is probably a raven (Lyubenova 2008, 191) or a cock (Katsarov 1924, 138). A part of the animals presented on the reliefs of Danubian Riders are considered as symbolic images of the four main elements of the world (*principia vitae*): fire – lion, air – cock, water – kantharos, earth – snake (the last two missing in this case) (Tudor 1976, 227–231; Ertl 2014, 100). The lion is also supposed to be the highest rank (*leo*) of the initiates in the mystery cult of the Danubian Riders (Tudor 1976, 254).

A **three-legged table** is present on many reliefs. Usually, a sacred food or a fish is served on

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it probably as an offer to the Goddess. Its position in the central part of the composition, under the Goddess, seems to be a later introduction. On earlier reliefs a three-legged table with fish on it is part of the register with the symbols of *pricipia vitae* (see Szabó 2017, 57, fig. 1).

The **fish** (in this case on the table) is almost always present on the monuments of the Danubian Riders. On the plaques of types Ertl F 1 and G 1–G 7 it is depicted in the pediment as a separate image (Ertl 1996, Tafel LI–LXVIII, LXXV–LXXXVI). The image of the fish also could be placed under one of the Riders (usually the right one)¹⁰ or in other places in the composition. Frequently, it is on the table in the central part of the lower register that suggests connection with the Goddess (Tudor 1976, 209–210). For this reason, the principal female deity is identified as Dea Syria. According to recent research the presented fish is red mullet (*Mullus barbatus*) that was offered to Hekate (Malbašić 2021, 247–249). The main function of the fish is to serve as ritual food in sacred feast at initiation rites of the neophytes that gives them specific symbolic power (Tudor 1976, 212).

The **unclear image under the table** is a scorpion according to G. Katsarov or a ram's head and unclear object according to D. Tudor (Katsarov 1924, 138; Tudor 1969, 49). The opinion of V. Lyubenova is that on this place is depicted (probably?) a burning fireplace flanked by ram's heads (Lyubenova 2008, 191). On some reliefs from *Serdica* (figs 4, 6), the image seems like prostrate human figure lying sideways to the beholder. Following the head of the "figure" several short oblique lines are depicted that remind bones. Similar oblique lines together with a ram's head are visible in the bottom right corner of the plaques of *Romula*, *Oescus* and *Gabare* (Tudor 1969, nos 36, 74–75). A skeleton of a ram is presented also on the plaque of *Quadrata* (Szabó 2017, 29, 34, 37, figs 1, 3). The ram is of major significance in the cult of the Danubian Riders. Except for its function as a sacrificial animal in sacred rituals, the ram is considered also to be the lowest rank (*aries*) of initiation (Tudor 1976, 212–214, 252). Regarding the importance of the animal, it seems more likely that the unclear image under the table is a ram's skeleton.

The **little human figure** with raised hands on the discussed plaques is rarely attested in such posture on other monuments. Similar image is present on a plaque from *Singidunum* (Krunić 1995, 163–164, fig. 1). It is supposed that the image represents a reduced version of the scene of *criobolium* – the flaying and preparation of the sacrificed animal (ram, lamb?) depicted on many reliefs of the Danubian Riders (Katsarov 1924, 142; Ertl 1996, 66; Lyubenova 2008, 191, note 15).

In the lower register of the plaques above the little human figure with raised hand is placed an object in form of a grid (?) with triangles on the top of it that are better visible on the items from Arbanas and the amphitheatre (figs 2, 4). The most probable identification of this image is as *cista mystica* (Tudor 1976, 267; Ertl 1996, 60; Lyubenova 2008, 191). In his description of the plaque, from Rebro R. Ertl recognizes this object as an altar for burning of sacrificial animals (Ertl 1996, 66). The identification as *cista mystica* seems more plausible due to the triangle things on top of the grid. The image reminds of a temple in three-quarter perspective. Similar items are visible on two more reliefs of type Ertl C 1 (Tudor 1969, nos 34, 56; Ertl 1996, Tafel XLVII). According to another opinion, it is a representation of bull in a temple or a small house borrowed directly from the cult of Mithra (Zotović 1998, 74).

