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BRONZE TILE FROM THE VICINITY OF SREMSKA MITROVICA

A CONTRIBUTION TO STUDIES ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF SIRMIMUM

Abstract: The subject of the paper is a bronze tile with a relief ornamentation from the vicinity of Sremska Mitrovica. The tile shows three reapers in a field in front of the walls and gates of a city. I have assumed that the reapers shown as they work are meant to glorify rural life, and express a desire to revive the golden Saturnian and Augustan ages. A view of the city in the background shows, in my opinion, the walls and northern gate to Sirmium. The tile could be dated to the final quarter of the 3rd century.

Looking over a small archeological collection gathered by three generations of nostalgic antiquity enthusiasts, I was attracted to an unusual item.¹ It was a bronze tile, dimensions 137x89x5 mm, with a relief representation on one side (picture 1). I believe the item was a matrix for casting thin metal wainscots for jewelry cases quite popular in Pannonia in late antiquity.² The item was found in the vicinity of Sremska Mitrovica, a fact that may be considered reliable. The paper attempts to say something more about the tile and its decorative content. The absence of direct analogy has compelled me to make use of different approaches and methodological pro-

¹ I wish to thank the owner of the collection for permission to publish a photograph of the item.

² D. Gáspár, *Spätromische Kästchenbenbeschläge in Pannonien*, Szeged 1971, with functionally, not formally, close analogies.

cedures, both specific and general, in my interpretation of the depiction and its chronology.

The tile shows a harvest under way in front of the gates of a fortified city. The depiction is given in a steplike order applied with such precision that it gives the impression of a two-zone composition. The foreground shows three reapers in a fruitful task, and the background the walls and gates of the city. To establish a functional communication between the two, almost wholly defined and independent zones, the left side of the tile shows a branchy tree, a kind of denominator that incorporates – mechanically, rather than thematically – these two ambiances.

The three reapers are shown in a symmetric composition with heraldic members, one in the center, and two on the sides. One reaper stands in the center, with a huge bundle in his left arm, holding a sickle in his extended right arm. On his head appears to be, on the axis of the composition, a floral wreath (*corymbus*). The two other reapers are shown at work, bent; holding the ears of grain in their left hand, and cutting them, or getting ready to do so, with their right hand, which holds the sickle. The composition is simple, with a linear approach in interpreting the structure. There is, however, something inconsistent, in the basic approach. The central figure, the frame of the iconographic constitution, is lower in height than the others. Originally, the composition had a pyramidal structure and represented a model with a tympanic solution. Had the model and its compositional principle been consistently followed, the central figure would have reached the representation in the upper zone, which was, in this part of the picture, deliberately avoided, with firmly delineated boundaries. My impression is that an attempt was made at perspective, with two bent reapers at work in the foreground, and in the background, farther off, a standing figure to establish communication with the city on the horizon.

The standing reaper is the axis of the depiction in the first zone, linking it indirectly to the second zone. His posture, and the position of the attributes in his arms is similar to representations of Genius, who in his left arm holds a horn of abundance, and a patera in his extended right arm.

The reapers are at work in fields stretching before the gates and walls of a city. The representation may be treated as a general place, with a view of the city walls marking a nameless urban potential. However, my opinion differs. I believe the representation shows the walls and gates of a specific city – the city of Sirmium. The fact that the tile was discovered in the vicinity of Sremska Mitrovica is, I believe, a reliable guide on this course. It

certainly is not sufficient; other elements stemming from the proffered interpretation supply the deficiency, and give it shape.

The walls were built of large regular stone blocks in the *opus quadratum* technique. The entrance is flanked with two solid square towers partially projecting from the walls. The towers are high, going above the entrance considerably.³

