



Portraits of the dead: A Roman family funerary stele from the Middle Strymon Valley

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a marble funerary stele depicting a family group that was discovered during rescue excavations conducted in 2025 in the Roman and Late Antique necropolis near the village of Struma (Sandanski Municipality, Southwestern Bulgaria). The monument was found reused as a covering slab in a child's grave dated to the late 3rd – early 4th c. AD. The relief represents the busts of a married couple with a girl positioned below them. Despite the poor state of preservation, the iconography and stylistic features of the figures allow for a more precise assessment of the monument's date and regional context. The hairstyles of the depicted figures, particularly the melon coiffure of the girl, suggest a date within the Middle Antonine period (c. AD 160–180). Close parallels can be identified in the funerary sculpture of the Middle Strymon Valley, especially at Heraclea Sintica and Laskarevo. The monument provides important new evidence for Roman funerary relief sculpture in the Middle Strymon Valley.

KEYWORDS

Roman funerary stele; funerary relief sculpture; Roman necropolis; Roman Macedonia; Middle Strymon Valley

Introduction

Funerary stelae constitute an important component of the Roman-period material culture of the Middle Strymon Valley, a region within the Roman province of Macedonia. The region has yielded numerous monuments with inscriptions and portrait representations, reflecting local adaptations of provincial artistic traditions. Family portrait stelae are particularly significant, as they provide valuable evidence for the representation and commemoration of family groups that were depicted and commemorated in funerary art. In this context, a recently discovered example from the necropolis near the village of Struma represents an important addition to the regional funerary record.

The monument was uncovered during rescue excavations conducted in 2025 in connection with the construction of a gas pipeline near the village of Struma (Sandanski Municipality, Southwestern Bulgaria), within a Roman and Late Antique necropolis associated with a nearby settlement (figs 1–2). The site, first identified during field surveys in 2024 (Zlatkov et al., in press), is situated on a rocky elevation south of the settlement.

A total of 88 graves were documented, including cremations and inhumations, often overlapping due to the absence of surface markers (fig. 3). The graves were predominantly simple pits, frequently covered with stone slabs or roof tiles, a practice relevant to the interpretation of the stele as a reused cover slab. The necropolis was in use from the second quarter of the 3rd to the last quarter of the 4th c.