The presented observations on the monuments of the Danubian Riders rather do not support a clear connection of the discussed late monuments with the Roman army. Many authors accept the syncretic formation of the cult in the military sites where it is widespread (Tudor 1976, 54–55, 281; Ertl 1996, 5; Tacheva 2000, 254; Ertl 2014, 100–101; Nemeti 2015, 130; Szabó 2017, 24). The iconographic similarities with the military tombstones are pointed out many times, especially regarding the prostrated human figures under the horses' hooves. M. Tacheva even sees the origin of the

10 One plaque from *Singidunum* depicts a skeleton of fish under the right horseman (Krunić 1995, 164, fig. 1).

iconography of the Danubian Riders from the funerary relief in the Hellenized Thracian-Macedonian area on the Balkans (Tacheva 2000, 249, 255–256). The recent spatial analysis of the increased number of plaques attested their predominance in the civil sites (Zotović 1998, 64–65; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 157–161) that imposes more careful evaluation of the role of the Roman army in the formation and spread of the cult. Nevertheless, the military factor could not be ignored given the presence of specific symbols and elements, as well as the significant number of monuments from the Roman forts along the Middle and Lower Danube frontier and in the inner part of the provinces. The influence of the Roman army, especially on later reliefs dated to the middle–second half of the 3rd c. AD, could be seen in representations of the Riders with weapons and armour as well as the presence of armed soldier as attendant to the horseman.

The increasing importance of the cavalry is evident after the middle of the 3rd c. AD (Ivanov 1999, 118). The impulse for this process is the elite cavalry unit created by Gallienus to provide quick assistance to the troops positioned on the borders. The commanding officers of this mobile army very soon obtained considerable significance in battles, and gradually increasing political importance. Several Roman Emperors like Claudius II Gothicus, Aurelianus and Probus have their origin from this cavalry that is emphasized by their coinage on which the emperors are presented as cavalry officers in military equipment (Fischer 2012, 214, 342). The prestige of the military service in a cavalry unit is always pointed out on soldiers' tombstones. The use of such reliefs, especially in the border provinces of the Empire, is more often in time of war and barbarian raids (Schleiermacher 1984, 11; Ivanov 2006, 111). The lack of sanctuaries that could relate to the cult of the Danubian Riders, as well as the almost complete absence (with one exception) of votive inscriptions, is an indication that most of the plaques rather did not serve as dedicatory or votive reliefs (Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 162). The predominantly small size of the metal plaques is additional indication in this respect. The formal and style features of the monuments reveal their production in series as a mass objects designed for unpretentious common customer. The real use of the plaques (especially the lead ones) most probably is predominantly as phylacteries and personal amulets¹¹ or part of the inventory of domestic shrine providing luck, success, and protection against real or imaginary perils (see also Cumont 1938, 69–70; Tudor 1976, 278–279). The iconography of the late reliefs is based on rich symbolism of wide range of perception providing complex protection against all malicious influences or even symbolic overcoming of death¹². The complex mystery nature of the cult probably was incomprehensible for the masses and for that reason it is transformed in eclectic combination of figures and symbols close to the notions and practical needs of the believer. Like the gnostic gemstones, the rich syncretic symbolism of the Danubian Riders' reliefs gain popularity mainly for its universal recognition and aptitude to satisfy spiritual needs of a large part of provincial society.

Archaeological context and chronology. The studies of Danubian Riders's reliefs often point out that only a limited number of monuments has clear archaeological context and plausible chronology (Nemeti 2015, 130; Szabó 2017, 12–13; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 157). According to D. Tudor the items with one rider (class A) are earlier while the complex iconography of the class B (with two riders) appears for the first time in the second half or even the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd c. AD (Tudor 1976, 81). Some recent studies and new plaques discovered in archaeological context suggest a date for the reliefs with one rider not earlier than the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd c. AD while one new monument with two riders is dated relatively earlier – to the middle of the 2nd c. AD (Oppermann 1981, 519–520; Szabó 2017, 55–60, 65, figs 1–4; Bondoc 2018, 236–238). As a

11 Some metal plaques have holes and loops for wearing on the neck or attachment to the wooden (?) base (see Tudor 1969, nos 74, 75, 132, 150, 174; Bondoc 2018, 242, fig. 1c, 256, fig. 35; Plemić, Crnobrnja 2022, 162).

