



vol. 13, 2026, 223–231

Devoted to the Past, Looking to the Future

Thirty Steps of the Be-JA Road

The worship and the road: a lead plaque of Danubian Horsemen from *Mansio Lissae* (*Bona Mansio*)

Mario Ivanov ^a

^a Department of Classical Archaeology, National Institute of Archaeology with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria; slotarm74@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article presents a lead plaque of the so-called Danubian Horsemen from the village of Vetren, Septemvri Municipality, where the Roman road station *mansio Lissae* (later *Bona mansio*) is located. Iconographic and stylistic analysis of the find shows that this is currently the only plaque of Type D from Bulgaria. Its dating can be placed in the second half or the last quarter of the 3rd c. AD. The discovery of the plaque at a road station raises the question of the connection between the Danubian Horsemen monuments and the provincial road network. It has been established that the majority of such finds in Bulgaria originate from sites located along major road arteries. This correlation is linked, on one hand, to the practice of offering votives at roadside sanctuaries, and on the other, to the need for protection, which such monuments are believed to provide.

KEYWORDS

Danubian Horsemen, lead plaques, roads, sanctuaries

Research on the so-called Danubian Horsemen monuments has been relishing increased scholarly interest in the last decades. Many new finds have been published as well as comprehensive studies focused on their chronology and interpretation. The present contribution aims to publish a new monument from Bulgaria and, at the same time, to draw attention to certain aspects of the distribution of lead plaques of the Danubian Horsemen.

At the “Prof. Mechislav Domaradski” Archaeological Museum in the town of Septemvri, Bulgaria, a fragmented lead plaque with reliefs of the Danubian Horsemen is preserved (fig. 1)¹. The find originates from the area of the village of Vetren, municipality of Septemvri, where the road station *mansio Lissae*, later renamed *Bona mansio*, was located (Маджаров 2009, 86–87; Martinova 2012, 55). The fragments of the plaque were handed over in 1985 to the collection of the community centre in Vetren and later entered the museum collection in Septemvri. There is no information about the circumstances of the discovery. The existing parts of the plaque were assembled and mounted on a transparent base. Due to unfamiliarity with the iconography of the relief images, one of the fragments was not included in the restored section, while another was incorrectly attached to the lower part of the plaque (fig. 2). In its current state, the plaque consists of 11 pieces, with restored dimensions of approximately 76 × 60 × 1 mm. The fragmentary nature of the find and the poor quality of the relief images make it particularly difficult to identify the individual figures and their details. Modern research generally accepts that the

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues from the Archaeological Museum in the town of Septemvri, Tsvetelina Slavkova and Violeta Duneva, the director of the museum, for the opportunity to publish the plaque, for the information provided, and for their assistance in documenting it.



Fig. 1. Lead plaque of Danubian Horsemen from Vetren (mansio Lissae/Bona mansio) (photo: M. Ivanov)



Fig. 2. Two pieces (in red circles) from the upper part of the plaque, above the pediment

lead plaques of the Danubian Horsemen were mass-produced in stone molds, and specimens made from the same mould or from a secondary (ceramic ?) copy are identical or show only minimal differences (Malbašić 2021, 231–234; Domiter et al. 2025, 27). This characteristic of the finds allows the identification of various compositional schemes that are repeated across a large number of plaques. The preserved parts of the plaque from Vetren can be confidently assigned to the relatively rare type D 2 according to R. Ertl (Ertl 1996, 18, 62–63, Taf. V) and type D 07 according to V. Malbašić (Malbašić 2021, 76–80, Pl. XXIX–XXX). Thanks to other fully preserved examples of this type (for example fig. 3), it is possible to provide an accurate description of the find from Vetren.

