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**COINS AS GRAVE GOODS IN CHILD
INHUMATION GRAVES AND THEIR
POSITION IN RELATION TO THE DECEASED:
THE CASE OF VIMINACIUM SOUTHERN
CEMETERIES**

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МОНЕТИ КАТО ГРОБНИ ДАРОВЕ В ДЕТСКИ
ГРОБОВЕ И ТЯХНОТО ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ СПРЯМО
ПОЧИНАЛИЯ: СЛУЧАЯТ С ЮЖНИТЕ НЕКРОПОЛИ
НА ВИМИНАЦИУМ

МИРЯНА ВОЙВОДА,
ИЛИЯ МИКИЧ

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Coins as grave goods in child inhumation graves and their position in relation to the deceased: The case of Viminacium southern cemeteries

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Монети като гробни дарове в детски гробове и тяхното положение спрямо починалия: Случаят с южните некрополи на Виминациум

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Abstract: The excavations of Viminacium southern cemeteries revealed 1,808 child inhumations, 521 of them containing coins as grave goods. The present study examines the frequency of coin occurrence in these graves, compared to other grave goods, and paying special attention to the allocation according to the distinguished age groups.

In most of the cases, a single specimen was discovered (484), while larger number of deposited coins occur less often (**Fig. 5**).

The further observations concern the placement of the coin offerings in relation to the deceased. Following the established methods in human anthropology (*cf.* Clarke 1979 158), eight positions of coins in relation to the deceased has been distinguished: A – on/around the head; B – in the mouth; C – on/near the right arm and in the right hand; D – on/near the torso; E – on/near the left arm and in the left hand; F – on/near the pelvis; G – on/near the right leg; H – on/near the left leg.

The summarized observations allow to conclude that ca. 64% of the coin finds were related to the area of the head of the deceased child (positions A and B) (**Fig. 6**).

These allow to conclude that single coins in the graves could unquestionably be connected to the ritual of payment for the transition to the underworld (as Charon's obol), although in some instances they could be considered also as coins intended for "expenses" in the other world (*viaticum*).

Keywords: Viminacium cemeteries, Grave goods, Ritual coin finds, Charon's obol



Viminacium was the largest urban settlement in Upper Moesia and an important military centre. It was founded during the Roman conquest of the Danube areas (Mirković 1968, 21–22; Ferjančić 2013, 13–14; Spasić-Đurić 2015, 22–25; Vojvoda, Redžić 2018, 50–51),¹ not far from the confluence of the Mlava River and the Danube, near today's Kostolac. After AD 86, Viminacium became a permanent legionary camp, first for the legion of IV Flavia (until Trajan's Dacian wars) and then for the VII Claudia, which remained there until the end of antiquity (Mirković 1968, 27–31; Mirković 1986, 36–38; Ferjančić 2002, 160). Viminacium probably received the status of municipium (Municipium Aelium) at the beginning of the reign of Hadrian. In the middle of the 2nd century AD, if not even earlier, Viminacium became the seat for the governor of the province of Moesia Superior. It reached the peak of its development at the time of the reign of Septimius Severus and his immediate successors; at the beginning of the reign of Gordian III Viminacium became a colony (Mirković 1968, 63–65). The political and economic rise of Viminacium was influenced, among other things, by the ore-rich hinterland, its favourable geographical position within the defence system of the empire, as well as its position at the crossroads of important overland communications. The constant presence of the army contributed to the development of crafts and trade, which resulted in a large influx of settlers as well as traders from different parts of the empire (Spasić-Đurić 2015, 58).

During approximately five centuries of life in Viminacium, several cemeteries were formed and, according to their position towards the legionary camp and the civilian settlements, they were divided into northern, southern, eastern, and western cemeteries (**Fig. 1**). The constructions of the Kostolac 2 Thermal Power Plant in the area of the southern cemeteries, provoked large-scale rescue archaeological excavations from 1977 to 1990 (Zotović 1986, 41; Zotović, Jordović 1990, 2; Korać, Golubović 2009, 12–13). Within this area, nine cemeteries were discovered, five of which belong to the period of Roman occupation, dating from the middle of the 1st century to the first decades of the 5th century (Zotović 1986, 41, n. 4; 54–55; Zotović, Jordović 1990, 2; Ivanišević et al. 2006, 133–136).² The two oldest cemeteries are Više Groblja and part of the Pećine necropolis formed in the middle of the 1st century, where concurrent cremation and inhumation burials were practised. A change in the funeral ritual that took place around the middle of the 3rd century led to the abandonment of these two cemetery areas (Zotović 1986, 42–45; Zotović, Jordović 1990, 1–34; Korać, Golubović 2009, 12–13, n. 15–17). In a separate necropolis, also at the Pećine site, only cremated deceased were buried, apart from a number of graves with inhumations, which, in all cases, were children's graves. This necropolis was formed at the turn of the 1st century and was used until the middle of the 3rd century. In the southern cemeteries of Viminacium, the cremation rite was abandoned in the middle of the 3rd century, and inhumation was the only burial form thereafter. At that time, two more cemeteries were formed in the southern area: Burdelj, which was used until the middle of the 4th century, and the third necropolis at the Pećine site used until the first decades of the 5th century (Zotović 1986, 52).³