Scenes of fieldwork in front of a suburban complex or rustic villa are frequent in ancient mosaics, in particular in Egypt and Africa, the well-known granaries of the Roman Empire.⁴ Pastoral themes appear, and images connected with the farming cycle. Mosaics depicting such scenes date generally from the 3rd and 4th centuries. The ornamentation of sarcophagi,⁵ and contemporary literature,⁶ testify to the revival of rustic themes and motives in this period. The return to the healthy and renewed eternal source of simplicity, honorable modesty, Romulus' virtue, and Cato's firmness, was a lasting ideal in Roman society. Every crisis would evoke nostalgic reminiscences of times past, the golden age, with fresh enthusiasm, exemplified in the rural life and moral purity of the idyllic picture. The golden Saturnian Age, linked to peace, prosperity and abundance, was attained in the times of Augustus and Trajan, and remained an inherent tendency in the programs of all Roman emperors.⁷ All of them strove to attain the golden era (*aetas aurea*) and the glory of the Augustan and Trajan eras.⁸ A reflection of this idea seems recognizable on the tile representation. The reapers are shown in the middle of their work, holding sickles. This tool is Saturn's

³ The illustration is not very clear on this spot; one gains the impression that the passageway is not arched. Above the entrance two banners or standards appear to be woven into the representation of the tree.

⁴ For instances, mosaics from Thabrac, Zliten, Carthage, etc. /P. Romanelli, *Topografia e archeologia dell'Africa Romana*, Torino 1970, 322–342, T. 283/b, 284/a,b, 285 a./

⁵ Cf., for instance, the well-known sarcophagus of Julius Achilleus from Rome, dated to the year AD 275. /D. E. Strong, *Roman Imperial Sculpture*, London 1961, 71, 102, No. 126./

⁶ See M. Budimir, M. Flašar, *Pregled rimske književnosti*, Belgrade 1986, 616 onward, for this kind of didactic literature in late antiquity.

⁷ K. Latte, *Römische religionsgeschichte*, München 1960, 254 ff; the extensive volume *Saturnalia*, by Makrobi, is in this respect interesting for the period of late antiquity.

⁸ R. Étienne, *Le siècle d'Auguste*, II ed., Paris 1989, 9–12; E. Cizek, *Epoca lui Traiani*, Bucuresti 1980, 15–19; E. Cizek, *Le saeculum Traiani apogée del la culture e de la civilisation Romaines*, Acta Museii Napocensis, Cluj 1994, 26–30, 67ff.

attribute, and symbolizes a toilsome trustworthy labor that brings well-being. The direct link between the effort put in and positive prosperity that follows is a fundamental basis for glorification of rural life. Saturn was the primeval reaper, his sheaves scattered in the fields nurtured the Roman order of the modest, hardy and unwavering rustical spirit, and earned him fame as ruler of the world. To these old virtues created before the reign of the „aictis king“ – Jupiter,⁹ returned a fatigued Roman society as to a life-giving healer. Another possibility should be added. The reapers, strong men in their prime, bring to mind soldiers, and the time when peasants were the courageous defenders of their homes and when Mars was the god of fertile plains, vast herds and overall progress in Roman society.¹⁰ His feasts in March and October are connected with the agrarian and war cycles. The possibility of bringing together Saturn and Mars is manifest in the direct link of Saturn's and the military treasury;¹¹ the tile most likely illustrates that idea.

However, the representation, besides evoking and calling to mind more bountiful times (*felicitas temporum*), the golden age and happy life (*vita felix*),¹² unity of civic and military interest, also points to a connection between responsibility in labor and reward, a fundamental stoic principle that has emerged in similar manifestations on sepulchral monuments.¹³

The above elements of structure, meaning and origin may be combined chronologically. The step-like position of the illustration is characteristic for the 3rd century, its beginning in particular, the late academicism of the epoch of the Severans, as well as the latter part of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th centuries, when certain aberrations took place, and a number of unifying elements were included, such as the branchy tree in our example. The internal constitution of the illustration is similar; the first zone depicts the reapers in strong symmetry found on Dionysian sarcophagi, dated from the first half of the 3rd century; however, the principle of symmetry was not implemented entirely, and the central reaper, the backbone

⁹ Vergil's *Pohvala seoskog života* in the *Pesma o zemljoradnji* (Vergil, *Georgica* II, 510-517; 538.

¹⁰ G. Hermansen, *Studien über den italischen und römischen Mars*, 1940, 10 ff.

¹¹ M. Corbier, *L'aerarium Saturni et l'aerarium militare*, Roma 1974, 20 ff.

¹² N. Himmelmann, *Über Hirten-Genre in der antiken Kunst*, 1980, 31 ff.

¹³ In this respect, an interesting monument is to be found in the Lateran museum in Rome and a complementary one in Romula. D. Tudor, *Versuri stoice din Romula-Malva si Roma*, Drobeta IV, 1980, 9-16.