The lead plaque is rectangular in shape, framed by a double relief line. The main decorative field features an edicule, flanked by two columns supporting a triangular pediment, all inscribed within the rectangular field of the plaque. The relief images are presented in several registers: above and within the pediment, between the columns, and in a separate field at the bottom of the plaque. The main characters – the two Horsemen and the goddess between them – are depicted at a larger size. The goddess is shown wearing a long, stylised garment. With both her hands, she raises the edges of her clothing towards the horses' muzzles. Above her head, a crescent moon and a star are depicted. The two heraldically placed Horsemen are shown in a schematic manner, and the details of their clothing are difficult to discern. Both of them have their right arms raised, holding an unclear object. Above the horses' heads, a star appears above each one. Beneath the Horsemen, prostrated human figures are depicted, usually interpreted as fallen enemies or adorants. Between them, under the figure of the goddess, a tripod is shown with a fish placed on it. Beneath the reclining figures, animal images are visible, likely a dog (on the right) and a ram (on the left), behind which a crater and a jug are placed. The entire relief composition is flanked by two columns, with fluted lower parts and twisted upper parts, ending in a simple capital. The columns support a triangular pediment with a profiled frame. Within the pediment, there is an image, most likely of an eagle, and on either side, according to R. Ertl, there are busts of Sol and Luna (Ertl 1996, 63). The two upper corners above the pediment are occupied by depictions of flying Victories, each with a star in front of them – likely Phosphoros and Hesperos. The lower part of the relief field is separated by a relief line. At the two ends of this narrow, elongated space, two buildings are depicted, each approached by a human figure with raised arms. Between the two figures, there appear to be other smaller images, likely animal representations, that cannot be properly identified due to the low quality of the reliefs. The dimensions of the plaque are standard for this type. Notably, the thinness of the lead sheet stands out, which might indicate that the relief was additionally attached to another base (likely made of perishable material), although no holes for attachment or hanging are visible on the preserved parts of the monument.

From the description of the plaque and its comparison with other fully preserved examples of the same type, it is clear that an error was made during the restoration of the find from Vetren: the fragment placed in the lower right corner actually belongs to the upper part of the plaque, above the pediment. The other fragment, which was not assigned a place during the assembly, also belongs to the upper part of the find, above the pediment (fig. 2). As far as it can be assessed, the fragment from the lower right corner most likely comes from the upper left part of the plaque, while the other fragment is from the upper right part.

The item from Vetren is currently the only monument of this type from Bulgaria. In the corpus of D. Tudor, only one similar find with an unknown provenance from a site along the Danube River is published, currently kept in the Belgrade Museum (Tudor 1976, 14–15, no. 210; Ertl 1996, 62–63, Taf. XLVIII). Three new finds have been discovered in *Scupi* and its nearby surroundings (Nerezi, Govrlevo), another comes from the Kumanovo area, and one plaque from the collection of V. Malbašić (fig. 3) originates from the village of Uzvece, a few kilometers south of *Sirmium* (Jovanova 2015, 306, nos 2–5; Malbašić 2021, 80–81, Pl. XXIX–XXX).



Fig. 3. Lead plaque of type D 07 from Uzvece, Serbia (after Malbašić 2021, 80–81, Pl. XXIX–XXX)

The chronology of the examples from today's Republic of North Macedonia, according to stylistic-compositional analysis, is in the late 3rd c. (Jovanova 2015, 306). In recent studies on the Danubian Horsemen monuments, the plaques of type D are considered part of the initial generation of lead monuments, with type E regarded as a derivative of it (Nemeti 2023, 164, fig. 4). Unfortunately, observations on the typological evolution of the monuments cannot be chronologically specified at the moment. The archaeological context of most of the plaques of type E allows for their relatively secure dating to no earlier than the very end of the 3rd c. – or even the beginning of the 4th c. (Ivanov 2023, 222–224). Due to their stylistic characteristics, the lead plaques of type D indeed appear to be somewhat earlier, confirming their earlier chronology compared to those of type E and dating them at least to the second half of the 3rd c., possibly even to the last quarter of the 3rd c.