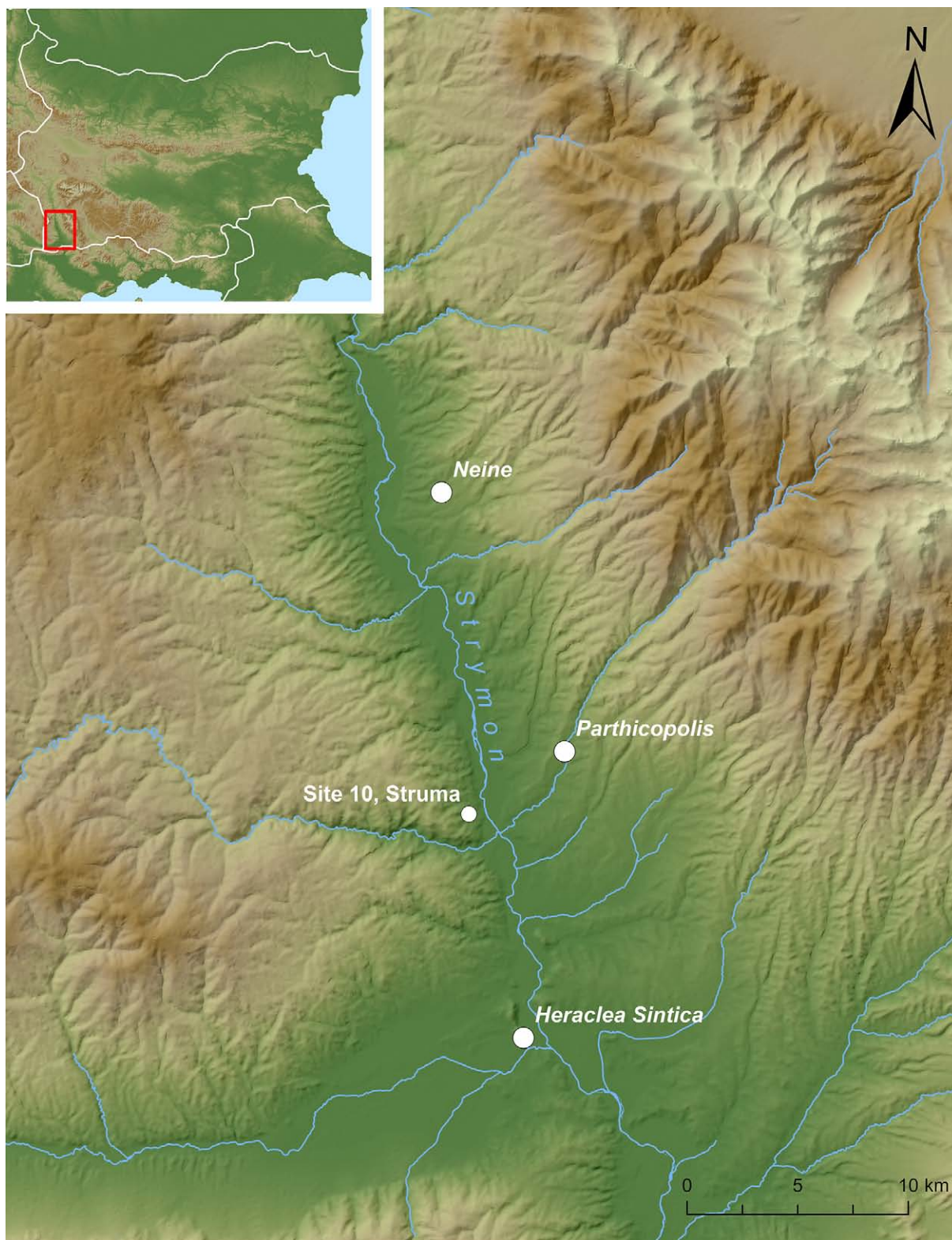


Fig. 1. Map of the Middle Strymon Valley (author A. Grigorov)

AD (Kolev, Pramatarov in press).

Evidence from the nearby settlement indicates occupation from the 4th c. BC to the 6th c. AD, with a peak in the 4th–6th c. AD. The necropolis, however, is limited to burials of the 3rd–4th c. AD, with no evidence for earlier or later use. This pattern suggests that burial grounds belonging to other periods



Fig. 2. Panoramic view of the necropolis, from the north (photo Ph. Kolev)

were located elsewhere in the vicinity and points to the secondary deposition of earlier funerary monuments within the necropolis.

Archaeological context

The funerary stele was discovered in grave no. 68, located in the central part of the necropolis. It was found placed face down and reused as part of the grave covering (fig. 4). The slab was positioned in the central part of the grave, above the pelvic area of the deceased.

The grave consisted of a simple rectangular pit oriented west–east (azimuth 281°) and measuring 1.30 × 0.67 m (fig. 5). The pit was cut 0.81 m into the sterile soil and covered with a stone slab. The burial was an inhumation, with the deceased laid in supine position and the head to the west. The skeletal remains were poorly preserved; only the skull and traces of the femurs were documented. The dimensions of the pit suggest that the burial most likely belonged to a child. A bronze coin was deposited as a grave good and was found in the central part of the grave¹ (fig. 6), providing a *terminus post quem* for the burial, which can be dated to the very end of the 3rd or, more plausibly, the early 4th c. AD.

Grave no. 68 is located in close proximity to graves nos 62 and 65 (fig. 7). It cuts into the earlier grave no. 62, an inhumation burial measuring 1.13 × 0.67 m and oriented west–east. Its eastern part was covered with stone slabs. The excavation yielded a ceramic cup, an iron clamp, and an iron nail, all from the eastern part of the grave pit. Grave no. 68 is in turn disturbed in its eastern part by grave no. 65, also an inhumation burial. A roof tile from the covering of grave no. 65 partially overlaps the funerary stele. Grave no. 65 measures 0.92 × 0.46 m and is oriented west–east; its covering consisted of stones and roof

1 Bronze coin of Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305), struck between AD 295–298 at the mint of Heraclea (Perinthus, Thrace); diameter 18/20 mm; weight 0.98 g. Obv.: [IMP C C VAL] DIOCLETIANVS P F AVG. Bust of the emperor, radiate, draped, facing right. Rev.: CONCORDIA [MILI] TVM. The emperor standing right, receiving Victory standing on a globe from Jupiter; between them the letters H? (RIC VI, Heraclea 13/21).

