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Upper Moesian Bacchic Worshippers As Reflected in Jewellery and Cosmetic Objects

Abstract: The paper looks at the anepigraphic material such as jewellery and cosmetic objects recovered from the province of Upper Moesia. The quality of the material used in their manufacture, their findspots and iconography, serve as a basis in an attempt to shed light on the origin and social status of Bacchic worshippers in that part of the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Bacchus/Dionysos, Upper Moesia, worshippers, origin, social status, finger rings, intaglios, caskets, relief mirrors

The archaeological finds of jewellery and cosmetic objects decorated with Dionysiac imagery from the Roman province of Upper Moesia do not supply as much and as precise information as epigraphic monuments. Yet, the quality of the material used in their manufacture, their iconography and findspots can tell us something about their owners. Building a comprehensive picture of the Upper Moesian Bacchic worshippers seems a barely attainable goal. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to show that even anepigraphic material can be helpful in identifying the social status, origin and gender of members of this particular population group.

Under the Empire, just as under the Republic, jewellery was expressive of the owners' religious and aesthetic preferences and reflected their socioeconomic status or, in other words, their financial standing and their position in the social hierarchy. The finger ring, for instance, was a sensitive indicator of the owner's intimate beliefs and a carefully chosen artefact (Henig 1984: 179 ff).[1] It could be a seal ring or a good luck charm (*amuletum*) or a mere adornment.[2] The choice of a particular ring could be guided

[1] In an anecdote from Nero's life found in Suetonius, *Nero* 46, 4, the image of Persephone on a ring is referred to as a symbol of death: while the emperor was taking the auspices in the year of his death, Sporus showed him a ring with the gem engraved with the rape of Persephone.

[2] Valuables were kept under seal, for which there is abundant evidence in Roman sources. Also numerous are references to seal rings owned by prominent persons under the late Republic, such as Julius Caesar or Pompey the Great, and then by many emperors from August on. On the other hand, a long list of magical properties of gemstones in Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXXVI–XXXVII, reveals what then was a fashionable trend in

by the person's religious beliefs, to express his or her reverence for particular gods,[3] by superstition, to protect them against evil, and by aesthetic preferences, and it is not always easy to differentiate between the three.[4] Apart from functioning as a badge of honour, a seal or an amulet, the ring could also be a token of betrothal (*annulus pronubus*).

Although the Roman attitude towards jewellery changed over time, it always marked the rank of the one who wore it (Kunst 2005: 128–129). Rings made of precious metals were not allowed to all strata of Roman society, either in Republican or in Imperial times, although the right remained permanently denied only to slaves, who were not entitled to Roman citizenship and consequently to the rights the citizenship status entailed (Kuntzsch 1981: 64; Popović 1992: 7, 17; Zotović 1997: 26, n. 16). Under the Republic, the golden ring (*annulus aureus*) was a badge of honour and associated with an office. The *nobiles* and their male-line descendants became entitled to wear golden rings in 321 BC, a privilege subsequently extended to include the first eight centurions and later still some other groups as well (Popović 1992: 7).[5] In the early Empire, the golden ring remained an insignia of the patricians, and lower-ranking persons were not allowed to wear it without express permission. Under Hadrian, however, only slaves were denied the right. In AD 197 Septimius Severus granted all soldiers the right to wear golden rings (Popović 1992: 7).[6]

An analysis of the Roman law and of Roman art as well has shown that the role of female jewellery (*ornamenta uxoria*) was not merely decorative (Kunst 2005: 127 ff). It clearly signified wealth, rank and merit. The transition from the Republic to the Empire reveals that the jewellery of a noble woman primarily indicated the status of her family (*gens*). It was

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superstition. On intaglio gems for signet rings or amulets, or as a decorative detail, see Walters 1914: 1 ff.

[3] It is on the basis of the many floor mosaics and even rings with Dionysiac imagery that researchers, notably Henig 1984: 199 ff, have assumed that Bacchus was held in greater reverence in Roman Britain than previously believed. Perhaps that should be interpreted as an expression of great reverence for the deity rather than as the worshippers' active participation in the cult, cf. Hutchinson 1986: 5.

[4] The form of a ring could depend on its purpose. If intended as a signet ring, it had to be manufactured so as to be resilient to pressure, but it could be more delicate if used as an adornment. Nonetheless, none of the forms was reserved for a single purpose, cf. Marshall 1907; cf. also Popović 1992: 9.

[5] In Republican times, former magistrates, from the office of *aedilis* up, and their male descendants were allowed to wear gold rings, cf. Stout 1994: 77 ff.

[6] Men were permitted to wear signet rings (Valerius Maximus III.5.1) and freeborn boys from elite circles wore golden amulets (*bulla*) until they came of age, cf. Stout 1994: 77 ff.