12 The discovery of reliefs in graves could be additional indication in this respect.

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whole, the predominant group of the lead plaques could not be placed before the beginning of the 3rd c. AD. Significant number of monuments belong to the latest phase of the development of the cult – the second half of the 3rd or even the beginning of the 4th c. AD (Tudor 1976, 81–83). The discussed here items from *Serdica* and its vicinity belong exactly to this group. Their archaeological context gives additional evidence for precisising the chronology of the late reliefs.

All the three plaques from *Serdica* are found during archaeological excavations. The first one (fig. 4) is discovered immediately to the north of the arena of the amphitheatre of *Serdica*. On this side of the building there are no seats for spectators (Velichkov 2010, 353; 2014, 253). The findspot of the lead plaque is probably near the route of the main Roman road coming from the eastern gate of the town as prolongation of the *decumanus maximus* of *Serdica*. The relief comes from a context with late Roman pottery and 4th c. AD coins that suggest its deposition in the layer probably at the middle–second half of the 4th c. AD¹³.

The next item (fig. 5) is discovered under the pavement of a narrow Late Antique street (*decumanus*) in the north area of the town. The archaeological context and material allow the layer with the plaque to be dated between the second quarter and the end of the 4th c. AD (Ivanov 2011, 124).

The third find (fig. 6) originates from a courtyard of a Late Roman building situated to the north of Roman *Serdica*, in the newly fortified area of the town. The plaque is discovered in a layer that could be dated to the middle–second half of the 4th c. AD according to the coins (Stanev, Borisova-Katsarova 2020, 765).

The plaques from Rebro (fig. 1) and E 05-001 from the collection of R. Ertl (fig. 3) do not have archaeological context. Their chronology could be established only on the basis of comparison with the better dated similar finds.

The plaque from Arbanas (fig. 2) is dated by the author to the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd c. AD on the basis of iconography and style of the relief decoration without evidence from archaeological context. It is necessary to point out that the archaeological site at Arbanas quarter of Radomir is excavated in several archaeological campaigns. The author distinguishes three main periods in its existence: Roman (the 1st – middle of the 3rd c. AD), Late Roman (4th c. AD) and Late Antique (end of the 4th – middle of the 5th c. AD). Pieces of information about the site are published several times, mostly in preliminary reports of the excavations but without clear stratigraphy and contextualizing of the numerous finds (Lyubenova 1985; 2003, 198–199; see also the comment in Katsarova 2005, 161–163, 204). According to the author, the lead plaque is discovered ‘in the south-eastern sector of the area walled in Late Antiquity’. The site itself is identified ambiguously as production centre, metallurgical site with sanctuary near it, trading-production centre (*emporium*) and sanctuary near the road station. The lack of clarity for the archaeological context of the plaque is obvious. Due to this fact the item from Arbanas should be synchronized with the identical reliefs from *Serdica* and dated not earlier than the last third of the 3rd c. AD (see Ivanov 2011, 125).

The last monument from Aldomirovtsi (fig. 7) is found in the disturbed upper layer of the archaeological site. According to the preliminary report of the excavations, the discovered buildings, part of a road and other structures could be dated to the end of the 3rd–third-quarter of the 4th c. AD (Petkova, Stoychev 2023, in print).

The briefly presented evidence for the context of discovery of the discussed items indicates clearly that most of the plaques (four items) are from Late Roman contexts that could be dated to the middle–second half of the 4th c. AD. That date reflects the time of their deposition in the archaeological layers (the end of their use) and not the time of production and use. Nevertheless, for the plaques in discussion, a long period of use could hardly be suggested. Due to the historical stages in the de-

13 Information from the field records of the excavations.

velopment of *Serdica* and the surrounding region, as well as some stylistic observations it could be presumed that the manufacture and spread of the reliefs are not earlier than the last quarter/end of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD. In the middle-third quarter of the 4th c. AD, at latest, the plaques went out of use and at least some of them were probably intentionally destroyed (see below).

