

EOENA FUNEBRIS ON A FUNERARY STELA FROM NOVAE¹ (FIG. 1)

The ancient necropolises of Novae were desecrated and destroyed already in antiquity, leaving little evidence for establishing their precise location and extent (fig. 2). The discovery in 1985 of what has come to be called *via inscriptionum* uncovered several funerary steles damaged in a barbarian raid in the 3rd century AD,² which were reused as paving stones. In later times funerary stones were cut and used as building material in houses and an Orthodox church in the nearby town of Svištov. The area of the necropolis itself was gradually lost to erosional processes.

The modest remains of one burial ground were investigated in the early years of excavations in Novae, which started in 1960. The cemetery lay on a small mound some 300 m from the south defense wall of the fortress³ and may be considered as the southern necropolis of Novae. Other cemeteries are believed to have lined the roads exiting the fort and later town, going in opposite, easterly and westerly directions.⁴ Fragmentary funerary steles continue to be found even today in the fields and vineyards around the site and during construction projects.

¹ The project has been financed with resources provided by the National Science Center, Poland, allotted on the basis of decision DEC-2014/13/B/HS3/04836.

² P. Dyczek, 'Via inscriptionum at Novae', *Novensia* 10 (1998), 17–23.

³ Z. Hilczérówna, S. Kołkówna, M. Nowicka, S. Parnicki-Pudęłko, L. Press, S. Rutkowski, B. Sułtow, 'Sprawozdanie tymczasowe z wykopalisk w Novae w 1960 roku', *Archeologia* 12 (1961) [1962], 90, fig. 23; P. Dyczek, *Archaeological Research at Novae*, in P. Dyczek (ed.), *Novae. Legionary Fortress and Late Antique Town*, vol. I: *A Companion to the Study of Novae* (T. Derda, P. Dyczek, J. Kolendo [eds]), Warszawa 2008, 34.

⁴ J. Kolendo, V. Božilova, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Novae (Mésie Inférieure)*, Bordeaux 1997, 13, fig. 3.

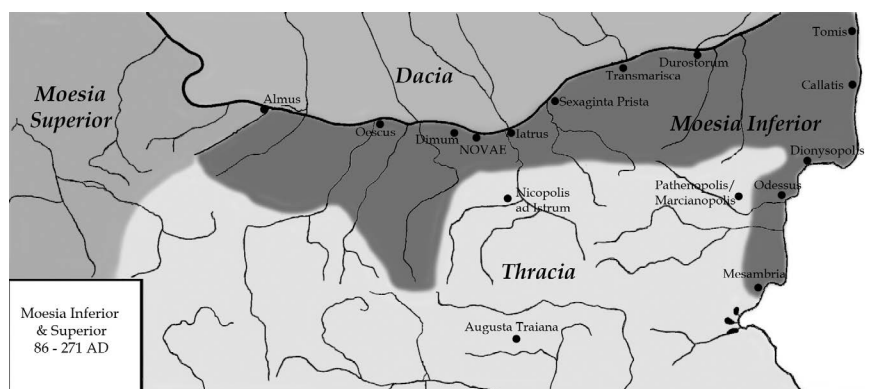


Fig. 1. Map of the Roman province Moesia Inferior – location of Novae, elaborated by P. Dyczek, M. Bura.