Fig. 1 *Bacchus*: Iron ring with a dark yellowish onyx intaglio from Scupi (photo Skopje City Museum)

not until Imperial times that she became allowed to adorn herself for her own particular merits, such as motherhood. It is this complex role of jewellery — to indicate, among other things, the rank and social status of the owner — that can help us better understand who the inhabitants of Upper Moesia whose personal adornments reflected their reverence for Bacchus and members of his *thiasus* were.

The surviving Upper Moesian rings with Dionysiac imagery are made either of iron or of gold. The iron pieces include the fragmentarily preserved ring from Scupi with a dark yellowish onyx intaglio showing Bacchus (fig. 1) (Mikulčić 1974: 114, fig. 66; Korakevik 1984: cat. no. 73, fig. 73); the ring from an unknown site with an opal intaglio showing a satyr (fig. 2) (Popović 1992: no. 121; Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: 380, cat. no. 184, Pl. 16); and the ring from Gradašnica near Leskovac whose cast-silver top shows Pan (fig. 3) (Zotović 1997: 23–27, fig. on p. 24). Such iron rings were affordable by people of limited means and lower social status. Iron rings set with gems of semiprecious stones or glass were in fact imitations of silver and gold jewellery. The silver top of the Leskovac ring nonetheless suggests the owner's solid finances, while the fact that the hoop was made of iron indicates his lower social status. The ring probably belonged to a slave who could afford it but was prohibited from wearing a piece of jewellery made entirely in silver (Zotović 1997: 26). The surviving gold rings are the ring from an unknown site, now in the National Museum in Belgrade, with a chalcedony intaglio showing Bacchus (fig. 4) (Popović 1992: no. 11; Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: 377, cat. no. 172; and 2007: 151, cat. no. 4), and the ring from Viminacium with a carnelian intaglio depicting Silenus (fig. 5) (Popović 1992: no 17). Both carnelian and chalcedony were commonly used gemstones (Walters 1914, 12), but the use of gold indicates well-situated owners of higher social status.[7] The size of the ring hoops suggests

[7] There is evidence that the Romans wore rings on the ring finger, then on the index and little fingers. Some rings were very big and massive and therefore too heavy to wear, cf. Daremberg and Saglio 1877: 295; see also Popović 1992: 7.

Fig. 2 *Satyr*: Ring with an opal intaglio from an unknown site (photo National Museum, Belgrade)

Fig. 3 *Pan*: Iron ring with a silver top from Gradašnica near Leskovac (photo National Museum, Leskovac)

Fig. 4 *Bacchus*: Gold ring with a chalcedony intaglio from an unknown site (photo National Museum, Belgrade)

male owners. The smaller diameter of the Viminacium ring, on the other hand, suggests a woman, and a well-to-do upper-class woman. Unfortunately, the Upper Moesian intaglios carved with Dionysiac scenes have survived in much greater numbers than the rings they once adorned. They were carved in semiprecious stones widely used in the classical world. The most numerous are those of much sought-for carnelian (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: cat. nos. 168, 170, 171, 175, 176, 179 and 180; Popović 1992: no. 17), followed by jasper (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: cat. nos. 169, 177, 178, 181 and 182; and 2006: cat. no. 169), chalcedony (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: cat. nos. 172 and 190) and opal (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: cat. nos 175 and 184). Garnet (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: 377, cat. no. 172), onyx (Mikulčić 1974: 114, fig. 66; Korakevik 1984: cat. no. 73, fig. 73) and agate (Kuzmanović-Novović 2005: 381, cat. no. 189, Pl. 16; and 2007: 152, cat. no. 20) intaglios have also been discovered, though each represented by a single example. The assortment of gemstones and the precision of engraving and stylistic purity suggest glyptic workshops of some significance (Kuzmanović-Novović 2006: 15; 2007, 150). Their number, on the other hand, suggests the Upper Moesian population's reverence for this deity.

The depictions on the Upper Moesian intaglios belong to the stock of common images.[8] Both Bacchus intaglios (figs. 1 and 4) follow the usual

[8] Dionysos/Bacchus, together with sileni, satyrs and maenads, constituted a very popular theme in gem carving under the Roman Empire.

