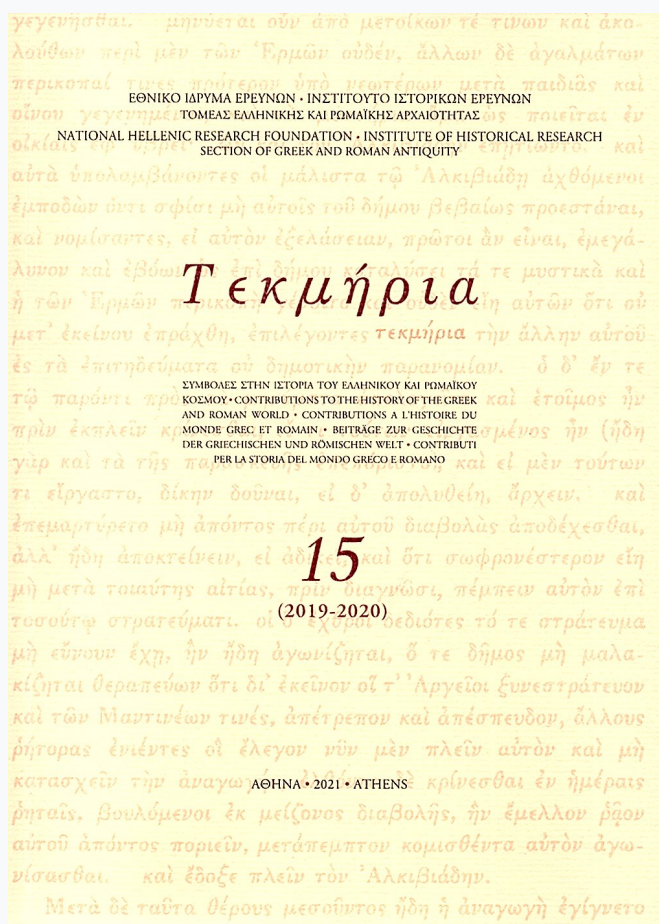


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### A New Look at an Inscribed Ceramic Medallion with Gladiators (Equites) from the Region of Parthicopolis in the Roman Province of Macedonia

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EMIL NANKOV

## A New Look at an Inscribed Ceramic Medallion with Gladiators (*Equites*) from the Region of Parthicopolis in the Roman Province of Macedonia\*

### Introduction

The ceramic medallion in question (fig. 1a-c) was briefly announced by L. Vagalinski in 2005 and eventually incorporated in his book on sport and public entertainment in Hellenistic and Roman Thrace.<sup>1</sup> Following L. Robert's observations on a gladiatorial marble relief from Ephesus published in 1950,<sup>2</sup> the gladiators on the Palat medallion were labeled generically as "*gladiatores tunicati*"<sup>3</sup> without drawing on subsequent scholarship, which, by 1967, had already replaced the aforementioned *terminus technicus* with that of *equites* or ἵππεῖς known from literary sources and epigraphic data.<sup>4</sup> The ideas offered for the medallion's function ranged from it being a souvenir to being an item used for domestic decoration. Commenting on its significance and without linking it to a particular *munus*, Vagalinski concluded that the medallion was indicative of the popularity of gladiatorial entertainment in the region during the second and third centuries AD.<sup>5</sup> A more thorough study based on autopsy was undertaken by the author in 2015.<sup>6</sup> The present publication presents

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\* I am indebted to Denver Graninger and the anonymous reviewers for the suggested bibliography and the useful comments on the earlier drafts of this article.

1. Vagalinski 2005, 89-90, fig. 1. Vagalinski 2009, 119 cat. no. 121 (=SEG 59, 715) republished essentially the same text without expanding on his observations published in 2005.