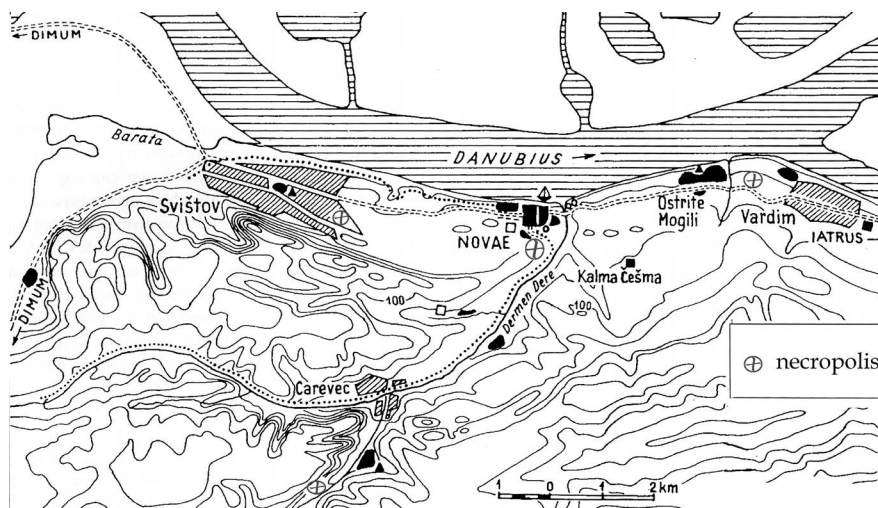


Fig. 2. Areas nearest to Novae, after J. Kolendo, V. Božilova, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Novae (Mésie Inférieure)*, Bordeaux 1997, fig. 3.

An archaeological survey carried out to the south of Novae in 2003 located a fragmentary stele with partly preserved inscription and a funerary banquet scene carved on it (fig. 3). The stone, identified as a “Hotnitsa limestone”, lay at the edge of a field at the foot of the mound where the southern burial ground had been situated. Parts of the decoration showed evidence of careful workmanship, but on the whole one would hardly consider the stele a masterpiece of ancient art.



Fig. 3. Banquet stela from Novae, photo P. Dyczek.



Fig. 4. Banquet scene on the gravestone, photo P. Dyczek.

The most interesting thing about it was the *coena funebris* carved in the archivolt. It is the only representation of its kind known so far from Novae (fig. 4).

The stela is also among the epigraphic finds that the late Prof. Jerzy Kolendo was studying before his death. The preserved fragment is 117 cm long, 60 cm wide and 29.9 cm thick. Considering the size of the preserved part of the inscription and banquet scene relief, the original width of the stela would have been close to 120 cm.

The banquet scene was placed in the upper part of the stela, in the archivolt. There, on a *kliné* with profiled rest, lying against a pillow, was a man dressed in a chiton. Next to him was the bust of another male figure. The faces of both fig-



Fig. 5. Representation of the support of klinè, photo P. Dyczek.



Fig. 6. Corinthian pillar – detail of grave-stone from Novae, photo P. Dyczek.

ures are damaged and the folds of the robes rendered schematically and with little artistry. A profiled support (fig. 5) can be observed below the sofa and it has been interpreted as one of the legs of a *mensa tripes*,⁵ although to my mind it is more likely one of the legs of the bed as suggested by the frontal mode of carving. The side legs of tables were usually carved in profile. Moreover, parallels from Odessos⁶ and Tomis⁷ show bed legs of similarly rich profiling.

⁵ E. Bunsch, J. Kolendo, 'Czternaście nieopublikowanych inskrypcji z Novae (*Moesia Inferior*)', *Novensia* 22 (2011), 49.

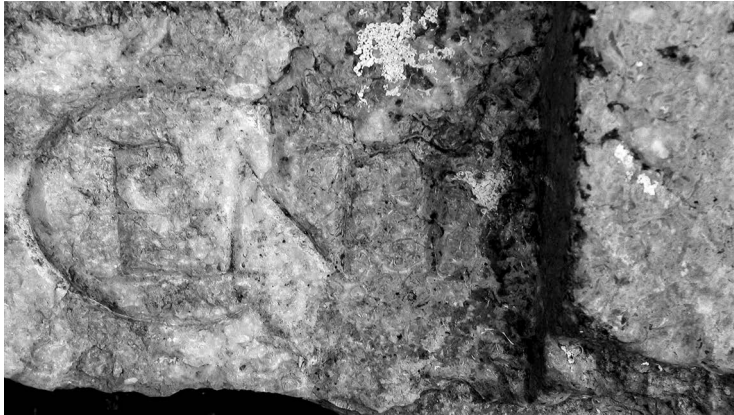
⁶ M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, 'Portrete romane din colecții românești (I)', *Studia Classica* 25 (1988), no. 8; M. Mirčev, 'Antični pametnici ot severoiztočna Bălgarija v arheologičeskija muzej v grad Stalin', *Izvestija na Arheologičeski Institut* 17 (1950), 271–272, no. 8, fig. 219; B. Gerov, 'Romanizmat meždū Dunava i Balkana ot Hadriana do Konstantin Veliki (II)', *Godišnik na Sofijskijat Universitet* 48 (1952/1953), 390, no. 640.