¹ The conquest of free tribes between Macedonia and the Danube was motivated by the need to protect Roman areas in the south of the Balkan Peninsula from raids from the north and the Romans' aspiration to reach the Danube, which would form a safer border. This process took place from 29/28 BC until the foundation of the province of Moesia in AD 14/15.

² The oldest necropolis belongs to the Celtic population that lived here at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC, while the two youngest necropoleis belong to the period of migration: the Ostrogothic one, which was used in the second half of the 5th century AD, and the Herulic one from the middle of the 6th century AD. The youngest is a smaller mediaeval necropolis, roughly dated to the 12th–14th century.

³ This necropolis at the Pećine site intersects the territories of older, already abandoned cemeteries with cremation and inhumation burials.

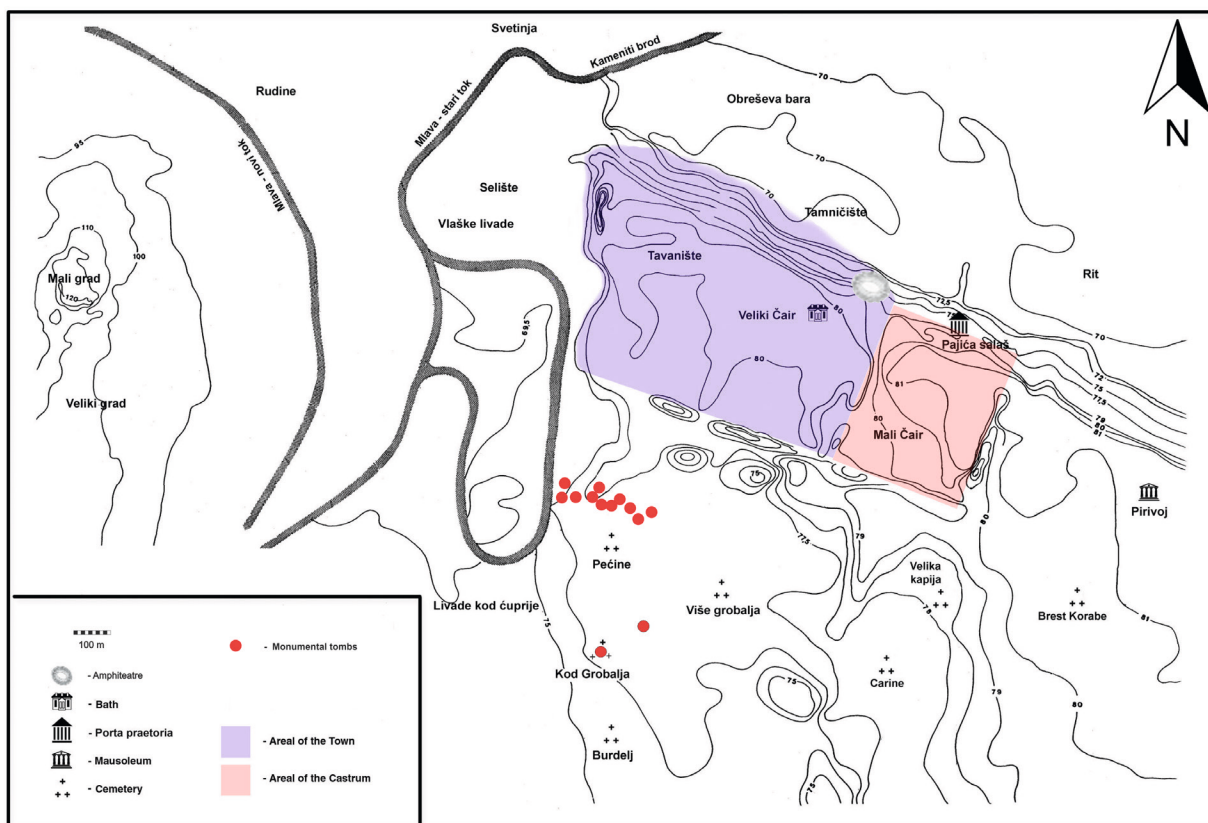


Fig. 1. General plan of Viminacium sites.