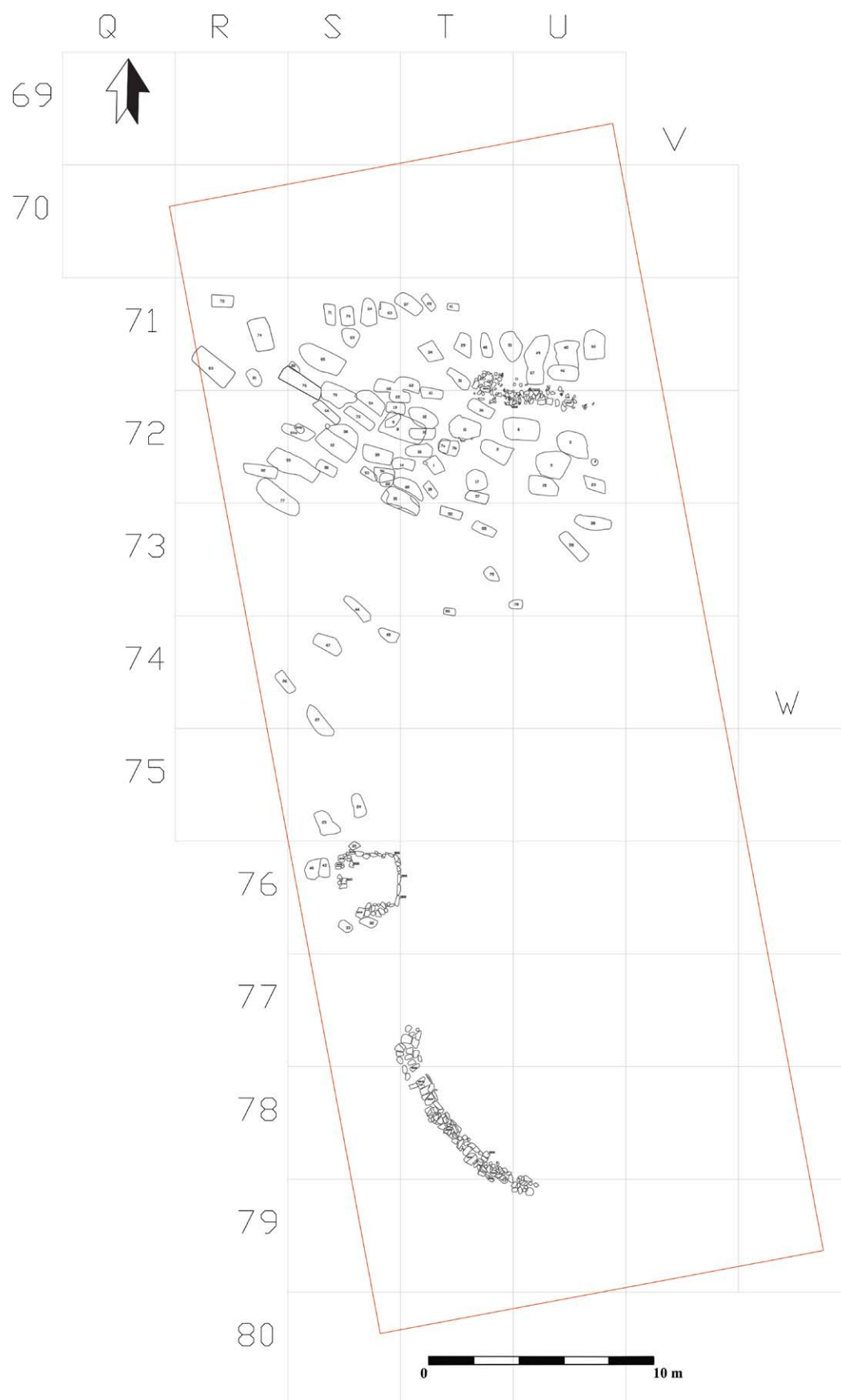


Fig. 3. Plan of the necropolis (author V. Valchev)

tiles. No human remains or grave goods were identified.