Origin of the type, production centre, distribution of the plaques, sanctuaries. It was already mentioned that the reliefs from *Serdica* and the surrounding region have different iconography and composition than most of the other lead plaques of the Danubian Riders. From formal point of view, they belong to types E 3/E03 and E 5/E05 (Ertl 1996, 66–67; Malbašić 2021, 18–19, 30–31, Tabla 10–11). Several monuments from *Romula*, *Orlea* and *Oescus* (Tudor 1969, nos 35, 43, 72) provide closer formal parallels for the discussed items. The similarity of some figures and elements between the plaques from *Serdica* and the ones from *Oescus* and *Romula* was previously pointed out. For the latter, an earlier date could be accepted on the basis of clearer structural concept of their iconography and the better qualities of the relief images: the figures are rendered with more details and plasticity. The comparison between the plaques from *Serdica* and *Oescus* and *Romula* suggested a date probably around the middle–third quarter of the 3rd c. AD. Regarding the lack (for the moment) of earlier lead plaques of the Danubian Riders in *Serdica* and its vicinity, their sudden appearance could have been caused by a new (military and civil) population. At least part of this population probably originated from the former Roman province of Dacia to the north of Danube. It is possible that exactly members of this new population brought the concept and models of the reliefs. In the last decades of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD *Serdica* became a residence of several Roman emperors and the capital of the new province of Dacia (Mediterranea). The presence of cavalry units in the town is attested by Late Roman tombstones whose relief images are very close in style (see Ivanov 2010). In this changed cultural milieu, the new beliefs are embraced at least by a part of the population.

The identical form, size, iconography and style of the discussed lead plaques are arguments in favour of their production in *Serdica*. At least one of the late workshops for lead reliefs of the Danubian Riders of types E 3/E03 and E 5/E05 should be located in the town. There is no doubt that the plaque E 05-001 (fig. 3) from the collection of R. Ertl is also a product of the same *Serdica*'s workshop and not of *Sirmium*'s one, whose production is entirely different. The items from Rebro, Arbanas and Aldomirovtsi demonstrate the distribution of the reliefs that follow most probably the movement of the (military?) men carrying the plaques with themselves. All three sites (fig. 8) are situated at almost the same distance from *Serdica* (ca. 30 km) along the main and secondary Roman roads connecting the town with the rest of the provincial centres: the site near Aldomirovtsi is identified as, or near to, the road station *Meldis/Meldia* on the *via diagonalis* from *Singidunum* to *Byzantium*; the site at Arbanas is probably in the vicinity of the road station *Elea* on the road *Serdica – Pautalia – Stobi*; the relief from Rebro is found near the presumed route of the local road between *Elea* and *Montana* (Tacheva 2004, 99–100, 103–104; Katsarova 2005, 214–215; Madzharov 2009, 75).

At present, the archaeological context of most reliefs does not allow connection with a possible sanctuary. Two of the plaques from *Serdica* are discovered in the layers under or along the streets and roads, and the third one is found in a courtyard of a Late Roman building. Probably the case of the Aldomirovtsi item is the same: it is deposited along the way of the one of the main provincial Roman roads. The plaque from Arbanas is the only one that could relate to an earlier sanctuary of Hera (and Zeus?) (Lyubenova 2003, 199; Valchev 2015, 246). The proposed later date of the plaque (the end of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD) does not coincide with the chronology of the production centre and the sanctuary which are destroyed in the middle of the 3rd c. AD according to V. Lyubenova (Lyubenova 2003, 199). The lead plaques from *Serdica* were probably utilised privately in a domestic shrine or were used as amulets and phylacteries that provide success and protection of their owner like the so-called *grylloi* and gnostic gemstones which boom coincides with the mass

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production of the lead plaques of the Danubian Riders (Dimitrova-Milcheva 1980, 16–18; Ertl 2014, 102). The absence of cult places (in provincial scale) that could relate to the monuments in question, as well as the almost complete lack of dedicatory and votive inscriptions also indicate their principal protective function.