During the aforementioned rescue archaeological excavations, a total of 10,769 graves have been discovered in the southern cemeteries, 2,930 of which were cremations and 7,839 were inhumations.⁴ Out of the total number of registered graves (10,769), 2,649 contained coins as an offering, which amounts to 24.60%.⁵ Coins are significantly more often present in the graves with cremations (40.55%) than in inhumation burials (18.65%) (Fig. 2).⁶

⁴ Due to the construction of the second block of the thermal power plant, new rescue excavations are underway in the area of the southern cemeteries. Until now, ca. 650 new graves have been discovered (this number changes daily).

⁵ This percentage of coins in graves is above average in relation to analogous cemeteries: 1) Brigetio: this percentage ranges (for three cemeteries) from 19.54–29.46%, with an average of 20.16% (Găzdac-Alföldy, Găzdac 2009, 162, Fig. 1); 2) Matrica: 21.50% (Topál 1981, 95); 3) Novaesium: 14%; 4) Gerulata: 6% (for Novaesium and Gerulata Topál 1981, 95, n. 276); 5) Emona: 14.40% (Petru 1972; Plesničar-Gec 1972; Miškec 2012, 135); 6) Intercisa II: 22.30% (Teichner 2011, 61); 7) Ptuj (Poetovio) western necropolis: 18.17% (Istenič 2000, 14–259); 8) Singidunum: 12.59% (Simić 1997, 46; Pop-Lazić 2002, 19–39). In the example of the last three cemeteries, the stated percentages should be viewed with some caution, considering the shortcomings and the ambiguities of the documentation from the old excavations, which were encountered by later researchers during the publication of the cemeteries.

⁶ Of the 2,930 graves with cremated deceased, coins were registered in 1,188 graves; of the 7,839 graves of buried deceased, coins were registered in 1,461 graves.

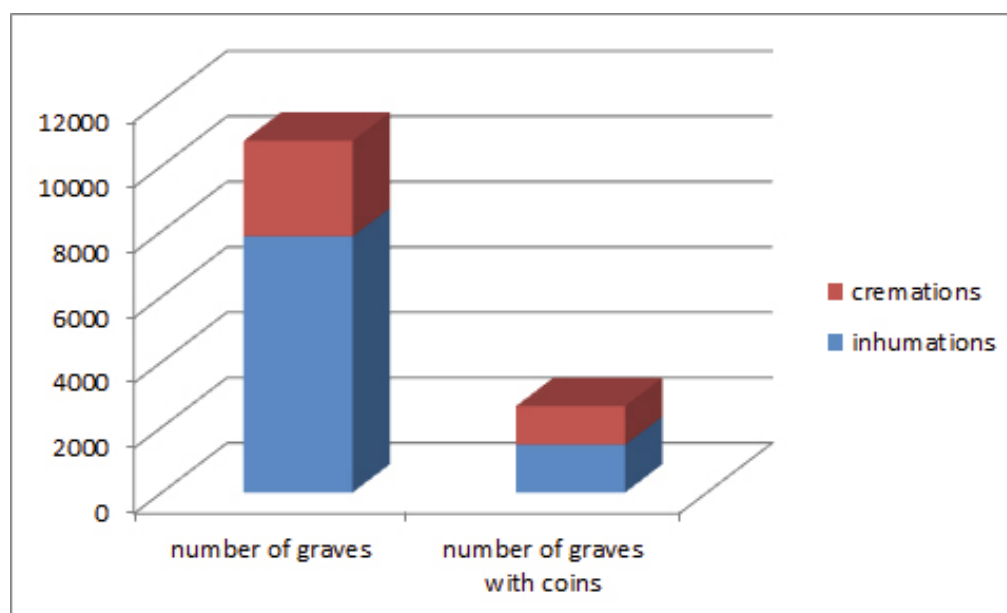


Fig. 2. Distribution of graves with coin finds.

Among all discovered graves, 1,828 child burials were registered, 1,808 of which were inhumations and 20 were cremations. Considering the established practice in the Roman period for burying the deceased children (Plin. HN 7.68; 7.72; Mikić 1987, 37–39; Milovanović 2016, 96f.), the attested cremations of children are extremely rare (**Table 1**). Despite the methodological limitations in the 1980s for anthropological analyses of the cremated remains, at least 20 were recorded in the southern Viminacium cemeteries. Actually, the development of the methodology for anthropological processing of cremation graves in our area began, more or less first with the research at Viminacium.⁷ The anthropological evaluation of cremation graves depended on several factors: the degree of the preservation and the burning of the bones, the number of bones that placed into the grave after the burning, etc. It turned out that the preservation of cremated bones in Viminacium southern cemeteries was very poor, and if we also consider the fact that the bones placed in the graves had been selected, the results of the analyses were very limited. They were limited mainly to determining gender, while the age of the individuals could be determined rarely. It was the more difficult to identify children's cremations and the age of these deceased, for which it was necessary to find preserved remains of upper or lower jaws with teeth in the grave (Mikić 1987, 37–39, Table 2–3). This would be a subject of a special study, and at this point, we will only be dealing with inhumations of children (1,808 graves) and analysing the position of the coins in relation to the deceased.

