

A CLAY MYRMILLO FIGURINE FROM TERRITORIUM TROESMENSE

BY
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Abstract:

The article is devoted to the analysis of a clay figurine discovered stray find in the area of the Cerna village during the 1980's. The findspot is close to the legionary headquarter of Legio V Macedonica from Troesmis (near modern Turcoaia village in Tulcea county). This myrmillo statuette is a unicum for Dobrudja, NE area of Moesia Inferior province, and even a rare form in the rest of Roman provinces, and merits publication in its own right.

Keywords: *Moesia Inferior; territorium Troesmense; clay figurine; gladiator; myrmillo.*

CONTEXT OF THE FIND

The terracotta figurine was discovered on the territory of Cerna village during the 1980's in unknown conditions. It seems that the find was a gift to Tulcea Museum from a local school teacher who probably gets it from one of his school students. The Cerna village is located in the north-west area of Tulcea county close to the Danube and approximately 11 kilometres south-east from Troesmis (on the Iglița Hill, north of modern Turcoaia) which is the main ancient settlement in its vicinity (Fig. 1). The proximity of the headquarter of Legio V Macedonica from Troesmis led to the development of a large number of Roman rural settlements in its territory, at Cerna being also attested *villae rusticae* and *vici*.¹ Together with Traian village, the area of Cerna was Troesmis's one of the main quarries.²

Another critical factor in the development of this area during the Roman period is the geographic placement on the route that made the connection between the coastal road and the Dobrudjan central road with the Danube *limes*. The intersection of the two was made in the area of the modern village of Horia and from here the *semita* that bound this road with the *limes*, particularly Troesmis, left. Therefore, the rural settlements in the area of Cerna developed as a result of its location in a particularly favourable area for agriculture, crafts and commerce. In the absence of large-scale archaeological investigations, one can mention only some field surveys, mostly unpublished, the Thracian Rider relief found at Mangina depression and an *aedicula* depicting Epona found at Mircea Vodă some six kilometres south-east from Cerna.³ Both monuments are probably of a local origin in workshops developed near one of the rural settlements.

DESCRIPTION

The statuette was full cast in a single valve mould (Fig. 2-3). The front part is carefully designed for details. However, the achievement is relatively mediocre. The shield that protects the torso and the upper part of the legs is rectangular with rounded corners; slight traces allow to see corrections made with the aid of a spatula and from the slip stretched with a brush, uneven. A small fragment is missing from the left corner of the shield. The helmet is high, provided with a circular full-face visor that has been suggested by incised circles. Its crest is partially broken (the central part), but it has an angular outline rising vertically. At the back, the helmet is thickened and extended at the bottom to suggest a protective 'collar'. The left arm is covered by the shield so that the ancient artist no longer represented it. The right arm is

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¹ BAUMANN 1983: 60; BAUMANN 1984: 209, No. 7, Fig. 7. For the archaeological dossier of Cerna see BĂRBULESCU 2001: 88 and GUGL, PANAIT 2016: 450, footnote no. 914.

² ALEXANDRESCU 2016: 57.

³ OPAIȚ 1973-1975: 125-128, Fig. 1; BAUMANN 1984: 210, No. 10, Fig. 10; BĂRBULESCU 2001: 177.

slightly flexed to support the shield but also because it initially had a small sword in it, as it suggests slight traces of a rupture. Also, this arm is covered by a sleeve represented by small incisions with an instrument having the tip approximately triangular. The back is massive, processed briefly, with the buttocks barely outlined and strong traces from a spatula with which some finishes were made. The left leg is broken where, probably, the terracotta was fixed on a base. The right foot is broken from the basin level. It features the same reddish-brown 2.5YR/4/3 non-uniform colour slip with lighter surfaces. The fabric is fairly fine, homogeneous reddish-grey 2.5YR/5/1.

It is housed by the Museum of History and Archaeology of the Eco-Museum Institute “Gavrilă Simion” from Tulcea (ICEM) under inventory number 42959. The height is 13.1 cm; maximum width is 6.2 cm, and the shield’s dimensions are 6.8 x 5.3 cm.



Fig. 1. Cerna village area and Troesmis in the background (Google Earth capture ©2020 CNES/Airbus).