These relationships indicate repeated use of the burial space and the absence of clearly defined grave boundaries. This context is essential for understanding the conditions under which the stele was deposited and supports its interpretation as a reused element within the burial context. A comparable case is documented in grave no. 10, where a reused stone base for a funerary stele was used as a cover for the grave pit² (fig. 8).

Description and Iconography of the monument

The monument is a marble funerary stele of rectangular shape, terminating at the top in a triangular pediment (fig. 9). The triangular pediment contributes to the architectural framing of the monument and evokes the impression of a small temple-like structure, which may reflect the symbolic elevation and possible heroisation of the deceased. The frame, the lower corners, and parts of the pediment are broken off. It is carved from white marble with grey banding. Dimensions: H 0.615 m; W 0.38 m; Th. 0.08 m. Pediment: L 0.345 m; H 0.08 m; frame Th. 0.01 m. Relief field: 0.32 × 0.35 m; frame Th. 0.015 m. Lower field: W 0.36 m; H 0.09 m. The slab was probably integrated into an architectural structure, as indicated by its roughly worked rear and lateral surfaces and the absence of a tenon at the base, indicating that these parts were not intended to be visible. In this context, it may have been set into a wall or placed within a wall niche, alternatively it could have been fixed in a base with a socket corresponding to the width of its lower edge. Numerous parallels can be cited from the region, where such practices are well attested in monuments originating both from urban centres, and from the necropoleis of the surrounding settlements (e.g. Dimitrov 1941, 110, no. 4; 111–115, nos 5, 7, 10, 22, 30; Manov 2008, 94–96, nos 64, 66–67, 70; 98, no. 81, 101–102, no. 91; 130, no. 179; Mitrev 2011, 43, no. 22; Dimitrov 2017, 20, 21, nos 27–28; 25, no. 36). This allows the monument under consideration to be placed within the context of a broader regional tradition in the methods of setting and fixing funerary monuments. The stele has no inscription.

The relief depicts the busts of a married couple, with that of a girl positioned below them, forming a coherent family composition characteristic of Roman funerary iconography in the region. Such a composition, combining a male and a female bust with that of a child, belongs to a broader iconographic repertoire attested in the funerary art of the region. The surface is heavily worn in places. The carving is relatively shallow, and the modelling is achieved through simple incisions and limited surface finishing, yet the preserved details indicate a confident and skilled execution rather than a schematic rendering. The man is dressed in a chiton and a himation. His hair is short and voluminous. He has an oval face and narrow almond-shaped eyes. Both the upper and lower eyelids are indicated, while the irises and pupils are not rendered. The nose and eyebrows are damaged. The mouth is small and partly damaged. The beard is short. The ears are not depicted.

The woman is dressed in a chiton and a himation covering her head. Her hair, left uncovered, is parted in the middle and combed to the sides in waves. The face is oval. The eyes are rendered in the same manner as those of the man, with the upper and lower eyelids indicated, while the irises and pupils are not marked. The left side of the forehead, the left eye, the nose, and the mouth are damaged. The neck is elongated.

Below them is depicted the bust of a girl dressed in a chiton and a himation. The relief is heavily worn, and the details are difficult to discern. The hair is arranged in the so-called melon hairstyle, divided into eight segments indicated by incisions. The face is oval. The eyes are narrow and almond-shaped; the upper and lower eyelids are indicated, while the irises and pupils are not marked. The nose

2 Dimensions: L 0.49 m; W 0.305 m; Th. 0.05 m. Socket: L 0.145 m; W 0.08 m; D 0.05 m.



Fig. 4. Grave no. 68. Findspot of the funerary stele. View from the north (photo V. Vasilev)



Fig. 5. Grave no. 68. View from the north (photo V. Vasilev)



Fig. 6. Bronze coin of Emperor Diocletian (photo K. Pramatarov)

is damaged. The mouth is small. The ears are visible.