Table 1. The ratio of the total number of discovered graves and children's graves in the Viminacium southern cemetery

	Total number of graves	Number of children's graves	Ratio
Inhumations	7,839	1,808	23%
Cremations	2,930	20	0.68%
Total	10,769	1,828	17%

⁷ Although the first anthropological articles dedicated to cremation graves date back to the late 1920s, the first published analyses appeared in the former Yugoslavia only in the mid-1970s (Mikić 1987, 33).

If we take a closer look only at the children inhumations, 1,024 (i.e., 57 %) of them had offerings of various kinds. Tracing the allocation of the offering finds according to distinguished age groups,⁸ we may conclude that the presence of grave goods is much higher by the first two age groups of the youngest children (the first year of life and from the second to the fourth year), where the number of graves with offerings is almost twice as high as those without offerings (**Fig. 3**). In the next two age groups (5–9 and 10–14 years), this ratio is approximately equal, with graves including offerings still predominating slightly. In the case of the graves of the oldest children (15–19), the presence of graves without offerings is higher in relation to those with offerings.

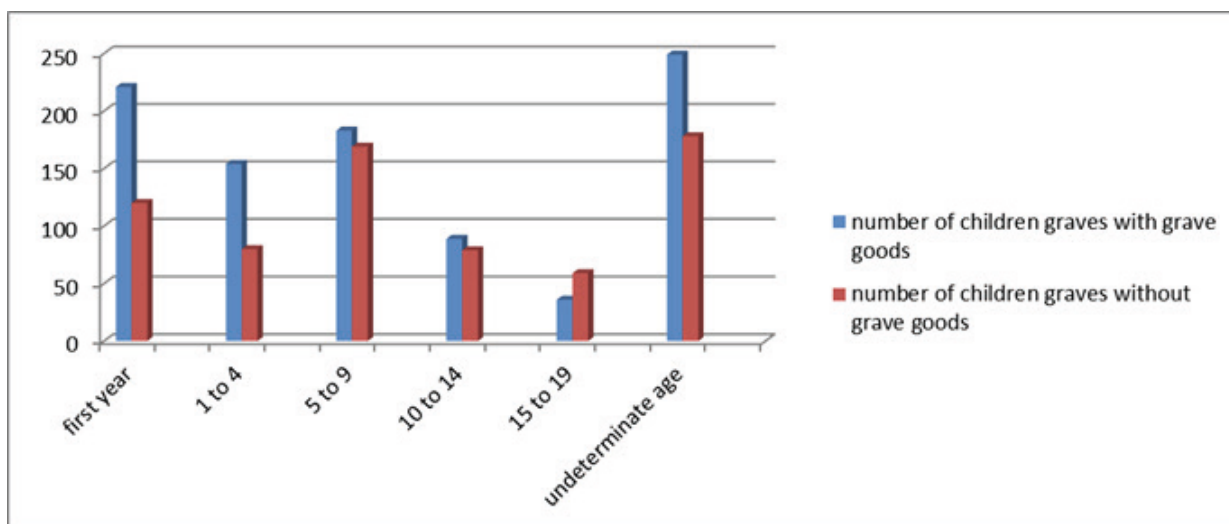


Fig. 3. Distribution of children's graves with and without grave goods according to the age groups.

Coins were registered in 531 children's graves, or 29%, which is higher than the average percentage of coin finds from graves of the southern Viminacium cemetery where that percentage is 24.60% (Vojvoda et al. 2021, 51). Despite the small number of confirmed examples of cremations of children, the percentage of coins present in them is extremely high (**Table 2**).

Table 2. The ratio of the total number of children graves and graves with coins

	Number of children's graves	Number of children's graves with coins	Ratio
Inhumations	1,808	521	28.80 %
Cremations	20	10	50 %
Total	1,828	531	29 %

⁸ According to the adopted model as the previous palaeodemographic analysis of the population of Viminacium by Hošovski (1991, 273–278), there are five age groups of deceased children distinguished by precise observations and dating starting from the first year of life to the age of 19 (see **Fig. 3**).