Fig. 1 Bronze tile from the vicinity of Sirmium

of the illustration in the lower zone, does not coincide with the fortified entrance into the city, which is the pillar of the second zone. The displacing and breaking of a main axis in a picture is characteristic for the latter part of the 3rd century. The hair-style and general appearance of the reapers cannot be of use in determining the chronology of the item, due to the murkiness of the picture. The central figure has a wreath on his head; the two others have short hair, and unaccented chins, characteristic for portraits of new dynamic impressionism from the time of military emperors.¹⁴

It appears the representation on the tile is to be connected with emperors from Sirmium or the vicinity, firstly to Aurelius and Probus. These emperors are credited with the prosperity of the empire and the revival of old times; they brought well-being to the state and to their homelands. The idea of restoring the golden reign of Trajan is more directly expressed with Aurelius through his connection with the former, via his stepfather Ulpus Crinitus, a descendant of Trajan, who adopted him, Aurelius, at the insis-

¹⁴ B. M. Felletti Maj, *Iconographia romana imperiale*, II, Roma 1958; M. Bergmann, *Studien zum römischen Porträt des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, Bonn 1977.

tence of Emperor Valerian.¹⁵ However, during the reign of Probus, agricultural activities flourished and significant innovations were introduced around Sirmium.¹⁶ The high quality of the grain and bread of Pannonia were renowned far and wide in late antiquity.¹⁷ In this context it appears that the ears depicted in the representation of the Fortuna of Sirmium are on golden ingots.¹⁸

The illustration shows a decisive semantic sequence: golden age, golden ears and golden gate. The golden age is present in the idea of glorifying rural life and work in the fields; golden ears in fertility, armfuls and Pannonian bread, and the golden gate presents the northern entrance to the city and the route from north to south in the ideal project of the city. The latter supposition may be arrived at indirectly. The gate could not be a representation of the southern entrance into the city because in that part, toward the Sava River, there are no wide stretches of fields such as are portrayed on the tile. The eastern gate of Sirmium is shown on Galerius' triumphal arch in Salonika.¹⁹ However, the towers flanking it, also constructed in the *opus quadratum* technique, are low and barely surpass the highly-arched entrance into the city (picture 2). Comparing the representations of the entrances, it may be observed that the fortification concept of the gate depicted on the bronze tile is more sophisticated in design and more firmly built, with evident differences in the size and height of the towers and in the way the entrance is arched. I believe the illustration does not show the western gate of the city. In front of it lay swampy ground, where a harvest

¹⁵ SHA Aur. 10–15.2; in Eutropius (VIII,2,1) in the name of Aurelius' stepfather appears the cognomen: Ulpus Crinitus Traianus. R. Syme, *Amianus and the Historia Augusta*, Oxford 1968, 133-4; 166. Interesting in this context are monuments erected in Pannonia in honor of Aurelius. cf Z. Visy, *Ein Stateunbasis des Kaisers Aurelian von Vág*, Kom. Győr–Sopron, Specimina Nova II, 1986.

¹⁶ M. Mirković, *Sirmium - Its History from the I Century A.D. to 582 A.D.*, Sirmium I, Belgrade 1971, 45.

¹⁷ Nemesianus, *Cynegetica*, 228.

¹⁸ Fortuna, the patroness of the city of Sirmium, on the throne, is depicted on gold bars dated AD 379; on her head is a crown in the shape of a bulwark, in the left hand the horn of abundance, and in the right, I assume, an ear of wheat with the monogram of Christ above it. cf F. Baratte, *Lingots d'or et d'argent en rapport avec l'atelier de Sirmium*, Sirmium VIII, 1978, 102/.

¹⁹ H. Meyer, *Die Friesszyklen am sogenannten Triumphbogen des Galerius in Thessaloniki*, Jahrbuch DAI 95, Berlin 1980, 407 ff, Abb. 18,19. The scene shows the transfer of Galerius from Sirmium (right) to Thessaloniki (left).