Representations of a family group consisting of a man, a woman, and a child are also attested in the Middle Strymon Valley, in some cases with the child depicted outside the main relief frame (Manov 2008, 98, no. 81; 117, no. 140; 120, no. 147; 130, no. 179; 131, no. 182; Dimitrov 2017, 20, no. 27; 21, no. 29; 26, no. 37; 41, no. 66).

The stylistic features of the monument may suggest production within a regional workshop tradition. While a precise attribution is not possible, it may tentatively be associated with a workshop in a nearby urban centre, such as Parthicopolis or, perhaps more likely, Heraclea Sintica.

Dating

The dating of the monument is based primarily on the hairstyles of the depicted figures. A particularly important chronological indication is provided by the hairstyle of the girl, arranged in the so-called melon coiffure and divided into eight segments. This coiffure is typically associated with representations of young girls and is well attested in portrait and funerary sculpture of the 2nd c. AD including monuments of the Antonine period from Thessalonica (Terzopoulou 2019, 322).

The hairstyles of the man and the woman further support this dating. The woman's hairstyle, with the hair parted in the middle and combed to the sides in soft waves, is characteristic of female portraiture of the Middle Antonine period (c. AD 160–180). The man's short and relatively voluminous hair combined with a short beard likewise finds parallels in male portraiture of the same period. Comparable hairstyles are also attested in the funerary sculpture of the Middle Strymon Valley, particularly at Heraclea Sintica³ and Laskarevo⁴ (figs 10–11) (Dimitrov 1941, 9–10, Abb. 3; 109–110, no. 2; Milcheva 2015, 292–296).

Taken together, these stylistic and iconographic features indicate that the monument can be dated to the Middle Antonine period, around AD 160–180.

Conclusions

The marble funerary stele discussed above represents a family monument depicting the busts of a married couple, with the bust of a girl positioned below them. Despite the poor state of preservation of the relief, the iconography and stylistic features of the figures allow for several observations to be made. The monument can be dated to the Middle Antonine period (c. AD 160–180). Close parallels can be found in the funerary sculpture of the Middle Strymon Valley, particularly in monuments from Heraclea Sintica and Laskarevo. Representations of such family groups are well attested in the funerary art of the Middle Strymon Valley. The triangular pediment further enhances the architectural character of the monument, evoking the form of a small temple-like structure and reinforcing the symbolic elevation of the deceased.