I will not focus here on the identification and symbolic interpretation of the relief images, as these have been extensively discussed in the literature (Tudor 1976, 99–137, 181–276; Ertl 1996, 5–16; Szabó 2017, 27–76; Malbašić 2021, 242–282; Ivanov 2023, 218–222; Nemeti 2024). However, one particular element deserves special attention. It is characteristic for the monuments of type D 07 and is rarely found in other types of lead plaques of the Danubian Horsemen. These are the two symmetrical depictions of an architectural structure in the lower field of the relief. Such an image is recorded on very few specimens and is usually interpreted as a temple (Jovanova 2015, 306; Malbašić 2021, 80). A fragmented plaque from Dunăreni (*Sacidava*), Romania, perhaps most clearly expresses the idea of an architectural representation of a temple or edicule with a triangular pediment, columns and three steps, to which three human figures are approaching (Iconomu, Chiriac 2007, 274, 281, Ill. 3). The shape of the plaque indicates its belonging to the same type D, although it should probably be considered a distinct variant of the type. The *Sacidava* specimen is dated to the second half of the 3rd – early 4th c. (Iconomu, Chiriac 2007, 279), but its stylistic characteristics suggest a possibly slightly earlier date than the other

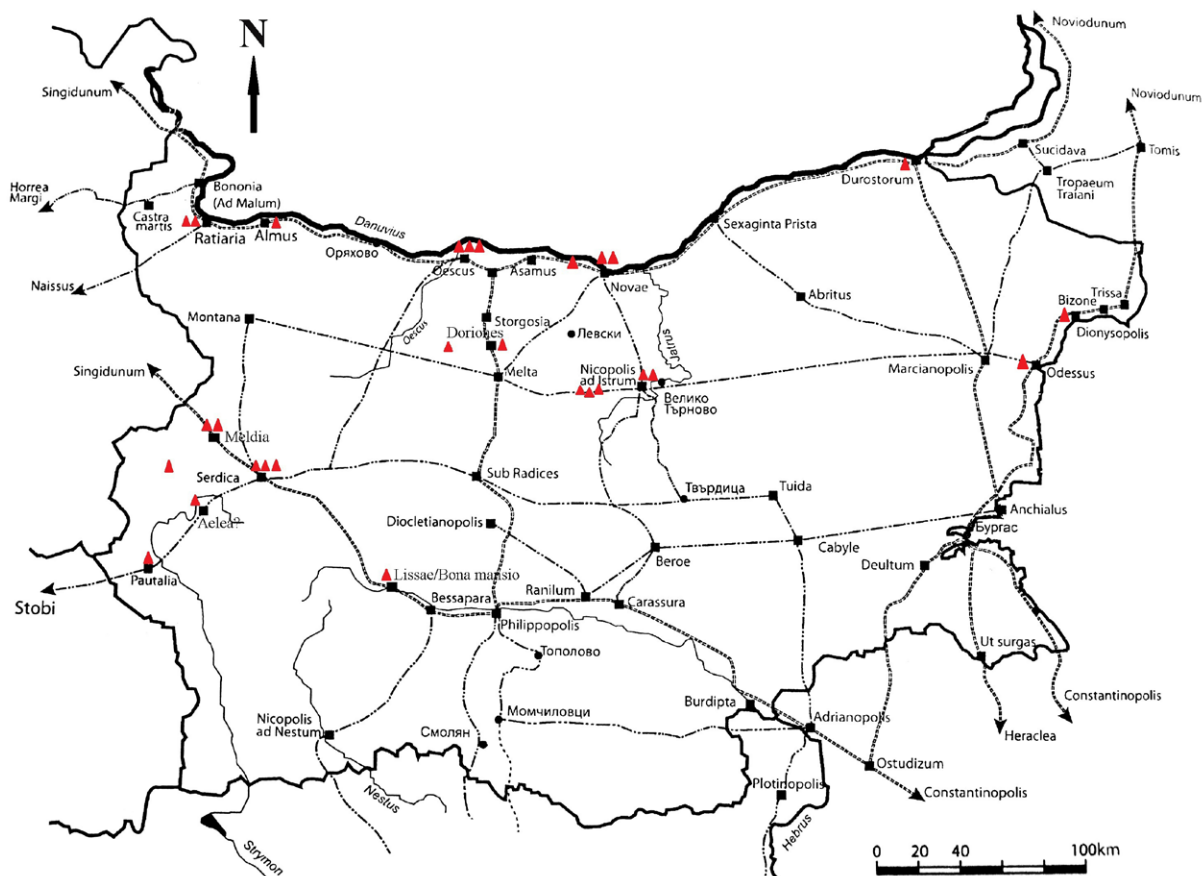


Fig. 4. Monuments of the Danubian Horsemen from Bulgaria found along Roman roads
(author: M. Ivanov on a road map after Маджаров 2009, 68, обр. 42)

plaques of type D. Similar images are found on two plaques of type C 01 from Dacia, probably from Turnu Severin and *Romula-Malva* (Tudor 1969, 19–20, no. 34; 1976, 21, no. 230; Malbašić 2021, 71), also identified as a temple (Tudor 1969, 20) or *cista mystica* (Ertl 1996, 60). It can be reasonably assumed that the image of a square, whose interior is divided into four parts, like a grid, on plaques of type E 2 (E 02) and E 5 (E 05) (cf. Ivanov 2023, 210–215, figs 1–6), is actually a schematic presentation of a similar architectural form, more clearly depicted in the reliefs of type D 07. Indirect confirmation of this can be seen in the depiction of a human figure with raised arms, which is present in both types. If