Christian reaction against Paganism. The archaeological context and some damages on the discussed lead plaques from *Serdica* and the surrounding region provides interesting observations about the final destiny of the monuments. All three items from *Serdica* probably were purposely thrown out – two of them on the street/road, and the last one, in the courtyard. Similar situation is plausible also for the reliefs from Aldomirovtsi and Arbanas. Five items bear signs of intended damage: the plaques from *Serdica* (fig. 5), Arbanas (fig. 2) and Aldomirovtsi (fig. 7) are bent to a different degree; the second relief from *Serdica* (fig. 6) has a deep crack on its left part, while the monument from Rebro (fig. 1) has incised markings, made with a sharp tool. The described damages are caused most probably by deliberate actions aiming (symbolical and physical) destruction of the reliefs¹⁴. Due to the specific material the plaques are made of (lead), it is impossible simply to “break/crush” them like marble votive items. Their melting or cutting up into pieces would take more time and efforts than necessary. The simple mechanical deformation by hand or tool/object, and then throwing the plaques away like waste, was enough for the purpose. The deposition of the monuments in layers dated to the middle–second half of the 4th c. AD suggests that the “extinction” of the reliefs of the Danubian Riders was most probably caused by the growing influence of Christian religion. Possible “Christianization” of the Danubian Riders’ plates is attested on some marble items (Tudor 1976, 190). The destruction of the cult statues and relief images of the so-called temple of Herakles in *Serdica* probably has the same purpose (Stancheva, Farkov 1977, 264). It seems that during this period the pagan symbols on the plaques became intolerable for the followers of the new religion, which resulted in brutal actions of ritual and material removal. Whether this was a single act or it took place over some period of time is impossible to establish by archaeological methods. It would be wrong to insist that the described evidence is entirely a consequence of intended organized actions of the Church/Christians against the pagan beliefs. It is equally possible that newly converted Christians have destroyed the reliefs, previously owned by them, as a consequence of their transition to a new spiritual identity. Whatever the answer of these questions, the lead plaques of the Danubian Riders provide important information in this respect.

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¹⁴ According to some authors, the damage signs upon lead plaques of Danubian Riders testify their possible use in magical rituals (Malbašić 2021, 250–251).

Description of the finds

1. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from the village of Rebro, Breznik municipality (fig. 1). It is a stray find discovered in a cornfield in the Vartopa locality near the village. National Institute of Archaeology with Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, inventory no. 6027.
Dimensions: 7.5 by 5.5/5.2 by 0.2 cm.
State at discovery – no data; the plaque is cleaned up and restored? Incised markings by sharp tool on the pediment.
Date: 2nd–3rd c. AD (according to G. Katsarov); most probably the end of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD.
Publication: Katsarov 1924, 137–144, fig. 103; Tudor 1969, 48, no. 81.
2. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from Arbanas (fig. 2). Discovered in 1988 during the archaeological excavations of a site located to the east of the quarter Arbanas in Radomir town, district of Pernik. The find is from unclear archaeological context in square 11/E in the ‘south-east sector of the area walled up in Late Antiquity’. Regional museum of history – Pernik, inventory no. ГП-4-6230 (1988 г.).
Dimensions: 7.5 by 5.5 by 0.2 cm.
State of discovery: the upper right corner of the plaque is bent forward; the relief is probably cleaned up and restored.
Date: the end of the 2nd–beginning of the 3rd c. AD (according to V. Lyubenova); most probably the end of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD.
Publication: Lyubenova 1989, 103; Lyubenova 2008.
3. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders (fig. 3). Unknown place of origin. According to its owner it originates from *Sirmium*; most probably the item is from an area to the west of Sofia. Private collection of R. Ertl, no. E 05-001.
Dimensions: 7.6 by 5.9 by 0.3 cm.
State of discovery: no data.
Date: probably the end of the 3rd–beginning of the 4th c. AD.
Publication: Ertl 1996, 67–68, Tafel LI.
4. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* (fig. 4). The relief is discovered in 2009 during the archaeological excavations of the amphitheatre, to the north of the arena (square 13) in Late Antique layer with 4th c. AD bronze coins. Regional museum of history – Sofia, inventory no. МИС А 6721.
Dimensions: 7.5 by 5.4 by 0.3 cm.
State of discovery: no data; cleaned up.
Date: middle–third quarter of the 4th c. AD (according to the archaeological context).
Publication: unpublished, see Ivanov 2011, 125, note 1.
5. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* (fig. 5). The relief is discovered in 2010 during the archaeological excavations of the so-called *decumanus* 3 in the north area of the fortified Roman town. Regional museum of history – Sofia, inventory no. МИС А 6850.
Dimensions: 7.8 by 5.6 by 0.2 cm.
State of discovery: upper right corner bent backward, and bottom left corner bent forward; the plaque is cleaned up and restored.
Date: second quarter–end of the 4th c. AD (according to the archaeological context).
Publication: Ivanov 2011.
6. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from *Serdica* (fig. 6). The relief is discovered in 2019 during the archaeological excavations of a site located in 27, G. Washington str., Sofia. The item is found in square B4, in a presumed courtyard area of a Late Roman building situated in the so-called north enlargement of *Serdica*. Regional museum of history – Sofia, inventory no. МИС А 8281.
Dimensions: 7.6 by 5.7 by 0.2/0.4 cm.
State of discovery: rupture in the middle-left half of the relief; not cleaned up.
Date: middle–second third of 4th c. AD (according to the archaeological context).
Publication: Stanev, Borisova-Katsarova 2020, 765, fig. 5.
7. Lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Riders from the site in locality Izvora, 5 km to the north of the village of Aldomirovtsi, municipality of Slivnitsa (fig. 7). The relief is found in the upper layer of the archaeological site.
State of the discovery: the left half of the relief is bent very strongly to the right half; a rupture in the left bottom part.