⁷ M. Bărbulescu, A. Rădulescu, 'Inscriptii inedite din Tomis și imprejurimi', *Pontica* 27 (1994), 158–159, no. 2, fig. 2.

Fig. 7. Partly preserved inscription, photo P. Dyczek.



Fig. 8. A ligature inside another ligature – detail from banquet stela from Novae, photo P. Dyczek.



The epigraphic frame below the relief scene was bounded on either side by engaged Corinthian pillars; the one surviving pillar shows proficient carving (fig. 6). Only four incomplete verses of the text can still be seen, but they demonstrate a well planned and executed inscription (fig.7). Elaborate ligatures were used in the text, including a ligature inside another ligature (fig. 8). It is interesting in view of the quality of the carving of elements of the decoration that the representations of the two males in the main scene are so lacking in refinement.

As far as the preservation of the text is concerned, the second letter of the abbreviation for *Dis Manibus* has survived along with the fragmentary names of two people (in the dative) for whom the stele was made. One of these was presumably of Greek origin: the initial letters and the end can be observed, Er[---]nus. A reconstruction of the full form cannot be made on these grounds, especially as Greek names were hardly popular in the region and the comparative material is deficient. The other name is the rather common Roman name of Crescens.⁸

Contrary to what has been said above, a closer look at the details of the stele raises questions that are of scientific significance. Funerary steles with banquet scenes are a fairly common category as such, but restricted to the eastern part of the province of Moesia Inferior. They are found chiefly in the cemeteries of Greek cities in the Black Sea littoral, such as Histria, Odessos and Tomis. The earliest examples are attributed to the 1st century AD,⁹ but the peak of popularity can be placed in the second half of the 2nd century AD through the middle of the 3rd century and early 4th century AD.¹⁰ Their occurrence at other sites in Lower Moesia is rare.¹¹ They have been found in the neighborhood of legionary fortresses and in towns lying along the Danube, e.g., Capidava, Durostorum, near Oescus in Sexaginta Prista, Sacidava,¹² and very seldom in the interior, that is, Marcianopolis or around Veliko Târnovo.¹³

Archaeological data confirmed by epigraphical finds indicate a close link between this iconographic model of funerary markers and the Greek cultural *koine*, referring to Greek traditions and beliefs that were still strong in the local community and largely independent of Roman influence. Having said this, one must note, however, that while the iconographic scheme of the stele in question repeats models from the Pontic region, there are some differences that are in need of consideration.

The stele can be classified as type VI a in the typology prepared by S. Conrad,¹⁴ but with an important difference: the base of the archivolt is set upon a narrow profiled cornice supported by engaged pillars instead of columns. The carving of the Corinthian capital is partly sunken, presumably a device to add depth and plasticity to what was in effect relatively shallow relief carving. The pillar itself is not flat, but modeled spatially with a broad band along the edges and a vertical

⁸ Bunsch, Kolendo, 'Czternaście nieopublikowanych inskrypcji z Novae', 50.

⁹ Cf. a grave stone from Bajkal from the Claudian Period. Conrad, *op. cit.*, 254; M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, 'Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure: schémas et modèles', *Dacia* 21 (1977), 139–140.

¹⁰ G. Tončeva, 'Chronologičesko razvite na pločite "pogrebavno ugoštenie" ot Odessos', *Arheologija* 6 (1964), 37; eadem, 'Skulpturata v Odessos ot V–I vek pr.n.e.', *Izvestija na Narodnen Muzej Varna* 4 (1969), 13–15; Conrad, *op. cit.*, 57–58.