Coins as grave goods in child inhumation graves

Comparing the ratio of children's graves containing coins (with or without other offerings) and graves with offerings (but without coins), according to the age groups (**Fig. 4**), it is clear that coins are more often presented than other offerings within the age groups of children between the ages of two and nine. This ratio is also visible in the graves of children of undetermined age and, to a lesser extent, in the graves of children between the ages of 15 and 19. Only in the groups of the youngest children and of those between the ages of ten and 14 the ratio is different, with a slight prevalence of the graves with offerings and without coins.

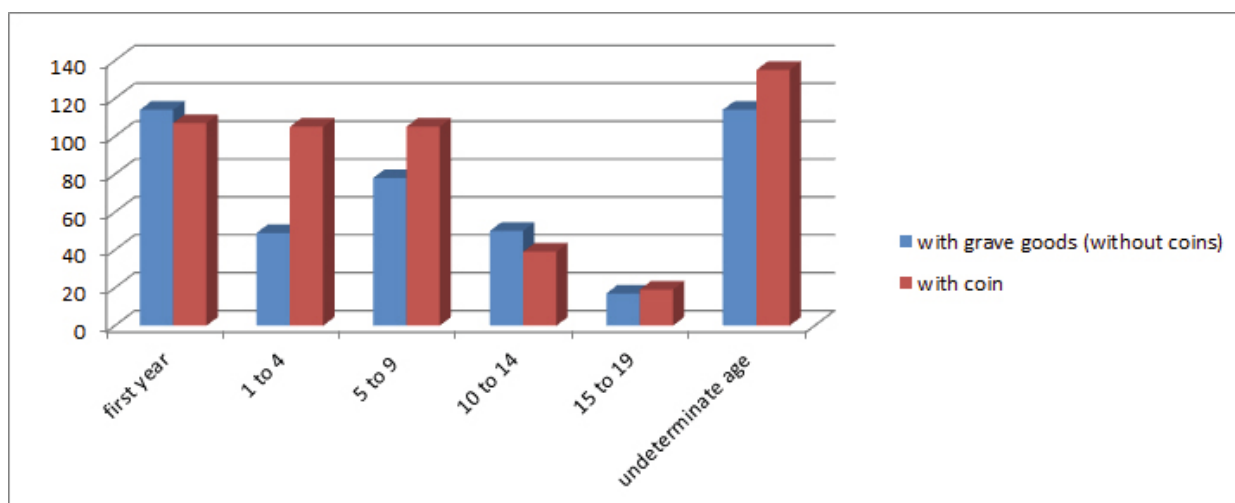


Fig. 4. Distribution of coins and other grave goods in children graves according to the age groups.

Coins were registered in 521 graves of buried children. In most cases only one coin has been contributed (in 484 graves). Two coins were found in 25 graves, and three coins in seven graves. A larger number of coins was recorded less often: four coins in two graves, while six, nine, and eleven coins were found in one grave each, all within the third age group (children who died between the ages of five and nine) (**Fig. 5**).

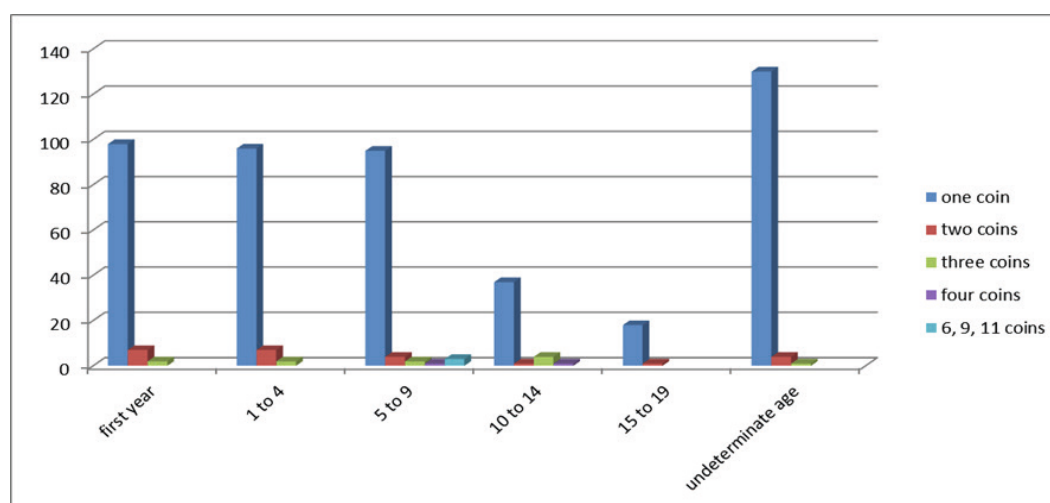


Fig. 5. Number of coins in individual graves of buried children according to age groups.