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Date: end of the 3rd–third quarter of the 4th c. AD (according to the preliminary report of the excavations).

Publication: unpublished.

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Оловни плочки на т.нар. Дунавски конници от Сердика и региона

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(резюме)

В статията са представени и коментирани седем оловни плочки на Дунавските конници от София и софийска област, формиращи хомогенна хронологическа и иконографска група.

Първият паметник (обр. 1) е открит край с. Ребро, община Брезник. През 1988 г. при разкопки на т.нар. производствен център до махала Арбанас на гр. Радомир е открита втора оловна плочка с идентична иконография (обр. 2). Нов оловен релеф е публикуван от колекцията на Р. Ертл (обр. 3). През 2009 г., северно от амфитеатъра на Сердика, е открита още една подобна плочка от София (обр. 4). Следващите две находки (обр. 5–6) са от разкопки в северната част на римския град и от проучвания на ул. „Г. Вашингтон № 27. Последният паметник (обр. 7) произхожда от землище на с. Алдомировци, общ. Сливница.

Разглежданите оловни плочки са с еднакви размери и идентична форма. Те принадлежат към тип III по Д. Тудор и типове E 3 и E 5 по Р. Ертл, съответно E03 и E05 по В. Малбашич (Tudor 1976, 66; Ertl 1996, 18–19, 66–68; Malbašić 2021, 18–19, 30–31, Tabla 10–11).

Четири от плочките (обр. 1–2, 4–5) имат идентична иконографска схема (Сердика 1), а при останалите две (обр. 3 и 6) изображенията в долния регистър са възпроизведени огледално (схема Сердика 2).

Оловните плочки са във вид на едикула с триъгълен фронтон. Във фронтоната е изобразена фигура на орел надясно с глава наляво. При паметниците от схема Сердика 2 орелът е наляво с глава надясно. Вдясно от орела има две звезди, а вляво – една. Основното поле е рамкирано от две колони със схематични бази и капители. В центъра на горния регистър е представена права женска фигура с по-голям размер между два конника. Тя е облечена с дълга драпирана дреха, пристегната в кръста. Двете ѝ ръце са протегнати към муцуните на конете. Двамата конници са разположени симетрично от двете ѝ страни. С левите си ръце те държат поводите на конете, а десните са вдигнати нагоре и назад като че замахват с копие. Левият конник носи фригийска шапка, докато при десния това не е съвсем ясно. Над главите на конете има по една звезда. Под конниците са представени две проснати по корем човешки фигури, а зад тях – фигура на Немезида. В двата горни ъгъла на релефа се виждат бюстове на Сол (вдясно) и Луна (вляво). Зад изображенията на Немезида, е представена по една змия.