Fig. 5 *Silenus*: Gold ring with a carnelian intaglio from an unknown site (photo National Museum, Belgrade)

pattern: the deity holds a *thyrsus* and pours out of a *cantharus* onto a panther or a dog at his feet, with the difference that the Scupi iron ring (fig. 1) shows the god with a drapery over his naked body and an ivy wreath on his head (*corymbus*), while the golden ring from an unknown site (fig. 4) shows a vine scroll above the god's head. The depictions of members of his *thiasus*, a satyr, Silenus and Pan (figs. 1, 5 and 3), also follow the usual patterns.[9]

Apart from jewellery, a fragment of a bronze revetment for a casket showing a satyr has been discovered at Viminacium (fig. 6) (Djordjević 1994: 44 ff, and no. 2). A smaller rectangular field enclosed in a roughly executed astragal border shows the summarily depicted figure of a satyr with his head in profile. The lower part of the figure shows rounded thighs, thin

[9] Satyrs and sileni were shown in a variety of ways. Especially popular were scenes showing satyrs in ecstatic dance and playing a double pipe or holding a *thyrsus* and a *cantharus*. Pan was shown both independently and with a satyr or with a goat, cf. Walters 1914: 26. For the latter motif, see also Naumann 1980: 55, no. 1239, Pl. 24; Sena Chiesa 1966: 195, Pl. 22/427; Walters 1914: 26, cat. no. 196.

Fig. 6 *Satyr*: Bronze revetment for a wooden casket
(photo Ivan Stanić)

lower legs, hooves and a tail. The figure is surmounted by grapes on the vine, which the satyr probably held with his raised right hand.

Wooden caskets clad in relief-decorated sheet bronze were probably owned by families of higher status. The technique required skills and tools, and this piece may have been an import. The shape of the fragment suggests that there may have been one or several more fields decorated in relief. Apart from this one, another five bronze revetments for wooden caskets from Upper Moesia are known, three of them showing Muses (Jelačić 1962: 109–113; Madas 1992: 171–176), one Victory (Popović et al. 1969: 146; Buschhausen 1971: A28, 65, Pl. 32), and one the personification of seasons or months (Djordjević 1994: 43 ff). The revetment may have originally contained other scenes, possibly those of the Bacchic *thiasus*, but it is more likely that the fragment, as proposed by M. Djordjević (1994: 48),

formed a whole with the fragments depicting months. The closest analogies for similarly decorated caskets come from Lower Pannonia, notably those showing members of the *thiasus*, though depicted within a single composition rather than in separate fields.[10] The most frequent motifs on the Pannonian caskets, apart from members of the *thiasus*, are Muses, individual deities and their deeds, personifications of cities, allegories of seasons, and genre scenes (Djordjević 1994: 46). The Viminacium revetments could have been produced either in Pannonia or locally. Given that there was a mint at Viminacium, meaning that minting techniques were known, it is possible that there were local workshops capable of producing such revetments (Djordjević 1994: 46). Regardless of the place of their origin, the fact remains that there was at Viminacium a family that could afford such a costly artefact decorated with a Dionysiac scene. The casket was probably owned by a woman who kept her precious bits and pieces in it, as Roman women used to.

An exceptional piece of superb craftsmanship found in Viminacium is a relief mirror of bronze, silver and gold (fig. 5) (Rankov 1980: cat. no. 49; Karović 1995: 217–224, figs. 1–3, Pl. I/2; Krunić 2000; Spasić 2001: 162–165, no. 1, figs. 2 and 3; Spasić-Djurić 2002: 72, fig. 51). The matrix-hammered relief shows the hierogamy of Dionysos and Ariadne.[11] The other grave goods from the same burial suggest that it was owned by a woman,[12] and a very affluent woman, as evidenced by the techniques and materials used for making the mirror. The front side of the mirror is of silver-plated sheet bronze. The amalgamation technique of silver-plating used required high-quality silver and polishing in order to improve reflecting properties of the surface (Karović 1995: 219). Polishing, as a finishing process in metalworking, was reserved for costly pieces of jewellery. The reverse bearing the embossed design was executed in gilded bronze. The mirror's superb craftsmanship suggests a craftsman from the eastern provinces, well known for a rich metalworking tradition. Viminacium has yielded six more relief mirrors, but only four of them bear recognizable representations: Venus and

[10] On the Pannonian caskets from Fenékpuszta, Kisárpás and Felcsuth, the participants in the Dionysiac procession are compositionally connected, cf. Gáspár 1986: cat. nos. 733, 802 and 838.

[11] The Romans produced hand, wall and table mirrors, lidded mirrors and chests with mirrors decorated with imperial coins, as well as miniature ceremonial mirrors, cf. Daremberg and Saglio 1918: 1428–1429; cf. also Spasić 1995/96: 29–68, and 2001: 159.

[12] The grave contained: an *oinchoe*, two jugs, a red-slipped ceramic lamp, two bone needles and two decorative bone pins, a rectangular-sectioned silver ring with pseudo-granulation, a bronze bulla, a damaged semicircular-sectioned glass ring with an elliptical bezel, a bronze rivet, four iron nails and a small fragment of a glass vessel, cf. Karović 1995: 218.