¹¹ D. Dimitrov, *Nadgrobnni ploči ot rimsko vreme v Severna Bălgarija*, Sofia 1942, *passim*.

¹² Conrad, *op. cit.*, 68–70.

¹³ Alexandrescu-Vianu, 'Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure', 160.

¹⁴ Conrad, *op. cit.*, Taf. 12.



Fig. 9. A ligature inside another ligature – detail from the main altar from *valetudinarium* at Novae, photo P. Dyczek.

like-torus in the middle; the effect at a certain distance is that of an engaged column rather than pillar. From the technical point of view this was an intentional and well considered measure.

The inscription was executed with equal care. The letters were well-shaped, even, carved deeply and at regular intervals, keeping also regular lines, which in itself is proof of the skill of the craftsman. Added to that the inscription demonstrates the use of ornamental ligatures; the double ligature in the end of the name of Crescens is of particular sophistication and beautifully composed. It recalls a similar rendering of the end of the word ‘sacrum’¹⁵ observed in an inscription on the main altar to Asclepius (Aesculapius) (fig. 9) found in the courtyard of the army hospital in Novae,¹⁶ in front of a shrine to the healing divinities.¹⁷ The altar

¹⁵ Cf. J. Kolendo ‘Inscriptions en l’honneur d’Esculape et d’Hygie du valetudinarium de Novae’, *Archeologia* 49 (1998), 56, fig. 1a-c and pl. XII, 1 a.b. = AE 1998, 1130; L. Mrozewicz, *Paleography of Latin Inscriptions from Novae (Lower Moesia)*, Poznań 2010, 176, C 27.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Dyczek, ‘A Sacellum Aesculapii in the valetudinarium at Novae’, in N. Gudea (ed.), *Roman Frontier Studies XVII/1997. Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, Zalău 1999, 495–500; idem, ‘Novae – Western Sector (Section IV), 1997–1999. Preliminary Report on the Excavations of the Center for Archaeological Research-Novae, Warsaw University’, *Archeologia* 51 (2000), 93–96.

¹⁷ P. Dyczek, J. Kolendo, ‘Archaeological and Epigraphical Sources for the Cult to Asclepius and Hygia in the Army Hospital at Novae’, *Archeologia* 61 (2010) [2012], 35–46.

in question is believed to date from the 1st century AD; however, it seems to have been well known to the sculptor of our inscription and was an inspiration for him when he carved the inscription on this particular funerary stone.

The funeral banquet is undoubtedly a Greek tradition, going back perhaps even to the Bronze Age and most certainly to the archaic period. Homer's mention of a banquet in Priam's palace after Hector's death may be indirect evidence of the 2nd millennium BC origin of the custom.¹⁸ The first relief scenes of the *coena funebris*, taking place in the company of family and friends,¹⁹ appeared in Attica²⁰ about 400 BC.

An analysis of the relief representations and parallels, as well as written sources led N. Himmelmann²¹ to distinguish three kinds of banquet scenes: *kliné*,²² *sigma* and banquet at a table.²³ Our stele refers to the first type, in which the deceased was depicted in the company of his near ones lying on a bed. The model of the scene was developed most probably in Greece (Attica?) in the 4th century BC. In the 1st century AD it appeared in the Roman world.²⁴ The Greek prototype was modified at the time or to be more precise, it was enriched. Constant elements of the Roman convention included the *mensa tripes*, a larger number of persons accompanying the deceased, including slaves, occasionally adorers and animals. A Near Eastern tradition of depicting a horse rider was embraced in Lower Moesia, where, especially in the region on the Danube, the image was confused to some extent with the motif of the Thracian Rider.

The iconological significance of the funeral banquet scene is widely debated. Some written sources as well as the more elaborate examples of funeral banquet scenes, not to mention parallels like the Etruscan representations, suggest a "banquet in the underworld" or "eternal feast".²⁵ It is equally justified to consider it a scene of the deceased partaking symbolically in a banquet or a symbol of the

¹⁸ Hom. *Il.* XXIV 801–803, cf. M. Andronikos, 'Totenkult', *Archeologia Homerica*, III, W, 1968, 15–18.