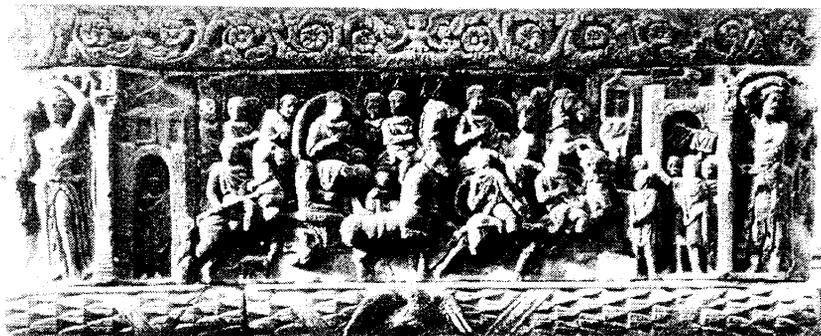


Fig. 2 From Galerius' triumphal arch in Salonika

such as depicted on the tile could not have been brought in. Most likely, Emperor Probus attempted to ameliorate the terrain, which ended fatally with his death in the „iron“ tower, i.e. the tower of the city's iron gates.²⁰ To conclude, I assume that the gate depicted shows the northern entrance, the most important one,²¹ and that the reapers were working in the spacious fields in front of it. The gate was located on an important communication route toward Bononiae, i.e. toward the Fruška Gora hill and the Danube River.²²

Archeological research has discovered no trace of this gate, nor of the others. However, part of the northern wall has been investigated. In the beginning of the 2nd century the old wooden/earthen wall was replaced by another, built of large stone blocks which were used in the 3rd century.²³ More significant changes took place later on, during the tetrarchate, early in the 4th century. My assumption is that the bronze tile depicts the walls and gates of the 3rd century, the period that preceded the restoration of Sirmium, at the very end of the 3rd, or opening of the 4th centuries.

I conclude by stating again my opinion that the bronze tile shows the northern, golden gate of Sirmium, dating around the year AD 275.

Translated by Dragana Vulićević

²⁰ SHA Prob. 18.

²¹ Cf. the analogy with Dioclesian's palace. T. Marasović, *Dioklecijanova palača*, 1982, 54 onwards.

²² V. Popović, *A Survey of the Topography and Urban Organization of Sirmium in the Late Empire*, Sirmium I, Belgrade 1971, 124.

²³ V. Popović, *Glavne etape urbanog razvoja Sirmijuma, Anticki gradovi i naselje u južnoj Panoniji*, Materijali SADRŽ XIII, Varaždin 1975, 116–117.

БРОНЗАНА ПЛОЧИЦА ИЗ ОКОЛИНЕ СРЕМСКЕ МИТРОВИЦЕ

Прилог проучавању архитектуре Сирмијума

Резиме

Предмет овога прилога је бронзана плочица са рељефном декорацијом из околине Сремске Митровице (сл. 1). Овај објекат је вероватно служио као матрица за израду оплата од лима на ковчежићима за накит. На плочици су приказана три жетеоца у пољу испред бедеме и капије неког града. Претпостављам да приказ жетелца у раду представља глорификацију сеоског начина живота, вечитог идеала римског друштва. То је жеља за обновом златног века (*aetas aurea*) Сатурна, бога жетве, благостања и просперитета. Приказ је алузија на златни век Августа и Трајана коме су тежили сви римски цареви. За ведућу града у другом плану слике претпостављам да представља Сирмијум. Чини се да постоји следећа окосница и рационализација представе: златни век, златно класје и златна капија. Према овој реконструкцији златна капија града, која има највећи сакрални значај, представља северну капију. Дакле, претпостављам да је на овој слици представљена жетва испред северне капије Сирмијума. До овог закључка може се доћи посредним путем. Јужна капија града се налази према пристаништу на Сави и ту није било простора за жетву. На западној страни града су биле велике мочваре, које је Проб покушао да исуши и том приликом је убијен у „гвозденој капији“ града. Источна капија Сирмијума је приказана на Галеријевом славолуку у Солуну (сл. 2) и она је другачије форме од оне на бронзаној плочици.

Степенаста форма приказа на плочици, иконографске карактеристике жетелца и афирмација рустикалних тема карактеристичне су за касноантичку уметност на крају III века. Претпостављам да је ова плочица настала у време Аурелијана или Проба у оквиру афирмације њиховог завичаја и жеље за повратком сретних времена и златног века.