this observation is correct, the plaques of type D 07 could indeed be seen as the typological precursor of the reliefs of type E (cf. Nemeti 2023, 164). It is difficult to claim, based solely on the relief images, whether these depictions represent actual temple buildings. As of now, there are no excavated temples or sanctuaries that can be definitively associated with the cult of the Danubian Horsemen. There is archaeological evidence for the discovery of Danubian Horsemen plaques in sanctuaries of other deities: temple of Mithra in *Londinium*, Great Britain (Tudor 1976, 55) and sanctuary of Zeus and Hera at Radomir, Bulgaria (Иванов 2024, 75, 77). The presence of two symmetrical buildings in the lower register of the plaques of type D 07 is somewhat puzzling, which seems unusual if they are indeed meant to represent cult buildings. The depiction of these unusual architectural elements may, at least at this stage of research, allow for a different interpretation.

The plaque from Vetren presents another interesting aspect in the study of the spread of the monuments of the Danubian Horsemen. Although the exact context of its location is unknown, the fact that such a find originates from a road station or its immediate vicinity is significant. It has long been suggested in the literature that the distribution of the monuments of the Danubian Horsemen is connected

with the Roman army and military sites (Tudor 1976, 55; Тачева 2000, 254). However, more recent studies on the topography of the lead plaques from Southern Pannonia show that they are predominantly distributed in civilian settlements (towns, smaller settlements, villas and estates), with the percentage of finds from military sites being very small (Plečić, Crnobrnja 2022, 157–159, 165; Domiter et al. 2025, 18, 22). In most cases, the specification of the type of settlement is difficult to determine due to the lack of archaeological excavations. The connection between the road network and the spread of the finds is rarely discussed in the literature. For the territory of Southern Pannonia, a significant concentration of the Danubian Horsemen's lead plaques has been noted along the road from *Sirmium* to *Cibalae* (Domiter et al. 2025, 18–19, Map 3).