When analysing the position of coins in the graves with children inhumations, we have used the method established by Clarke (Clarke 1979, 158), and later also used by Cooke (Cooke 1998, 24–25); we have further expanded it to some extent (Vojvoda, Mrđić 2015, 25, Fig. 1; Vojvoda, Mrđić 2017, 21–22). Clarke established, namely, eight positions of coins in relation to the deceased: A – on/around the head; B – in the mouth; C – on/near the right arm and in the right hand;

D – on/near the torso; E – on/near the left arm and in the left hand; F – on/near the pelvis; G – on/near the right leg; H – on/near the left leg. As we encountered a number of cases in which coins were found between the knees or lower part of the legs of the deceased and therefore could not be precisely attributed to G or H groups, we added another position to this systematisation: G/H – between the legs/feet.

If we examine children's graves that contained one coin as an offering, in most cases the coin was placed in the mouth of the deceased (position B), i.e., 37%, excluding from the calculation those graves with an unknown position of coins (**Fig. 6**). These are followed by the graves with coins found around the head of the deceased (position A) with 27% and those with coins found in the torso area (14%), while other positions were registered in smaller percentages. We may conclude that ca. 64% of the coin finds were related to the area of the head of the deceased child (positions A and B). These results coincide with those we detected in all southern cemeteries (Vojvoda, Mrđić 2015, 24, Graph 7; Vojvoda, Mrđić 2017, 24, Graph 6). This means that the positions of coin placements in the graves of buried deceased do not differ for adults and children. In addition, we did not observe any convention related to the position of coins and the age group of deceased children, nor their connection with the chronology of coin issuing. It follows that the coins were placed most often in the aforementioned positions in all age groups and during the entire period of use of the southern necropolis.

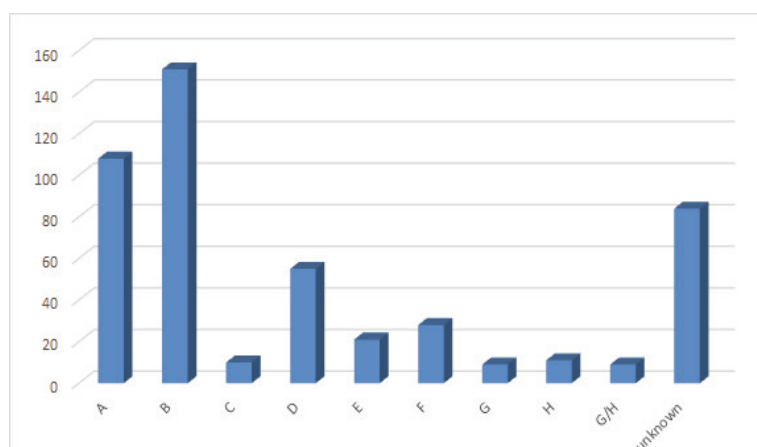


Fig. 6. The position of coins in children's graves with one coin.

In the cases with two coins (25 graves), we detected 13 position combinations (Table 3). Obviously, there is no regularity in the placement of two coins because, of all the positions, only three are repeated twice (A – A; A – G/H; F – H). In addition, coins were found in the same place in four graves (A – A [2 graves]; D – D; F – F). The only regularity we can observe is that the positions related to the head (A and B), as well as those related to the legs or feet (G, H, and G/H), appear most often. If we exclude graves with undetermined positions (nine graves) from the calculation, it follows that the first two positions occur in 56% (nine times), and the other three related to the leg area in 44% (seven times).

Table 3. Combinations of coin positions in children's graves with two coins

Two coins in graves	Total number of graves
A – A	2
A – F	1
A – G/H	2
B – E	1
B – G/H	1

C – D	1
D – D	1
D – H	1
D – G/H	1
E – F	1
E – G/H	1
F – F	1
F – H	2
unknown – unknown	9
Total graves	25

Three coins were found in seven graves of buried children (**Table 4**). Six different positions were registered, and in one example it was not possible to determine the position. In only one case all three coins were found at the same place, on the chest of the deceased (position D). Obviously, most of these coins are again related to the area of the head of the deceased (positions A and B), which appear six times in three graves.