CHRONOLOGICAL, FORMAL AND STYLISTIC PARALLELS

A close parallel comes from the southern cemetery of Patavium/Padua wherein 2012 was discovered a rich infant burial (age of 3 years \pm 12 months).⁴ Dated in the second half of the 2nd century AD, this tomb, probably belonging to the wealthy class of the city, had in its inventory a statuette of terracotta representing a gladiator. Not coincidentally, Rossi emphasized the importance of the discovery that she considered a *unicum* due to the conservation status of the figurine and the fact that the helmet is removable.⁵ The statuette represents a *myrmillo* in a defensive position, with a large rectangular shield, and a slot for fastening a sword in the right hand. The helmet (*galea*) has a trapezoidal crest and with

⁴ PETTENÒ *et al.* 2012: 16; ROSSI 2015: 24.

⁵ ROSSI 2016: 65.

the visor provided with holes. The statuette has medium dimensions, with a height of 16.1 cm. Only the detachable helmet has a height of 4.3 cm.⁶

In the necropolis at Luceria/Lucera, other terracotta statuettes representing gladiators were discovered. Although the context is not certain, due to the inadequate research method, we notice the figurine of a *venator* and those of a *secutor*, respectively *thraex* and a helmet belonging to the last-mentioned type.⁷ Among the mentioned statuettes, a *thraex* with a high helmet provided with a network-pierced visor and a massive, rectangular shield, as the Cerna find, draws attention. Despite the mediocre quality of the photography offered by Bartoccini, this figurine looks similar to the one in Moesia.⁸ We note, however, the position of the body of the figurine from Lucera that with its slightly bent legs suggests a more defensive position.



Fig. 2. The terracotta gladiator from Cerna (Photo: Gabriel Dincu/ICEM).

On the other hand, a terracotta figurine from the Württemberg State Museum depicts a *myrmillo* with a supple body, apparently protected only by the massive, rectangular shield and the typical helmet, with the oversized ridge.⁹ The shield and gladius were not preserved in the case of a bronze statue (2nd century AD) kept in the British Museum. However, the characteristic helmet (Berlin type G) offers enough details to allow the classification in the *myrmillo* type.¹⁰ Another fighter in the same category of gladiators is a terracotta figurine from the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg that presents a martial picture with the body bent in front, protected by the massive shield, and the right arm placed towards the back seems ready to strike.¹¹ Besides, the helmet can be removed to see the gladiator's face, as in the case of the Padua figurine. However, the similarities with it stop here, all the more as it is somewhat static. The typical helmet was also rendered in the form of a flamboyant class of lamps,¹² along with those of *thraeces*.¹³

⁶ PETTENÒ *et al.* 2012: 19, Fig. 5a-b; ROSSI 2015: 25; ROSSI 2016: 69, Nos. 5-6, Fig. 4.5-6,10-13.

⁷ BARTOCCINI 1936: 42-46; MERTENS, VOLPE 1999: 40, Fig. 33.

⁸ BARTOCCINI 1936: 44-45, Fig. 22-23. The same rigid, conventional attitude as in the case of the find from Cerna can be found in the case of two figurines of *secutores* from Cologne – see NOSSOV 2009: 88.

⁹ JUNKELMANN 2000: 63, Fig. 63/left; BLOIER 2015: 16, Fig. 16/left.

¹⁰ JUNKELMANN 2000: 43, Fig. 25; NOSSOV 2009: 85/down.

¹¹ JUNKELMANN 2000: 46, Fig. 29.

¹² RONKE 2012: 303-309; BIELFELDT 2014: 220, Fig. 50; BOGDANOVIĆ, VUJOVIĆ 2015: 317-331.

¹³ NOSSOV 2009: 85/above.