Although in limited numbers, finds from the Bulgarian parts of the two Moesias and Thrace allow some observations in this respect. In addition to the plaque from Vetren, several similar cases are also recorded (fig. 4). Two lead plaques of the Danubian Horsemen from different types (type E and probably D) were found in the immediate vicinity of the *mansio Meldia*, located near the village of Aldomirovtsi, Slivnitsa municipality (for the station see Динчев 2020, 63), during archaeological excavations in recent years (Ivanov 2023, 213, fig. 8)². Similar to the *Lissae/Bona mansio* station, the *Meldia* station is located along the same main Roman road (*Via diagonalis*). Two lead plaques from the territory of *Serdica* also originate from sites located along road arteries: the specimen from Radomir was found in the sanctuary of Zeus and Hera, most likely near the *Elea* station on the road *Serdica – Pautalia – Stobi*; the find from the village of Rebro is located along the presumed internal provincial road leading from the *Elea* station to *Montana* (Ivanov 2023, 224). From the village of Slatina, Lovech municipality, another lead plaque of the Danubian Horsemen originates (Гущераклиев, Димитрова 2017, 116, no. 446). The road station *Doriones* is located near the village, on the important road from *Oescus* to *Philippopolis* (Маджаров 2004, 43; 2009, 205). A lead plaque from the village of Sadovets, Dolni Dabnik municipality (Тачева 2000, 240–242, обр. 15) can most likely be associated with another local road from *Oescus* southwest along the Vit River. From Byala Cherkva, Pavlikeni municipality, and nearby Suhindol, three marble plaques of the Danubian Horsemen originate (Църов 2004, 143–146). These modern settlements are generally located along the main internal provincial road from *Nicopolis ad Istrum* to *Melta*. Many of the finds along the Danube come from military and civilian centers along the Danube road: *Ratiaria*, *Oescus*, *Novae*, *Durostorum*, *Almus*, and *Dimum* (Tudor 1969, 35–36, 40–43, 45, 49–50, 53, nos 62–63, 71–74, 76, 83–84, 89), while others are found in towns like *Serdica*, *Pautalia*, *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, *Odessus*, and *Byzone* (Ivanov 2023, 213–215, figs 4–6; Тачева 2000, 244–248, обр. 18a–18b; Църов 2004, 147–148, обр. 5–6; Tudor 1969, 53–54, nos 91–92), which themselves are also located along major provincial roads.

This distribution pattern points to a significant relation between the monuments of the Danubian Horsemen and the provincial road network of the Roman Empire. Based on the available archaeological information, this connection can be traced in two main aspects. The first aspect includes finds that originate from private contexts, such as residential buildings. Examples of this are the discoveries from Aldomirovtsi and *Serdica*, where the Danube Horsemen plaques were found in residential or near-settlement structures. It is important to note that during the period of more widespread distribution of these monuments (after the mid-3rd c.), larger settlement structures with production and commercial functions already existed near the road stations. The second aspect of the connection with the road network involves the discovery of plaques in contexts related to sanctuaries. Such is the case with the find from Radomir, which is associated with the sanctuary of Zeus and Hera, as well as the two finds from Byala Cherkva. Regarding the find from the town of Suhindol, a similar connection is also plausible, insofar as

2 The plaques have not been published. I would like to thank the directors of the excavations of the site, Dr. K. Petkova and Dr. R. Stoychev, for the information and for the opportunity to familiarise myself with the finds.

numerous votive monuments are known from the nearby area, likely belonging to more than one cult site (Торбаторова 2024, 291). From the area of the road station *Doriones* (near the village of Slatina, Lovech municipality), in addition to the plaque of the Danubian Horsemen, several finds have been discovered that testify to the practice of cult activity. These include an uninscribed plaque of an eagle and a votive altar dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus. The discovered monuments give grounds to assume the existence of organised worship of this god (Торбаторова 2024, 288) in a sanctuary located near the road station, which may also be the place of origin of the Danubian Horsemen plaque.