¹⁹ J.M. Dentzer, *Le motif du banquet couché dans le Proche-Orient et de la monde grec du VIIe au VIe siècle av. J.-C.* (BEFAR 246), Rome 1982, 11–14, 529–557.

²⁰ X. de Schutter, 'Rituel funéraire et coût des obsèques en Grèce à l'époque classique', *Kernos* 2 (1989), 58.

²¹ N. Himmelmann, *Typologische Untersuchungen an römischen Sarkophagreliefs des 3. und 4. Jhr. n.Chr.*, Mainz 1973, 25–26, 47–48.

²² *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituus Antiquorum*, Basel 2004 (ed. J. Paul Getty Museum), 292.

²³ Cf. H. Gabelmann, 'Die Typen der römischen Grabstelen am Rhein', *BJb* 172 (1972), 115–116; E. Will, *Banquets et stèles de banquet dans les cultes de la Grèce et de l'Empire romain*, Lausanne 1976, 353–254; I. Bianchi, *Le stele funerarie della Dacia*, Roma 1985, 98–99.

²⁴ Cf. B. Compostella, 'Banchetti pubblici e banchetti privati nell'iconografia funeraria romana del I secolo d.C.', *MEFRA* 104 (1992), 666–689.

²⁵ G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, München 1912, 419–420; J. Scheid, 'Sacrifice et banquet à Rome (Quelques problèmes)', *MEFRA* 97 (1985), 194.

heroization of the deceased,²⁶ or simply a banquet celebrated sometime during the deceased's life.²⁷ Each of these theories seems equally credible; after all, the scene with variations was *en vogue* for almost 800 years (from the 4th century BC to the fourth century AD) and covered a considerable area. It is more than likely that it was interpreted differently depending on the background and cultural context, as well as simply fashionable trends.

Greek colonies emerged in the Black Sea littoral starting from the 6th century BC. They gradually changed into Greek cities cultivating their Greek traditions, even after the Roman conquest.²⁸ Despite the economic and political domination of Rome, Greek culture remained strong and influenced both the local native population and the Romans, at first (in the 1st century AD) in the coastal region, then in Dobruja and from the 2nd century AD practically in all of Lower Moesia. It was expressed in the spread of Greek cults, but also in a palpable influence on the form of funerary monuments. The *coena funebris* scene is a good example, steles with this representation being found in cemeteries on the Black Sea coast as well as in Dobruja and, as mentioned above, in the neighborhood of legionary quarters and Roman towns.²⁹ One is tempted thus to search for the iconographic model of this theme and an analysis of the available evidence leads to the conclusion that the main center was the former colony of Miletus, Odessos³⁰ (modern Varna), where three iconographic models were distinguished. Secondary models, popular only in Dobruja, emerged in two other centers: Tomis and Histria.³¹

New research has demonstrated that the motif of a funeral banquet penetrated into the different military and civil centers in Moesia gradually and was much more diversified than believed initially.³² The motifs changed gradually, forming a unique contamination of Roman and Greek art. The Greek motif was copied more or less carelessly and with greater or lesser skill, incorporating it into Roman schemes that were well developed in the local stone-carving workshops. The addition of three-legged most likely in the 2nd century AD is a good example of this process.³³

²⁶ G. Bordenache, 'Temi e motivi della plastica funeraria d'età romana nella Moesia Inferior, II', *Dacia* 9 (1965), 254–255; J. Fabricius, *Die hellenistischen Totenmahlreliefs. Grabrepräsentation und Wertvorstellungen in ostgriechischen Städten (Studien zur antiken Stadt 3)*, München 1999, 22–24.

²⁷ *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituus Antiquorum*, Basel 2004 (ed. J. Paul Getty Museum), 293.

²⁸ P. Dyczek, *Amfory rzymskie z obszaru dolnego Dunaju. Dystrybucja amfor i transportowanych w nich produktów w I – III w. po Chr.*, Warszawa 1999, 21–22.

²⁹ M. Ivanov, 'A Roman gravestone from Bălgarski Izvor, Lovech region', *Arheologija* 44.4 (2003), 24–29.