Table 4. Combinations of coin positions in children's graves with three coins

Three coins in graves	Total number of graves
A – B – D	1
A – A – G/H	1
A – B – F	1
C – D – E	1
D – D – D	1
G – H – H	1
unknown all	1
Total graves	7

It is interesting to note that in the examples of graves with two and three coins, they appear mainly in different positions, while by the larger number of coins (four, six, nine, and eleven) they were regularly found at the same place. Four coins were registered in two graves; in the first example they were found in position C (next to the right hand), and in the second example in position G (next to the left leg). Six coins from one grave were found in position E (next to the left hand), nine coins around the head (position A), while for eleven coins from one grave it was not possible to determine the position due to poor preservation of the osteological material, but they were certainly found at the same spot. This fact may indicate a connection between the number of coins in children's graves and their function in the funeral ritual.

As shown in Table 2, 28.80% of all children inhumations contained coins as an offering. This is a significantly higher percentage compared to the cases of adults' burials (6,031), of which 940 contain coins, i.e., 15.58%.⁹ However, these calculations, which refer only to inhumations, do not provide a correct picture of the presence of coins in the graves of adults, given the fact that mostly children were buried. If we include in the calculations all the inhumations and cremations of adults (8,941), of which 2,118 had coins as an offering, it follows that coins are present in 23.70% of the graves of adult individuals. On the other hand, in 1,828 children's inhumations and

⁹ The total percentage of graves of all buried deceased in the southern cemetery that contain coins is 18.65%: the total number of inhumations is 7,839, of which 521 are children's graves with coins (6.65%) and 940 are graves of adults with coins (12%).

cremations, 531 specimens of coins were present, which is 29% (**Table 2**). Following the above, we can conclude that the ritual of placing coins into graves was adhered to by only a part of the Viminacium population (24.60%),¹⁰ but that it was more present in children's graves than in the graves of adults (29% vs. 23.70%).

Regarding the position of coins in relation to the deceased children, it is clear that one coin was usually placed in the mouth or around the head of the deceased, and then on the pelvic area. In cases of two coins in the grave, in addition to the position in the mouth or around the head, there is also the position related to the feet and legs of the deceased. When a larger number of coins (from six to eleven) was placed together, they were found in different locations in individual graves (next to the hand, next to the head). All these cases were reported within the age group of children who died between the age of five and nine years old (**Fig. 5**). The same phenomenon—for placement of a larger number of coins in the same place in relation to the deceased—was also observed in adult's burials in the southern Viminacium cemeteries (Vojvoda, Mrđić 2015, 23–24).¹¹ We believe that the observed difference in the placement of a smaller or a larger number of coins with the deceased indicates a different function in the funeral rituals.

Greek and Latin sources scattered across time, space, and genre are unanimous that coins in a grave are associated with the journey to the underworld. Despite some differences in the explanations, ancient sources mention the ritual of putting a single coin, of low value, in the mouth of the deceased immediately after death as a fee for transportation across Acheron or Styx to the underworld.¹² The custom of putting coins in the mouth of the deceased stems from the belief in the necessity of paying Charon to cross into the world of the dead. Originating in the Mediterranean cultural circle, it spread during the Roman Empire to the north-western provinces (Toynbee 1971, 49; Stevens 1991, 223). The need for the Charon's obol to be put in the mouth of the deceased, with the intention of touching the soul, is closely related to the time of placing the coin. It was placed at the time of death, when it was believed that the soul would begin its journey to the other world. This fact is crucial for understanding the custom because it makes placing coins a ritual of transition – closing the passage between the living and the dead – rather than a burial practice (Stevens 1991, 221). The coin finds in the numerous studied cemeteries throughout the empire, including Viminacium, confirm the occasional use of low-value denominations in funeral practices. There is a surprising discrepancy between the reports of the ancient sources and the realities that only a small number of graves contain coins,¹³ that more than one coin are also attested, and that they are placed on different parts of the body or around it.

In a study, S. Stevens, comparing the reports by the ancient authors about the role of the coins in the graves with archaeological evidence, came to the conclusion that the so-called "Charon's obol" is just one expression of a much broader funerary use of coins, indicating a richer context which we do not understand well (Stevens 1991, 215). This study was complemented and expanded on in a recent work by Á. Găzdac-Alföldy and C. Găzdac, who sought the iconographic parallels to literary sources with the myth of Charon theme (Găzdac-Alföldy, Găzdac 2013, 285–314). They concluded that the coins found in graves were related to the passage to the underworld in accordance with the rituals that had to be performed. In connection with that, there is the wish for a peaceful afterlife of the loved one, and a coin of small value represented a consoling element whose presence symbolised all the material wealth left behind by the deceased. In that sense, the coin could have been intended for Charon, Eak, or some other demon of the underworld according to a personal fantasy. Also, they emphasise that, although there are different explanations for the presence of coins in a grave (local customs, similar superstitions, fashion,

¹⁰ Cf. *supra* nt. 5.