It is interesting to note that many of the monuments of the Danubian Horsemen are linked to cult sites dedicated to supreme deities such as Zeus and Hera (Jupiter and Juno). This is confirmed by other finds, such as those from Sadovets, where a dedication to Jupiter, Juno, and Hercules was discovered (Торбаторова 2024, 280). The important connection between the road network and the development of important cult places is clearly visible in series of sites: the sanctuary of Zeus and Hera near Kopilovtsi village, municipality of Kyustendil (Кацаров 1914), the sanctuary of Asclepius Keiladeenos near Pernik (Любенова 1980, 15–27), the sanctuary of Zeus and Hera near Radomir (Иванов 2024), the sanctuary of Asclepius Limenos at Slivnitsa (Ботева 1985), the important cult complex at the road station *Ad putea* near village of Riben, municipality of Dolna Mitropoliya (Торбаров 2018, 57–58), the cult complex near Mezdra (Torbatov 2015, 154–157) and many others. The archaeological context of many of the finds remains unclear, which complicates detailed observations. However, the repetition of situations provides grounds to look for common patterns in the distribution of these monuments.

Several categories of sites can be distinguished in the spatial distribution of the Danubian Horsemen monuments from Bulgaria: military sites (*Novae, Durostorum, Dimum, Germania*), towns (*Ratiaria, Oescus*), and civilian settlements (*Almus*) along the *limes*; urban centres (*Serdica, Pautalia, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Odessus, Byzance*); road stations (*Lissae/Bona mansio, Meldia, Doriones*); and settlement structures along both primary and secondary Roman roads, as well as known (Radomir) and probable (Sadovets, *Doriones*, Byala Cherkva?) cult sites located along roads. To date, no finds have been recorded from necropolises or villa estates. This preliminary outline of the Danubian Horsemen monuments in present-day Bulgaria reveals a certain connection between these finds and the provincial road network. The vast majority of known monuments of the Danubian Horsemen are found along the main road arteries. On one hand, this can be naturally associated with the practice of offering votive dedications at roadside sanctuaries. On the other hand, it seems plausible that the plaques were connected to traveling military and civilian individuals, supporting the notion of a prophylactic and apotropaic use of the finds, at least some of which were likely carried by travellers.

Finally, road stations and civilian settlements along the more significant road arteries in the second half of the 3rd to the early 4th c. largely transformed into proto-urban structures, becoming a more modest model of cities. Like the latter, these settlements formed a complex cultural environment that allowed for the adoption and practice of various religious manifestations.

References

- Ботева, Д. 1985. Тракийското светилище на Асклепий Лименос край Сливница. *Историко-археологически и етнографски изследвания в Софийски окръг. I. Студентски проучвания VII.1.* София, 23–36.
- Гущераклиев, Р., Димитрова, М. 2017. *Каталог – археологическо наследство – Ловешка област.* Ловеч: Инфо Вижън.

