

# A DAY WITH MACEDONIAN ARCHAEOLOGY “DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF ROMAN HEADSTONES BETWEEN THE MIDDLE SECTIONS OF RIVERS AXIOS AND STRYMON”

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Three basic types of headstones can be found in the area between the middle sections of rivers Axios and Strymon originating from the middle of the first until the beginning of the fourth century: headstones, steles and medallions. Since they appear in different parts of the area in question, they display their own local characteristics. Nevertheless, when grouped according to the regions in which they appear, they still carry certain artistic, typological and thematic specifics.



The steles are the dominant type of headstones (total number of 134), followed by the medallions (9 pieces) and headstones as last (2 pieces).

The headstones, dated at the end of the first century, can be found in the region of Skopje i.e. on the territory of the city of Skupi, in Zlokukjani (no. 1 and 2).

Several types of steles can be found in the area between the middle sections of the rivers Axios and Strymon:

1. Roman type steles (also known as North Italian) characterized by large dimensions, tympanon and a separate inscription field containing an inscription in Latin.
2. Hellenic type steles, small in height, with a rectangular, pentagon or semicircular tympanum form, a wedge and an inscription in Hellenic.
3. Steles characterized by mixed Roman and Hellenic architectural and decorative elements.
4. Steles originating from local studios, characterized by small dimensions, tympanum, an inscription field with an inscription mostly on Hellenic.

It is considered that the monumental steles, also known as North Italian, are dispersed in two directions through Aquileia: across the Danube shore into Moesia and through the Dalmatia province, Dyrrhachium and Via Egnatia they arrive in Macedonia. The bearers of this headstone art were the soldiers, i.e. the craftsmen – lapidaries, who moved along with the soldiers. They would continue working on steles in the new environment.

This North Italian stele type was not well received among the local inhabitants in Macedonia, who continue to create and use steles characterized by small dimensions, analogue to the steles from the South, and completely opposite to the ones from upper Moesia, where the North Italian stele type is most numerous. The oldest stele belonging to the North Italian type was found in Malino – Sv. Nikole (no. 120), dating from the middle of the first century.

There is a mixture of Roman elements – the tectonics of the stele and Hellenic elements – a full height figure and an inscription in Hellenic.

Headstones medallions, dating from the end of first to the beginning of the fourth century, can be found in southeastern Macedonia and the middle region of Struma. They are in the form of a disk with a concave basis with modeled busts in one, two and three rows. The frame of the medallion can be embellished with an egg shaped ornament, and in the lower part there was a wedge used to mount the medallion on a post bearing an inscription. These medallions can be found only in southeastern Macedonia and the vicinity of Gevgelija, Dojran and middle region of Struma.



In the region of Skopje and Kumanovo, the most common motif on the steles is the vine with vine-leaves, ivy and acanthus leaves and grape clusters, dating from the second half of the third century, and mostly displayed in the second century. In the region of east and southeast Macedonia, this decorative element is very rare. The decorative vine first appears in Rome and through the steles in North Italy it is conveyed into Lower Moesia, thence into Upper Moesia, where it was well received by the population, as opposed to Macedonia, where its presence is limited and rare.

The double arms motif found only on one stele in Marvinci (no. 122), dating from the first quarter of the fourth century, is brought about from the south.

The rosette is very often applied in the steles found in the region of Skopje and Kumanovo, from the second half of the first century until the second half of the third century, mostly displayed in the second century. It is very common as a decorative element on the steles in east and southeast Macedonia, from first half of the first century until the end of the third century. The appearance of the rosette as a headstone art motif should be traced back to Macedonia, and thence to Rome. This iconography is spread from Rome in all directions throughout the Empire and it comes back to Macedonia, where it obtains local marks.

The pine cone is one of the more frequent decorative elements, present in the funerary decoration of the steles found in the region of Skopje and Kumanovo, dating from the end of the first until the second half of the third century. This ornament is rarely found in east and southeast Macedonia. From Ravenna through the Danube shore, it has been brought from northern Italy to Moesia, where it was well received, which differs from its reception in Macedonia, where its frequency depends on the region.

The half-palmettes as a embellishment motif are very commonly displayed on the steles from the region of Skopje and Kumanovo, dating from the first half of the first century until the first half of the third century, as opposed to the steles in eastern and southeastern Macedonia, where they can rarely be found. This decorative element arrived from Northern Italy, along the Danube shore into Moesia.

As opposed to the above-mentioned motifs, the garland, the bucranium, the dolphin, the axe, Medusa's head and Atis, numerous and characteristic for the steles in Northern Italy and the Dalmatia province, are quite rare and secondary in Upper Moesia and Macedonia. This testifies that should something new appear in Rome, it does not mean that it will automatically be accepted in all the provinces of the Empire. It should be emphasized that these decorative elements found on the steles in Dalmatia date from the end of the second century (with the exception of very rare prior occurrences), as opposed to the steles in Macedonia, where they date from the middle of the first century. This leads to the conclusion

that the influence from the second course, i.e. through Dalmatia cannot be even discussed.

The mirror and the comb are very common as funerary motifs on steles found in the region of Skopje and Kumanovo, as compared to other regions where they are seldom.

The coffret and the spindle are rarely found in all the regions. They occur on the steles in Macedonia and Hellas, and later on are accepted as funerary ornaments in all parts of the Roman Empire.