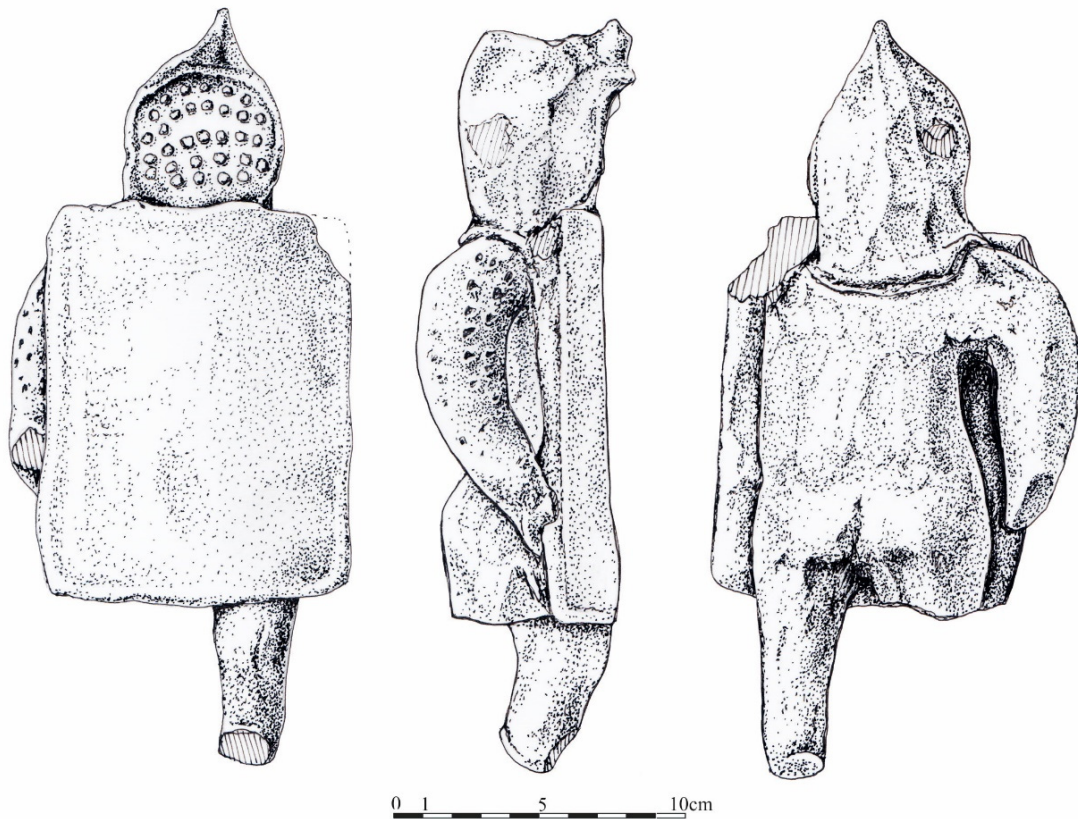


Fig. 3. The terracotta gladiator from Cerna (drawing: Camelia Geanbai/ICEM).

THE MYRMILLO IN ACTION

The origin of this class of gladiators is found in the type of Gauls who arrived in Etruria from Gallia Cisalpina. Grant noted that during the imperial period *myrmillo* replaced this class of fighters¹⁴ with whom they probably had relatively similar armament. As for their names, the same author noted that it was derived from the representation of a sea fish (*mormylos*, *mormyros*, i.e. the sea eel) that was represented on their helmet.¹⁵ However, the Gauls will not disappear immediately but will be mentioned in the sources of the time along with *myrmillo*. Last but not least, for this reason he will now have as an opponent the *retiarius* who with his trident was aiming to kill the fish.¹⁶ However, *myrmillones* routinely had other opponents in the *thraex*, *provocator*, or other heavily armed gladiators' category.¹⁷ The *armatura* of the *myrmillo* is not entirely clear. However, the large shield (*scutum myrmillonium*), the characteristic helmet with network-pierced visor,¹⁸ wide flanged neck-guard and the *gladius* are standard weapons in its equipment.¹⁹ The loincloth (*subligaculum*) is

¹⁴ GRANT 1967: 59; also, JUNKELMANN 2000: 48-51; NOSSOV 2009: 58.

¹⁵ GRANT 1967: 59 [...'named after the representation of a sea-fish (*mormylos*, *mormyros*) which he wore in his helmet']; BARRESI 2002: 6.

¹⁶ LAFAYE 1896: 1587; WIEDEMANN 1995: 119; BASTIDAS 2011: 127-128; MANAS 2016: 707-709. According to JUNKELMANN (2000: 48) and NOSSOV (2009: 58-60), *myrmillo* was currently battling *thraex* or *hoplomachus*, and *retiarius* was an occasional opponent. It is certain that this class of gladiators wore the equipment specific to the Roman soldiers, in particular the rectangular and massive shield, next to the *gladius*.

¹⁷ BENNETT 2009: 4; COULSTON 2009: 199; BASTIDAS 2011: 128; MIĄCZEWSKA 2015: 53.

¹⁸ According to COULSTON (2009: 200) the full face-masks of gladiatorial helmets 'prevented fights from being 'spoilt' by combatants losing their eyes or being blinded by bloody face wounds' or to avoid the 'stigma of their social status'.