- Динчев, В. 2020. *Скретиска – Кратискара, т. II. Резултати от последните проучвания на резиденцията и пътната станция. Трасетата на Диагоналния трансбалкански път (Via diagonalis) в района* (Разкопки и проучвания, 43). София: НАИМ.
- Иванов, М. 2024. Светилището на Зевс и Хера (Στοβουστορηνοί?) при Радомир. *Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology* 14.1, 71–85.
- Кацаров, Г. 1914. Светилище на Зевса и Хера при Копиловци (Кюстендилско). *Известия на Българското археологическо дружество* IV, 80–112.
- Любенова, В. 1980. Местоположение и устройство на светилището. In Венедиков, И., Фол, А. (ред.) *Тракийски паметници. II. Тракийски светилища*. София: Наука и изкуство, 15–27.
- Маджаров, М. 2004. *Римският път Ескус–Филипопол. Пътни станции и селища*. Пловдив.
- Маджаров, М. 2009. *Римски пътища в България. Принос в развитието на римската пътна система в провинциите Мизия и Тракия*. Велико Търново: Фабер.
- Тачева, М. 2000. Религиозният синкретизъм в навечерието на Миланския едикт: паметниците на „Дунавските“ конници. In Тачева, М. *Власт и социум в Римска Тракия и Мизия*. София: Вулкан-4, 238–257.
- Торбатов, С. 2018. Градището край Рибен. *Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology* 8.1, 17–65.
- Торбатова, Б. 2024. *Езически култови обекти в земите между Дунава и Балкана (началото на I – края на IV в.)*. София: Иврай.
- Църков, И. 2004. Култът към Дунавските конници в градската територия на Никополис ад Иструм. *Epoch* 12.1–2, 137–152.
- Ertl, R. 1996. *Donaureiter Bleivotivtafeln. Versuch einer Typologie*. Petronell-Carnuntum: Publikationen des Museumsvereines Petronell-Carnuntum Auxiliarkastell.
- Iconomu, C., Chiriac, C. 2007. Contributi all'iconografia dei Cavalieri Danubiani nella Dobrugia (Romania). *Pontica* XL, 267–282.
- Ivanov, M. 2023. Lead Plaques of the so-called Danubian Riders from Serdica and the surrounding territory. *Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology* 13.2, 209–232.
- Jovanova, L. 2015. On some of the Oriental cults in the Skopje–Kumanovo region. In Nikoloska, A., Müskens, S. (eds) *Romanising Oriental Gods? Religious Transformations in the Balkan Provinces in the Roman Period. New Finds and Novel Perspectives. Proceedings of the International Symposium, Skopje, 18–21 September 2013*. Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts & University of Leiden, 293–322.
- Malbašić, V. 2021. *U potrazi za neimenovanom boginjom: Kult podunavskih konjanika – paradigma ili zablude*. Sremska Mitrovica: Blago Sirmijuma.
- Martinova, M. 2012. Bona mansion = Lissae. In Ivanov, R. (ed.) *Tabula Imperii Romani K35/2-Philippopolis*. Sofia: Tendril Publishing House, 55.
- Domiter, O., Plemić, B., Vulić, H. 2025. *The Goddess and the Horsemen. Lead Plaques of the Danubian Horsemen Cult in Croatian Museums*. Zagreb: Archaeological Museum Zagreb.
- Nemeti, S. 2023. Three lead tablets depicting the Danubian Riders. *Starinar* 73, 161–167.
- Nemeti, S. 2024. The Danubian Riders. Art, Myth and Ritual of the Regional cult. In Kremer, G., Pollhammer, E., Kopf, J., Beutler, F. (Hrsg.) *Zeit(en) des Umbruchs. Akten des 17. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum provinzialrömischen Kunstschaffens, Wien – Carnuntum 16.–21. Mai 2022* (Österreichisches Archäologisches Institut, Sonderschriften Band 64). Wien: Verlag Holzhausen GmbH, 559–570.
- Plemić, B., Crnobrnja, A. 2022. A New Review of the Topography and Typology of the Danubian Horse-

The worship and the road: a lead plaque of Danubian Horsemen from *Mansio Lissae* ...

men Lead Icons in the South-Eastern Part of Pannonia Inferior. *Starinar* 72, 155–180.

Szabó, A. 2017. *Domna et Domnus. Contributions to the Cult-History of the ‘Danubian Riders’ Religion*. Wien: Phoibos Verlag.

Torbatov, S. 2015. The Transformations of a Roman Military Site: the Case with Mezdra (North-Western Bulgaria). In Vagalinski, L., Sharankov, N. (eds) *Limes XXII. Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies Ruse, Bulgaria, September 2012*. Sofia: NAIM, 151–162.

Tudor, D. 1969. *Corpus monumentorum religionis equitum Danuviorum I: The Monuments*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Tudor, D. 1976. *Corpus monumentorum religionis equitum Danuviorum II: The Analysis and Interpretation of the Monuments*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.