The vase is a common decor on the steles originating from the first half of the first until the end of the third century. It has shifted from the votive monuments to the steles in Macedonia, and is later accepted as a decorative element in the Roman headstone art.

Representations of figures are prevalent in this entire region.

The Thracian horseman is rarely displayed as an iconographic theme on the steles from the beginning until the end of the second century (three in total). As a counterpoint, the funerary feast, the bust and the half stature are very common.

The funerary feast is created and displayed since the second half of the first century until the second half of the third century throughout all the regions. During the 4th century BC, this motif is conveyed from the ancient steles to the steles in Macedonia, and later from Macedonia to Moesia, Tracia, Dacia and Rome. The simplified (common) version is spread from Rome to all the provinces of the Empire.

The human shapes appear in the first half of the 1st until the beginning of the 4th century in three basic forms: bust, a half stature and a full stature. The bust is found on 36 gravestones dating from year 70 – 86 until the beginning of the 4th century; the half stature is found on 10 steles dating from the end of the 1st to the first quarter of the 3rd century and the full stature on 6 steles dating from the first half of the 1st to the beginning of the 4th century.



In cases where the shapes are represented as busts or as half statures, it can be said that they are gravestone portraits wherein the craftsman-stonemason strives to represent individual characteristics. The gravestones' bust can be model in several ways: by shallow, engraved lines, completely neglecting the clothes, on a shallow or salient surface. This means that alongside the shallow linear style, characteristic for the provincial art of the Roman age, we also encounter a salient relief that emphasizes the craftsmen tendencies to project the mass from the surrounding surface, especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when the statures are very salient i.e. highly protruded and resemble feely modeled sculptures, for ex. steles (no.51.61-64).

The rendering of busts on medallions is mainly realistic, i.e. the manner of modeling is in compliance with the general principles of portrait art. Thus these busts can be implemented and dedicated to the departed in every province of the Roman Empire and throughout the entire Imperial rule.



In the process of creating decorative elements and realistic human representations, apart from the chisel, the craftsmen also used a drilling technique using an auger, slate (no. 1) and steles (no. 13,29, 30, 32, 35, 76, 77, 93, 99, 103); a technique that resembles engraving, stele (no. 78); puncturing, stele (no. 136) and gradation, steles (no.123, 124).

In the process of modeling these motifs, the main stylistic characteristic of the craftsmen is polishing, occuring in the first half of the 1st and lasting until the beginning of the 4th century. Apart from this stylistic characteristic, certain schematic and geometric qualities are apparent starting from the 2nd to the 4th century, especially during the 3rd century. From the end of the 1st century, and particularly around the

middle of the 2nd, we come across a tendency for realistic rendition which although rarely present, shall last until the beginning of the 4th century.

The ultimate realism can be seen on stele (no. 128) from Southeastern Macedonia, where the departed is presented with a scarf on her head. In the 2nd and even in the 4th century, there is also an idealization of the deceased present, stele (no. 52) and medallion (no. 137, 138). Apart from stylistic polishing and a schematic quality, the local craftsmen also exhibit certain linearity, a geometric quality, disproportionate dimensions, as well as an effort to fill in the empty spaces, especially in the 3rd century.

The full stature human shape is characteristic for the steles of the Hellenic type, as is the funerary feast and the Thracian horseman, and the bust and the half stature figurines are characteristic for the Roman type steles. Even with steles of purely Roman type, a certain new style indigenous for this region can be sensed through the choice of themes that are a feature of the craftsmen from the South, as well as the manner in which these themes are rendered.

The Hercules knot, different garlands and vases characteristic for the steles originating from the region in the middle section between rivers Axios and Strymon can be found among these motifs dated from the first half of the 1st until the beginning of the 4th century.

Not just the vine, but every ornament is presented in a way that is characteristic only to the studios that worked on this territory in that period. Apart from the decorative function they also had an ethnographical and symbolic meaning that intertwined in the beliefs of the ancient Macedonians, the idea of an eternal life and rebirth. Long after the arrival of the Romans, the craftsmen continue to deal with motifs that were instilled upon them from the past, just adapting them to the tastes of those ordering the steles. The craftsmen – lapidaries had excellent knowledge of the symbolic meaning of the decorative elements, thus their choice and rendering of the headstones cannot be circumstantial. Some of the steles belong to soldiers and legionaries, for ex. to the Legio VII Claudia, the Fifth Macedonian Legion, Fourth Flavian Legion and the Third Gallic Legion, who after serving their duty or untimely release – pension, inhabited this territory. With them, different craftsmen came along that combined their new art skills with the existing knowledge and skills of the people who lived here. Namely, even before the arrival of the Romans, on the territory of Macedonia headstone, influence by the craftsmen of the South, were being created and used.

And after the arrival of the Romans on Macedonian soil nothing changed in the appearance of headstones. They remained small, rectangular, semicircular or cubic, and only the bust is accepted as a decorative element. The funerary feast, the Thracian horseman and the full statute figure, characteristic to the iconography of the Southern craftsmen (from Macedonia and Hellada) were implemented as motifs on the Roman type steles in Upper Moesia.

In this way a symbiosis between the Roman and the Macedonian-Hellenic architectural and decorative elements was created, which combined with the local interpretation comprise a unique union in the

funerary art originating from the territory between the middle sections of rivers Axios and Strymon and dating from the first half of the 1st to the beginning of the fourth century, whose lead bearers are the ancient Macedonians.