¹⁹ LAFAYE 1896: 1588; MANN 2013: 24-25.

not visible in the case of the Cerna terracotta, as are the *fasciae* (the lower legs and feet wrappings). In contrast, the *manica*, the scale armour which was meant to protect the shoulders and the arms, is visible on the right arm.²⁰ The diffusion of this class of gladiators covers both the western and eastern provinces of the Empire.²¹

One of the clearest representations of a *myrmillo* is the stele of freedman Q. Sossius Albus from the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Discovered in Aquileia, the stele represents this gladiator of *myrmillo* type.²² The affiliation to this class of gladiators is clearly mentioned [*Q(uinti) Sossi / Albi / Myrmillonis*] and is supported by the specific *armatura*: the helmet with the high crest, a network-pierced visor and a flanged neck-guard, a rectangular, semi-cylindrical shield designed with an umbo, the *manica* on the right hand with which it holds gladius and greave on the left foot.²³ The stele of another *myrmillo* – Peitheros – of *Oescus/Gigen* origin discovered at Ancyra/Ankara, in Galatia, shows a similar image. Peitheros, probably a slave, is rendered to the left with a heavy helmet, a gladius in right hand and the typical broad rectangular-shaped shield.²⁴ One can notice the appreciable distance between the place of birth and the one where Peitheros died, all the more so since most of the gladiators in the eastern provinces died not far from their home town.²⁵

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At the end of these lines we cannot ask what the role of this statuette was. Obviously, due to the fact that it does not represent a deity, the figurine in question does not have a religious purpose. On the other hand, the statuettes in the terracotta representing gladiators are isolated discoveries,²⁶ many of them being recovered from the funeral contexts.²⁷ And, of course, *myrmillo* was not the only type of gladiator represented in the terracotta figurines because we know other examples such as the *secutores*.²⁸

Returning to the child's grave from Patavium/Padua, the authors of the discovery showed that the rich inventory recovered is divided into three functional categories. The containers were intended for essences and/or food/liquids, and the third category is the items with affective value among which the statuette representing the gladiator can be ascribed.²⁹ In this case, the statuette was meant to allow the deceased's child to continue playing, although one cannot exclude a magical role with protective function.³⁰ However, the primary function of this figurine seems to be that of a toy, especially if we consider the early age of the deceased.³¹

The funeral context from Patavium is not unique. Rossi recalls other situations in which gladiator statuettes were discovered in the funeral context, both in Italy and in other Roman provinces. One of the earliest (1st century BC) is a cremation tomb from Taras/Taranto where two gladiator figurines were discovered.³² Pompeii, Luceria/Lucera and a rural cemetery near Casazza are other examples of gladiator statuettes found in burial contexts.³³ In this context, a figurine representing a *myrmillo* discovered in Milan, in a funerary context, with the specific helmet, the *manica* on the right arm, a *subligaculum* supported by a belt and which is decorated with decorative motifs consisting of a circle and dot should be mentioned. The left arm is missing, but it probably held a rectangular shield, typical of this category of gladiators. The dating of this statuette is relative, in the 2nd – 3rd centuries AD.³⁴ Unfortunately, in the absence of anthropological analyzes, in many cases we do not know the sex or age of the deceased.

²⁰ LAFAYE 1896: 1584; WISDOM 2001: 30-31, Fig. E; NOSSOV 2009: 90.

²¹ VILLE 1981: 314; CARLSEN 2014: 442.

²² BERTACCHI 1994: 176; ROSSI 2015: 26; www. <http://lupa.at/17539> (accessed in 2 April 2020).

²³ BERTACCHI 1994: 177.

²⁴ BENNETT 2009: 6-7, 13, Fig. 2; MANN 2011: 107-108.

²⁵ MANN 2009: 281.

²⁶ MIĄCZEWSKA 2015: 80-81.

²⁷ HAUTALA 2015: 193.

²⁸ NOSSOV 2009: 88.

²⁹ PETTENÒ *et al.* 2012: 20; ROSSI 2016: 74.

³⁰ PETTENÒ *et al.* 2012: 20-21; ROSSI 2015: 24-25.

³¹ ROSSI 2015: 25.

³² BARTOCCINI 1936: 47-48, Fig. 26-27.

³³ ROSSI 2015: 26; ROSSI 2016: 78-79.

³⁴ CERESA MORI 2012: 72, No. 12.