3 The monument was discovered in the village of Rupite and was subsequently lost.

4 Archaeological Museum of Kavala, inv. no. A 7; NAIM–BAS, inv. no. 6312

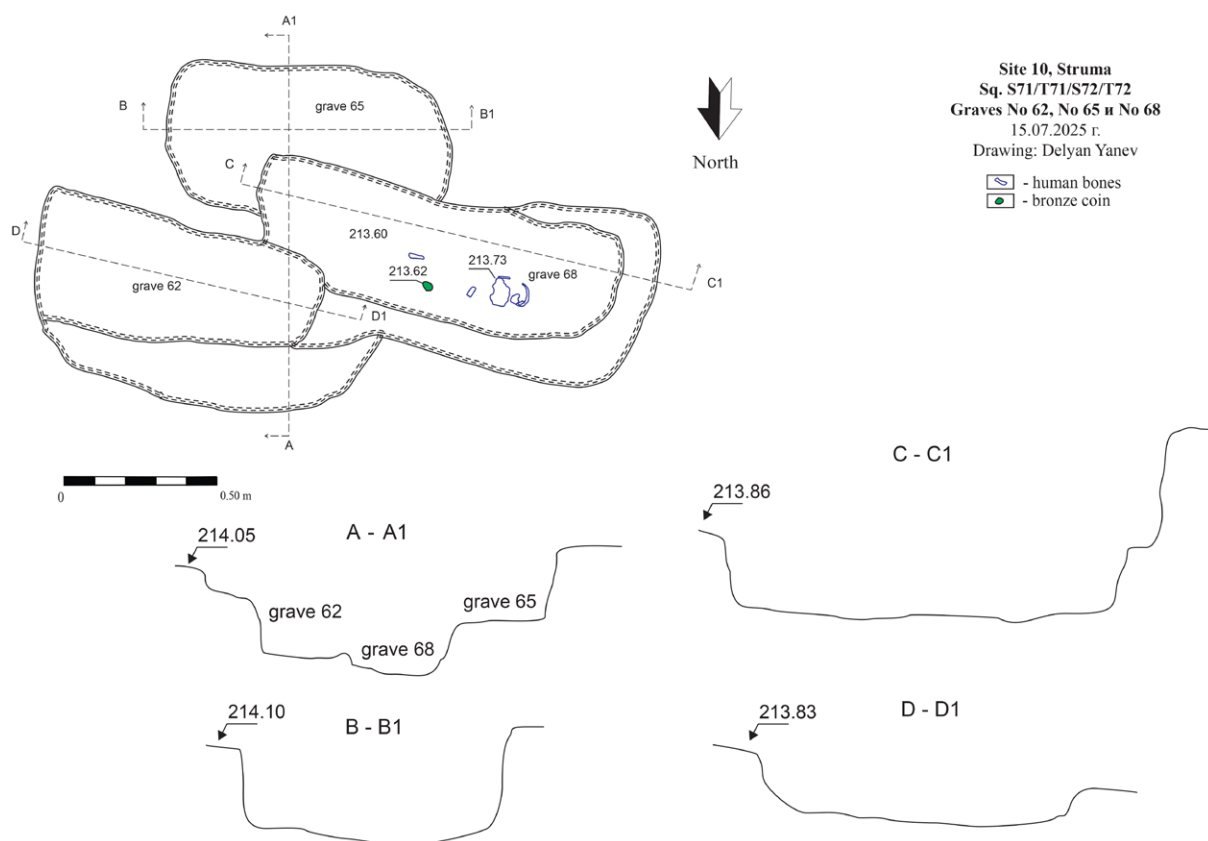


Fig. 7. Graves nos 62, 65 and 68 (drawing D. Yanev)



Fig. 8. Grave no. 10 with a covering reusing a stone base for a funerary stele (photo V. Vasilev)



*Fig. 9. Funerary stele with family portraits
(photo Ph. Kolev)*

The monument was later reused as a covering slab in a child's grave dated to the late 3rd – early 4th c. AD. No graves dating to the 2nd c. AD were recorded in the excavated sector of the necropolis, which suggests that the funerary stele was most probably brought here from the nearby surroundings. The monument is particularly significant as it represents the only funerary stele discovered during archaeological excavations outside urban necropoleis and the necropolis near the village of Piperitsa (locality of Sv. Todor).

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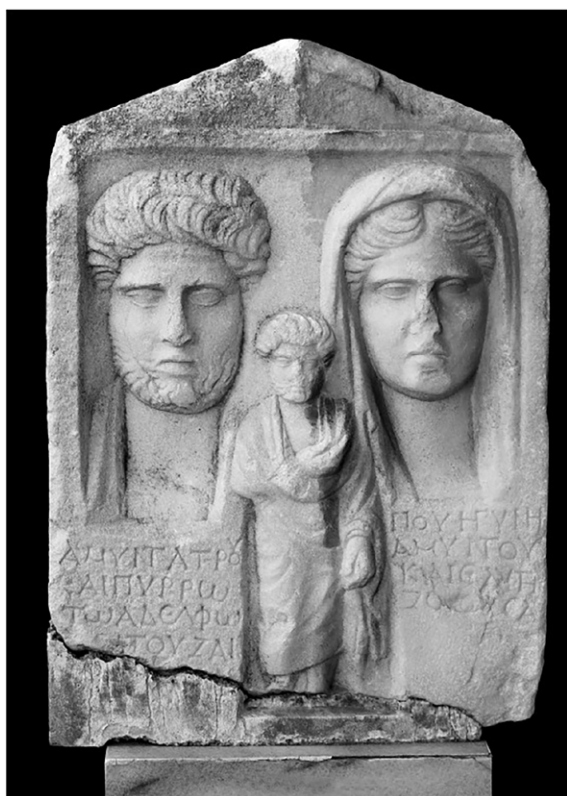


Fig. 10. Funerary stele from Laskarevo, now in Archaeological Museum of Kavala (after Milcheva 2015, 300, fig. 2)



Fig. 11. Funerary stele from Laskarevo (photo Ph. Kolev)

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