³⁰ Cf. S. G. Tončeva, 'Das Thema "Totenmal" (*coena funebris*) auf Denkmäler aus Odessos', *Arheologija* 3 (1961), 18–23.

³¹ M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, 'Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure', 140–151, 151–159.

³² Conrad, *op. cit.*, 57–70.

³³ Alexandrescu-Vianu, 'Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure', 149.

Determining how the motif of the funeral banquet was disseminated is a separate research issue. The current view is that this was effected to some extent by the Roman legions stationed in Moesia: I Italica, V Macedonica and XI Claudia. Both the legionaries and people associated either economically or by family ties with the legions were susceptible to the Greek influence. The dislocation of military units added dynamics to the process. The inscriptions on the stelae were by themselves an important source of information, containing frequently additional data on the deceased or the individuals dedicating the tombstone. An analysis of the texts indicates that they were sometimes migrants from the Greek cities, sometimes worshippers of Greek cults. In other cases, they were peregrinators, legionaries or veterans.³⁴

Let us now take a look at the stele from Novae under discussion. The terse and fragmentarily preserved inscription still manages to convey some information. The rare Greek name appears to point to the Greek origins of one of the deceased. While it cannot be excluded that at least one of the deceased was associated with the I Italica legion, but the representation itself and the arrangement of the text suggests that we are dealing with civilians settled in the vicinity of Novae. They must have been landowners, rather wealthy to judge by the quality of the tombstone and still attached to their Greek traditions. They were represented in chitons and in the same scale, emphasizing their equal status. We do not know who was represented lying on the bed, but the sequence of names on the stele indicates that it must be the 'Greek' Er...nus. He was surely the more important person in the duet with Crescens.

From a stylistic point of view the stele demonstrates a combination of Greek and Roman patterns. And apparently some of the Greek forms were already sufficiently well known and common in Moesia to cause no technical or compositional problem for the *fabrica lapidaria* from Novae. The shape is a reference to the Greek form of a tombstone with archivolt,³⁵ transformed into form II,³⁶ that is, with the epigraphic field below the semicircular frame of the relief. The next stage was adding engaged columns or pilasters on either side of the inscription, creating a sepulchral monument of the *aedicula* type, classified as type VI c.³⁷ The banquet stela from Novae represented this particular type. Interestingly, it constitutes a good analogy for the stele of Iulius Iero, the wine dealer, from Novae from the 1st/2nd century AD.³⁸

³⁴ Conrad, *op. cit.* 70, see notes 596–599.

³⁵ Conrad, *op. cit.*, 37, type C, taf. 10.

³⁶ Ibidem, 46–48, taf. 11.

³⁷ Ibidem, 51–52, Taf. 12.

³⁸ Kolendo, Božilova, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Novae*, 133–134.

The craftsmanship in the relief part contrasts with the overall execution quality. It was carved with a flat chisel like the other elements of the tombstone, but the compositional awkwardness and careless execution are surprising. Clearly the artist had difficulties with the subject and he also seems not to have had a good model to copy. Interestingly, the problem seems to have concerned only the figures. Wherever he could model his work on the real object, like the bed, he was capable of carving all the details with a firm hand and proper feeling. The impression is that the subject was entirely new to the artist. He seems to have had a general sketch of the scene and general instructions from those commissioning the stela. It would explain the artistic “hitch” in the carving and, assuming the suggestion is correct, it could open the way to a new interpretation.