Five clay figurines representing gladiators were discovered at Pompeii. Of these, one representing a *hoplomachus* was discovered in a funeral context, in “La tomba del vaso blu” in the necropolis near Porta Herculaneum.³⁵ The context is not known, as the tomb was excavated in the 19th century, but it seems that together with the gladiator statuettes were discovered other terracotta³⁶. Therefore, the offerings consisting of different figurines are a relatively common practice in different funerary contexts. In fact, the *sigilla/sigillaria* were donated during the festival of *Saturnalia* (December 17th – 23rd),³⁷ and this exchange of gifts, including for children, could constitute elements of the funeral inventory in the case of *mors immatura*. However, Carroll’s extended analysis of the offerings from children’s graves in Roman Italy showed that the most common grave-goods consists mainly of pottery, including feeding bottles, as well as glass, beads, coins and apotropaic amulets.³⁸ Thus, it seems that the gravestone of Sextus Rufius Achilleus (of seven months and nine days from the 2nd century AD) who represents the child with the figurine of a clay rooster – probably his favorite toy – is a rarer example than a rule.³⁹ Other such examples appear in Britannia. The famous ‘child’ tomb at Colchester in which some pipe clay figurines⁴⁰ were laid among other offerings turned out to belong to a high-ranking woman,⁴¹ an ex-legionary or a ‘travelling actor buried with representations of his profession’.⁴²

The significance of placing these figurines in graves is not clear, and possible hypotheses are not unanimously accepted. Beyond the role of simple toys, the apotropaic role of some was emphasized, in particular of the figurines representing animals.⁴³ Of course, the protective role of the representations of some deities, such as Mother Goddess in the grave of a child from Arrington, cannot be denied.⁴⁴

A few “statuette fittili” of gladiators were discovered in the amphitheatre from Aquileia, while an inscription mentioning a *retiarius* and the stele of the *myrmillo* Q. Sossius Albus,⁴⁵ previously discussed, were discovered in other find spots. I previously mentioned the five figurines of gladiators from Pompeii. Perhaps not by chance, four of them were discovered in a domestic context, in the “Casa del Marco Lucrezio Frontone”. Iorio advanced the idea that their role was decorative to illustrate in pairs the gladiatorial fights – in this case *hoplomachi vs. thraeces*. The hypothesis is supported by figurative parietal or sculptural representations from different areas of Pompeii.⁴⁶ Moreover, Langner interprets these figurines as decorative objects with which the Romans lived. Beyond the votive role, they were on display in the rooms in the vicinity of the *atrium*, on shelves or in boxes, and their role was to be seen.⁴⁷

The fascination of the Roman society for gladiators is reflected in the variety of objects having such representations.⁴⁸ The figurines depicting gladiators are just another form of this fascination and they obviously got the best of the children who identified themselves with those they imitated through the game. *Myrmillones* and other gladiators appear on a variety of materials and in various modes of representation, including pairs. Some are extremely detailed, such as the bone and ivory handles of some knives,⁴⁹ and in the case of a ceramic mould – a possible *crustulum* found at Selište, near Viminacium/Kostolac we observe the classic duel between *thraex* and a *myrmillo*.⁵⁰ If we are to discuss the popularity of this pair of fighters, we can bring to discussion another mould discovered at Salona in the 19th century. Considered long ago a *crustulum* or a mould for the manufacture of metal plates offered as prizes to winning

³⁵ KOCKEL 1983: 153, no. 9, Pl. 54.g; IORIO 2015: 96-97, 104, Fig. 1.

³⁶ KOCKEL 1983: 152-153, Nos. 3-10, Pl. 54; IORIO 2015: 98.

³⁷ LANGNER 2013: 59; IORIO 2015: 100.

³⁸ CAROLL 2011: 107-108.

³⁹ CAROLL 2011: 112, Fig. 8. See also, HAUTALA 2015: 196-197.

⁴⁰ ECKARDT 1999: 60-68, Pl. 10-12. For Gallia see TALVAS 2007: 165-197; DAMOUR, POUGET 2014: 481-488.

⁴¹ GOING *et al.* 1997: 388.

⁴² ECKARDT 1999: 78-79.

⁴³ GOING *et al.* 1997: 390-391.

⁴⁴ GREEN 1992: 7.

⁴⁵ BERTACCHI 1994: 176-177; GIOVANNINI, VENTURA 2012: 178-182, Fig. 6-9.

⁴⁶ IORIO 2015: 100-104; also, SERRA 2014: 154, Fig. 124.

⁴⁷ LANGNER 2013: 58.

⁴⁸ COULSTON 2009: 197; MIĄCZEWSKA 2015: 91.