В долния регистър са изобразени: канделабър с лампа върху него; седем кръгли предмета и две лампи над тях; лъв в скок надясно към трикрака маса с риба върху нея; под лъва е представена птица надясно; под масата се разполага неясно изображение – вероятно скелет на овен; вдясно от масата са изобразени птица и четириногото животно надясно с обърната наляво глава; в десния край на полето е представена мъжка фигура с вдигнати ръце към разположена над нея „решетка“ с триъгълен завършек на горната част.

При схема Сердика 2 композицията на фигурите в горния регистър е идентична. Основната разлика е в изображенията от долния регистър. Представени са същите символи, в идентична последователност, но разположени огледално: при релефите от схема 1 предметите и животните започват с канделабър вляво и завършват с човешката фигура с вдигнати ръце и „решетка“ над нея вдясно. При схема 2 поредицата символи започва с човешката фигура и „решетката“ вляво и завършва с канделабър вдясно. Изображенията съответно са огледално

обърнати.

Централна позиция заема изображението на Великата богинята, за чиято иконография най-близки са паралелите с Епона. Двата конници от двете ѝ страни са идентифицирани като мъжки божества с гето-дакийски произход, чиято иконография е под влиянието Тракийския конник и Диоскурите. Представената зад конниците Немезида е по-скоро във функцията ѝ на пазител на тайната на мистериите. Проснатите под конете човешки фигури са схващани като символи на злите сили, победени от Доброто, в лицето на конниците. Пасивното им държание, липсата на оръжие и изобразяването им голи и проснати по корем по-скоро предполагат представянето на ритуал, симулирана смърт или покорство/молитва. Бюстовете на Сол и Луна се смята, че са заимствани от митраистичните релефи. Изображенията на две змии зад фигурите на конниците се тълкуват като помощници на конните божества, а представянето на орела във фронта указва небесната сфера, но също е и войнска емблема и символ на победата.

Изображенията на канделабър и две лампи подсказват практикуването на култа в тъмни, подземни помещения. Седемте кръгли предмета до канделабъра вероятно съответстват на трите кръгли предмета върху устието на кантарос, засвидетелстван при други плочки. Идентифицират се като питки или плодове. Животинските фигури в долния регистър са представени от лъв, петел, овца и птица (гарван?). Част от тези изображения се тълкуват като символи на четирите основни елемента: огън – лъв, въздух – петел, вода – кантарос, земя – змия. Лъвът е смятан и за най-високата степен на инициация в култа. Изобразената върху трикраката масичка риба е схващана като свещена храна при угощения, свързани с инициацията на новопосветените. Неясното изображение под трикраката маса най-вероятно следва да се идентифицира като скелет на овен. Малката човешка фигура с вдигнати ръце изглежда пресъздава в редуциран вид сцената на криоболия, а изобразената „решетка“ над нея трябва да се идентифицира като циста мистика.

Разглежданите паметници на Дунавски конници не показват ясна връзка с римската войска. Пространственият анализ на многобройните находки от Сърбия индикира преобладаващо разпространение в цивилна среда. Липсата на проучени светилища на Дунавските конници и почти пълното отсъствие на посветителни надписи, показва, че огромният брой плочки по-скоро не са изпълнявали функцията на посвещения и оброци. Малките размери на металните екземпляри са друга индикация в тази насока. Формалните и стилови характеристики на плочките показват производството им като сериен продукт, ориентиран към непретенциозен масов потребител. Реалната употреба (особено на оловните екземпляри) е по-скоро като амулети или елементи от домашното светилище, осигуряващи благоденствие, успех и протекция. Комплексната мистериална същност на култа вероятно е оставала неразбираема за значителна част от хората и затова иконографски е преработена в компилативен сбор от фигури и символи, близки до възприятието и практическите нужди на вярващия. От тази гледна точка за конкретния притежател на подобен релеф от значение е била по-скоро общата концепция, натрупването на познати символи, гарантиращи изпълнението на търсения резултат.