The same scale of the two figures, one lying on the bed and the other standing next to it, was not frequently encountered in Lower Moesia. The nearest parallels originate from the central part of the province. A stela from Storgosia³⁹ (modern Pleven), from the end of the 2nd century AD, two from Durostorum (modern Silistra),⁴⁰ from the second half of the 2nd century and the end of the 2nd century AD, and another one from Melita (modern Loveč), from the first half of 3rd century AD.⁴¹ An early analogy for this model of representation was a tombstone from Tomis (modern Constanța), dated to the late Flavian period,⁴² referring apparently to Greek prototypes.⁴³ It was in Tomis that an iconographical scheme closest to the stela from Novae was developed.⁴⁴

Keeping in mind the state of research on funeral banquet steles from Lower Moesia, it can be suggested that the founder of this tombstone came from a Greek city. As for the dating of the stela, it is usually a difficult undertaking, if there are no indications either in the style, iconography or iconology. Fortunately, in our case, there is some information to suggest a dating. First of all the stone, which is a typical, partly crystallized hard magnesian limestone mentioned above Hotnitsa limestone. It was quarried at three sites in the vicinity of Nicopolis ad Istrum, next to the modern villages of Hotnitsa in the Kornitsa area, Samovodene in the Mogilite area, and Kamenets. All three quarries operated from the beginning of the 2nd century AD. The other dating element is the banquet scene, which was known

³⁹ G. Tabakova-Canova, ‘Rimski nadgrobni ploči ot Plevenski okrâg’, *Arheologija* 12.1 (1970), 38–39, no. 1, fig. 1.

⁴⁰ Conrad, *op. cit.*, 207–208, nos 302, 303, Taf. 84,1; 85,3.

⁴¹ G. I. Kacarov, ‘Antični pametnici ot Bălgarija’, *Godišnik na Narodnija Muzej* III (1921), 149.

⁴² G. Bodernach, *op. cit.*, 261, fig. 6; M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, ‘Contribution à une classification des stèles funéraires de la Mésie inférieure’, *Dacia* 17 (1973), 221; *eadem*, ‘Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure’, 151, 153, fig 8,1; *eadem*, ‘Les stèles funéraires de la Mésie inférieure’, *Dacia* 29 (1985), no. 160.

⁴³ M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, ‘Le banquet funéraire de la Mésie Inférieure’, 153.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 151–156.

from the 2nd century AD, as mentioned above. This limits the possible date for our stele to the 2nd century.

The shape of the letters and the kind of ligatures used in the inscription provide further important indications. The carving and proportions, as well as shape of the letters resembles four other inscriptions from Novae: the said main altar in front of the temple in the courtyard of the army hospital, an altar dedicated to *Bonus Eventus*, an altar dedicated to *Liber Pater* and an inscription on the architrave of a shrine to the healing divinities inside the army hospital.⁴⁵ The inscriptions were carved respectively in: about AD 101/102, about AD 182, before AD 184 and in AD 156/158.⁴⁶ After AD 156 the shrine in the *valetudinarium* was renovated and rebuilt and it is not to be excluded that craftsmen working for the *fabrica lapidaria* that carved our tombstone were employed on that project. It was then that they may have been inspired by the double ligature on the main altar of Asclepios. Therefore, the year AD 160 should be assumed as a *terminus post quem* for the carving of our tombstone. As for the latest possible dating, assuming a certain margin of error, it is the chronology of the *Bonus Eventus* and *Liber Pater* altars, that is, a *terminus ante quem* set as AD 190. Taking into consideration this and other available data, it is justified to date our tombstone to the second half of the 2nd century AD, most probably between 160 and 190.

In the light of this analysis the stele from Novae appears to be of exceptional importance, from both the epigraphic and the artistic point of view. It is an excellent example of a synthesis of Greek and Roman cultures, and it allows for many conclusions concerning the spiritual and material culture in Lower Moesia of the 2nd century AD. Despite a constant broadening of knowledge, also as a result of the excavations in Novae, sometimes a single artifact can open new research perspectives.

Professor Kolendo anticipated this when he pressed me to take a closer look at this modest find. Thus I hope I have fulfilled my promise to him.

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⁴⁵ Kolendo, Božilova, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Novae*, 44-45, no. 3; 56-57, no. 18; 67-68, no. 30.

⁴⁶ J. Kolendo, 'Vitrassius Pollio gouverneur de la Mésie Inférieure et son activité dans cette provinces', in W. Chmielewski, A. Lipska, E. Niezgoda, M. Ząbecka (eds), *Studia Aegea et Balcanica in honorem Lodovicae Press*, Warszawa 1992, 199-205.