⁴⁹ BARTUS 2010: 27-49, Pl. 2; BARTUS, GRIMM 2010: 321-324 (from Caerwent/Venta Silurum); KOVAČ 2019: 107-110, Fig. 1.1 (*myrmillo*-shaped bone handle from Mursa/Osijek).

⁵⁰ VUJOVIĆ 2011: 199-206.

gladiators in the arena, this discovery was later interpreted as a mould for rectangular-section glass containers.⁵¹ In any case, it reveals once again the popularity of gladiator combats and in particular the role of *myrmillones* in them.

It should be noted that most of the examples discussed above are findings from the western provinces where the topic of gladiatorial combat has long been discussed. In the East, the examples are relatively less, but the games had the same intensity. However, the observation regarding the rarity of terracotta statuettes with the representation of gladiators remains valid. Of the few examples in the proximity of Moesia Inferior is the east of Thracia where a series of figurines (*secutor*, *provocator*, *retiarius*) have been discovered in Apri/Kermeyan, Rhaidestos/Tekirdag and in other settlements in the area,⁵² but it differs stylistically from the figurine from Cerna. Further East we recall the examples found in domestic contexts at Ephessos, probably representing *provocatores*, *retiarii* and the head of the statuette of a *secutor*.⁵³

I mentioned at the beginning that the statuette of this *myrmillo* was not discovered in an archaeological context. Unfortunately, this does not allow a clear association with the funeral or domestic milieu. However, I tend to attribute this figurine to a disturbed early Roman grave. Thus, based on the available parallels, the find may be attributed to a *mors immatura* context involving offerings to children.⁵⁴

But where was this figurine produced and purchased? It is a difficult question and a “challenging assumption” is the possibility of making the figurine in the workshops in the territory of Troesmis. Such figurines/toys could be sold on the occasion of the *munera* that took place in the amphitheater of the city in the form of souvenirs highly prized by children who idealized gladiators. This fact is also supported by other categories of objects that could be sold as souvenirs⁵⁵ at the occasion of *munera* and which ‘travelled’ at considerable distances from their place of origin.

The impact of the gladiatorial games south of the Danube has been investigated in the last decades. Overall, archaeological and epigraphic discoveries reveal the importance of these games in Roman provincial life and the wide range of representations⁵⁶ – from rendering gladiatorial fights on ceramic vessels and construction materials,⁵⁷ to dress accessories,⁵⁸ statuettes, various decorations and, of course, funerary stele.⁵⁹

There is also limited information regarding the amphitheatres in the province of Moesia Inferior. Insofar, apart for the one in Marcianopolis/Devnija, Tomis/Constanța yielded some remains of a large structure of ellipsoid form which was considered an amphitheatre⁶⁰. The existence of an amphitheatre at Troesmis is unclear. The importance of the settlement and parallels with other legionary centres are arguments in favour of a local amphitheatre/s. Attempts to locate it in the ancient landscape, drastically altered by anthropogenic interventions, were made but no irrefutable evidence was provided.⁶¹ Thus, this remains an open issue. However, this modest clay figurine dated back to the 2nd – 3rd century AD is further evidence of the fascination of gladiatorial combats in the territory of the legionary headquarter from Troesmis and the Lower Danube as well.

⁵¹ BULJEVIĆ 2004: 193-200.

⁵² ŞAHİN, GÜÇLÜ 2015: 107-114.

⁵³ LANG-AUINGER 2002: 103-105, Fig. 1, 4-7, 8-9.

⁵⁴ VAQUERIZO GIL 2004: 197; BRØDHOLT 2012: 62-64.

⁵⁵ GIOVANNINI, VENTURA 2012: 179; ŞAHİN, GÜÇLÜ 2015: 109. RONKE (2012: 307) suggested that the lamps with the discus in the shape of a gladiator's helmet had the role of souvenirs being bought by the fans of gladiatorial fights.

⁵⁶ For an overview, see MINČEV 1974: 85-94; BOULEY 1994: 29-53; BONDOC 2006: 29-42; STREINU 2016: 265-270.

⁵⁷ BALKANSKA 1972: 171-176; SULTOV 1976: 59-60; SANIE 1981: 103-105, Pl. 22bis/5; STREINU, BORLEAN, STREINU 2019: 242-243, Pl. 2.

⁵⁸ NUȚU 2013: 19-20.

⁵⁹ ANGELOV, CONRAD, LUPPE 1998: 77-79.

⁶⁰ STREINU 2015-2016: 178-179.

⁶¹ ALEXANDRESCU 2016A: 445-449.

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