В изследванията върху паметниците на Дунавските конници често е отбелязван фактът, че много малка част от паметниците произхождат от археологически контекст. Релефите от Сердика и региона предоставят добра основа в това отношение. Трите плочки от Сердика и тази от Алдомировци произхождат от пластове, датирани към средата–втората половина на IV в., което отразява времето на тяхното депониране. Предвид историческата конюнктура в развитието на Сердика и някои съображения от стилово естество, може да се предположи че изработката на визираните екземпляри е не по-рано от последната четвърт/края на III–началото на IV в.

Двата релефа от Ребро и частната колекция на Р. Ертл нямат археологически контекст

и могат да се синхронизират с идентичните находки от Сердика. Плочката от Арбанас е отнесена към края на II–началото на III в., но в публикацията липсва стратиграфия на обекта и контекст на находката. Паралелите с релефите от Сердика подсказват по-късна датировка.

Разглежданите оловни плочки от Сердика и региона се отличават иконографски и композиционно от другите паметници на Дунавските конници. Формални паралели се откриват от Ромула, Орля и Ескус. Може да се допусне, че последните са по-ранни, предвид по-ясната структура на иконографската схема и по-качествената изработка на релефите. Липсата на по-ранни паметници на Дунавските конници в Сердика и прилежащата ѝ територия, предполага тяхната поява да се свърже с ново население, най-малко част от което вероятно идва от изоставените отвъддунавски територии на империята.

Идентичните размери, формалното, иконографско и стилово единство на разглежданите плочки позволяват с голяма доза сигурност в Сердика да се локализира един от късните центрове на производство на оловни плочки на Дунавските конници. Екземплярите от Ребро, Арбанас и Алдомировци маркират пътищата на разпространение на релефите. И трите пункта се намират на почти еднакво отстояние от Сердика (ок. 30 км) по протежение на главните и второстепенни пътища: Алдомировци е в близост до станцията Мелдия на диагоналия път, Арбанас – в района на пътната станция Елея на пътя Сердика – Пауталия – Стоби, а Ребро в близост до предполагаемото трасе на пътя от Елея към Монтана.

Контекстът на откриване на плочките от Сердика не позволява свързването им със светилище. Подобна е и ситуацията с релефа от Алдомировци. За паметника от Арбанас е възможно да се допусне хипотетична връзка с предполагаемо по-ранно светилище на Хера (и Зевс?), но коригираната хронология на находката (към края на III – началото на IV в.) по-скоро не е в полза на подобно твърдение.

Археологическият контекст и видът, в който са открити част от разглежданите оловни плочки, позволяват интересни наблюдения върху причините за изчезването на тези паметници. И трите екземпляра от Сердика са изхвърлени – два в уличното пространство и един вероятно в двора на сграда. Подобна ситуация е допустима и за плочките от Алдомировци и Арбанас. Пет от паметниците показват следи от умишлено увреждане: плочките от Сердика (обр. 5), Арбанас (обр. 2) и Алдомировци (обр. 7) са огънати в различна степен; втори релеф от Сердика (обр. 6) е с разкъсване в лявата част, докато паметникът от Ребро (обр. 1) носи следи от удар с остър предмет. Описаните повреди вероятно са резултат от умишлено третиране на плочките с цел тяхното (символично и физическо) унищожаване. Предвид оловото, от което са изработени релефите, не е било възможно същите да бъдат „счупени/натрошени“, подобно на мраморните оброчни плочки. Тяхното претопяване или разрязване/разкъсване на отделни части е изисквало повече усилия и време. Механичната деформация с ръка или с помощта на някакъв инструмент/предмет и последвалото изхвърляне на релефа като непотребна вещ изглежда е било напълно достатъчно. Предвид хронологията на депониране на паметниците (средата–втората половина на IV в.), като причина за описаното отношение към плочките на Дунавските конници е възможно да се допусне засилващото се влияние на християнската религия.