¹¹ In one part of the southern necropolis, Pećine, the appearance of hoards in the graves of adult individuals is also characteristic (Vojvoda, Mrđić 2017, 26–27, 45–46, Table 9). In connection with small deposits in the inhumations of adult individuals at cemeteries in the area between the Rhine, the Moselle, and the Somme, cf. Gorecki 1975, 250, 255.

¹² For the interpretation of the mentioned sources cf. Stevens 1991, 218–223 and Thüry 1999, 17–30 with the cited literature.

¹³ Cf. *supra* nt. 5.

etc.), their role in antiquity cannot be understood without considering the influence of the myth of Charon in ancient society (Găzdac-Alföldy, Găzdac 2013, 312).

Without getting into a discussion about the myth of Charon's obol here, we agree with the claims of the aforementioned authors that coins in the grave are connected in one way or another with the journey to the other world, although with some hesitation regarding the opinion that it is necessarily associated with the myth of the ferryman. We return to the issue of coins in children's graves from the southern cemeteries of Viminacium and their significance that we have noticed. Namely, except the slightly higher general presence of coins in children's graves (29%) compared to adult graves (23.70%), differences in the positions of placement or the number of coins (from one to three coins) were not observed, and therefore their role in funeral rituals can be considered similar. A difference is observed in the placement of coin hoards with adult individuals. A maximum of 13 coins was found in children's graves, but numerous hoards in the 3rd and 4th century AD graves from the southern Viminacium cemeteries (Vojvoda, Mrđić 2017, 24, Graph 6) seem to represent a confirmation of the deceased's social status and prestige rather than a tax for Charon (Clarke 1979, 165–167; Stives 1991, 225–226). This reality is logical, considering these are adults who managed to achieve a certain status during their lifetime, unlike children who died prematurely. This, of course, includes stillborn children, dead new-borns, and juveniles, but also young people before the age of marriage or those who died "prematurely" (*mors immatura; mors ante diem fatalem*). This category of the dead (Gk. *Aōroi*) is one of those which in antiquity was considered dangerously "restless", i.e., one which correlated to those who tended to haunt the place where they had died (Cumont 1922, 128–147, 64–69; Johnston 1999, 127–199; Ogden 2002, 146–178; Alfayé Villa 2009, 181–216). Could this be the reason for the greater presence of coins in the graves of children in the Viminacium southern cemeteries, compared to those of adults? It is a question that remains open until similar analyses from other ancient cemeteries become available.

Considering that the findings of one and two coins in children's graves in the southern Viminacium cemeteries are mostly related to the position in the mouth or around the head, which is not the case with a larger number of coins (i.e., six to eleven), we can assume that in the example of the former it represented a "one-way ticket" for a journey into the realm of the dead. What is also possible is the interpretation that appears in ancient sources of the 1st century AD that "Charon's obol" symbolises the equality of people in death, further developing the idea that it is the *pars pro toto* of the deceased's well-being during their lifetime (Borza 1955, 142; Stevens 1991, 220; Găzdac-Alföldy, Găzdac 2013, 296). Two coins in the grave can be associated with the journey of the soul from this world and its rebirth in the next. This is similar to Psyche's journey to the underworld, who necessarily required two coins for Charon and two baits for Cerberus to go (death) and return (resurrection) (Găzdac-Alföldy, Găzdac 2013, 296, 299–300). In the example of more coins in a grave, we could be talking about coins intended for "expenses" on the journey to the other world (*viaticum*), such as *marsupium* or *crumina*. In all cases known thus far, these were children who passed between the ages of five and nine. It seems illogical that these examples have not been recorded in the graves of older children (who died between the ages of ten and 19), although this may be the result of a lack of anthropological analyses from the 1980s or incomplete research of the southern cemeteries, which is likely to change during new protective research of the same area.¹⁴

Regardless of the results of past research on funeral rituals during the Roman Empire, it seems that we will never fully understand them. However, with a detailed analysis of the grave unities from as many cemeteries as possible throughout the former empire, we can certainly get closer to the truth. The largest part of the population of Viminacium practised the same methods of burial (cremation and inhumation, with a gradual transition from one to another type of burial). The offerings in these graves show a great similarity in character and quality, which indicates a more or less homogeneous population in terms of economic and social status, as well as the level of Romanisation. In terms of the discussed coins as funeral gifts, Viminacium has a leading

¹⁴ Cf. *supra* nt. 4.

position compared to similar sites, as mentioned earlier,¹⁵ although, on the other hand, the ritual is in disagreement with the testimonies of ancient sources. In any case, the Viminacium cemeteries, with the available large database, certainly will be in the future an inexhaustible source for resolving numerous open questions regarding ancient funeral rites.

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¹⁵ Cf. *supra* nt. 5.

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