Fig. 7 *Dionysos and Ariadne*: Bronze, silver and gold mirror from Viminacium (photo Ivan Stanić)

the Three Graces, Venus and Amor, Apollo and Persephone (Spasić 2001: 161 ff).

The Viminacium relief mirror is distinguished by an unusual iconography. The hierogamy of Dionysos and Ariadne takes place in the presence of Sol, or Helios, and a satyr, while the lower part of the composition shows warrior attributes: a shield, a sword and a pair of greaves (*knemides*). Analogies for the act of hierogamy are not difficult to find, but the presence of Sol and warrior attributes is what makes the scene unique.[13] Warrior attributes in Dionysiac compositions are not normally associated with the act of hierogamy but with Dionysos' triumph in India.[14] Also, although Roman art

[13] The closest analogies for the scene of the hierogamy of Dionysos and Ariadne seem to be the mirror from Lüleburgaz, another one from Tunisia and a mosaic from Tunisia (site of Thuburbo Maius), but none of the three examples shows Sol and warrior symbols, cf. Zahlhaas 1975: 45–46, 5, cat. nos. 12, 12, 30, Pls. 12 and 13; cf. also Spasić 2001: 164.

[14] E.g. the Indian triumph on the handle of a silver vessel contains a helmet, a sword, a pair of greaves and prisoners shown beneath the main scene, cf. Strong 1966: 171, Pl. 47B.

did show Sol in association with various deities, his association with Dionysos and Araidne can be described as unusual.[15] The association of Helios, or Sol, and Bacchus is not frequently seen. One such example is a bronze relief, now kept in Lyon, the central part of which shows Bacchus, Silenus and three portraits: Helios with a radial crown, Diana, and the personification of Night (Cuynat 1999: 187 ff). A somewhat different interpretation of these figures as Bacchus and Pan with Helios, Diana and Juno, has also been proposed (*LIMC* III, s.v. Dionysos/Bacchus in periferia occidentale, no. 115=*LIMC* IV/1, s.v. Helios/Sol, no. 268). If we accept the first explanation, the relief may be interpreted as the triad of Sun (Sol), Moon (Diana/Selena) and Night (Nox) protecting the world of vegetation (Cuynat 1999: 190). Another example of the assimilation of Dionysos and Sol is not that explicit: a basalt statuette from the shrine of Liber Pater on the Via Cassia in Rome dated to the second century (*LIMC* III, s.v. Dionysos/Bacchus, no. 262) shows young Bacchus holding a *thyrsus* and pouring wine from a *cantharus*. Traces of third-century reworking suggesting a radial crown are visible on his head. It is the crown that indicates the possible assimilation of Bacchus and Sol. What seems to follow from this overview is that the Viminacium relief was not a random collection of deities. The association of Bacchus and Sol, or Dionysos and Helios, may indicate the owner's, or the craftsman's, Oriental origin. Namely, in the second century, Viminacium, where the mirror has been found, received a number of settlers from the city of Doliche in Commagene in Roman Syria.[16] On the other hand, the possibility should not be ruled out of a local workshop at Viminacium, and from the mid second century on (Spasić 2001: 176). Whatever the case may be, the mirror reflects a predominant Syrian influence. Its owner probably was of Syrian origin and certainly belonged to the affluent class of Viminacium's citizens.

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This analysis has shown that Upper Moesian women, apart from men, used their jewellery and cosmetic objects to express their private reverence for Bacchus and members of his *thiasus*. This is most of all suggested by the re-

[15] Helios/Sol was shown with Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Serapis, Hecate, Hercules, often also in connection with the Mithraic cult, and with a number of different deities, cf. *LIMC* IV/1, s.v. Helios/Sol, nos. 233–269.

[16] The immigration was probably the result of the establishment of administrative and military centres, which provided a propitious setting for crafts and trade, cf. Mirković 1968: 128. The Syrian origin of some of Viminacium's citizen has been attested by two inscriptions (nos. 211 and 213), possibly by a third (no. 212) as well, cf. Mirković 1986:

lief mirror laid in the grave of a woman, a well-to-do citizen of Viminacium of Oriental origin. The size of the surviving rings, that is the diameters of their hoops, suggest male owners, except the Viminacium gold one whose smaller diameter suggests a woman, probably a woman of means and higher social status. The bronze-clad wooden casket probably also belonged to a woman and was used for keeping valuables. The surviving golden rings indicate that the pieces of jewellery decorated with Dionysiac imagery were owned by well-to-do citizens, while the iron ring with a silver top suggests a man of means but lower in social status. Briefly, the surviving pieces of jewellery and cosmetic objects provide important evidence that Bacchus/Dionysos and members of his *thiasus* were revered by inhabitants of Upper Moesia of different social status and origin, men as well as women.

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