2. Robert 1950, 68-69 no. 338, pl. XXVII. Cf. Vagalinski 2005; Vagalinski 2009.

3. Vagalinski 2005.

4. Coarelli 1966, 87-88; Berger-Haas 1967; Carter 1999, 96 n. 118; Junkelmann 2000a, 123-124.

5. Vagalinski 2005, 90.

6. I would like to thank Hristina Tsoneva, the former Director of the Regional Museum of History in Blagoevgrad, for granting me permission to examine and photograph the medallion in November 2015.

comprehensive photo and graphic documentation, which allow a more compelling iconographic analysis of the gladiators as *equites*, as well as a discussion of a previously unnoticed Greek inscription (fig. 1c).

### Discovery

The ceramic medallion is a chance find from an area around the village of Palat, situated on the right bank of the Strymon River, ca. 8 km northwest of the town of Sandanski in southwest Bulgaria (fig. 2). It was brought to the Regional Museum of History-Blagoevgrad in 1963 (now part of the museum's permanent exhibition) together with five ceramic theatrical masks, published recently in exhibition catalogues.<sup>7</sup> The medallion and the masks were discovered during agricultural work at a site located in the Srednata niva, situated 700-800 m northeast of the village of Palat.<sup>8</sup> At this point, however, it is impossible to establish whether the objects, including the ceramic medallion, should be associated with the settlement or the necropolis at Srednata niva. What is significant is that the cluster of Roman settlements near the village of Palat

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7. Fol et al. (eds.) 2004, cat. no. 306a-d; Meijden, van der (ed.) 2007, cat. nos. 171-172. The masks from Palat compare closely with nearly identical ceramic theatrical masks discovered in a terracotta workshop at the nearby city of Heraclea Sintica and dated to the 3rd cent. AD: Cholakov 2008, 56 cat. nos. 1, 7-13; Minchev 2008, 16 cat. nos. 10-12. In addition, ceramic molds of a human bust and a mask of a satyr (one with a *papula* inside on top of the forehead) for the manufacture of medallions are known from Heraclea Sintica (d. 0.164 m; d. 0.15 m): Cholakov 2008, cat. nos. 47-48. And so are two medallions (one with two holes for attachment to a wall) with representations of human busts (d. 0.15-0.155 m): Cholakov 2008, cat. nos. 39, 41. That the masks, including the ceramic medallion from Palat, were most probably manufactured at the nearby Heraclea Sintica is suggestive of a well-organized local industry in this city intended to meet not only its own citizens' demand for such items, but also that of its neighboring communities: Vagalinski 2005, 89; Cholakov 2008, 56, 59; Cholakov 2015, 130.

8. Kulov 2005, 55; Garbov 2017, site no. 1032. Allegedly, the site is frequented by local looters who have destroyed part of the fortified compound, as well as numerous graves from the adjacent necropolis: Bozhkova, Delev 2009, 72, figs. 7-8; cf. Garbov 2017, site no. 1062. Perhaps it was a part of another substantial settlement in the area called Padarkata, located ca. 1 km northeast of the village: Garbov 2017, site nos. 1041-1042.

may have belonged to the territory of Parthicopolis (mod. Sandanski), which fell under the jurisdiction of *Macedonia Prima*.<sup>9</sup>

### Description and iconography

The medallion consists of two fragments (currently stored in the RMH-Blaogoevgrad - Inv. nos. 1.2.-154<sub>1</sub> and 1.2.-154<sub>2</sub>), with two additional ones painted differently due to modern restoration (**fig. 1a**). The preserved dimensions are: diameter 0.18 m; thickness of field 0.004 m; thickness of relief figures 0.01 m. It is made of buff clay, with inclusions of mica (20%), organic material (1%), chamotte (2%) and quartz (1%). On the back side there are multiple depressions made by fingerprint impressions (**fig. 1a**). These are left from pressing the clay into the mold by the potter. The frontal side is covered with yellow-greenish to olive-brown glaze applied by a brush. The relief figures are covered with light olive-brown glaze to distinguish them from the pictorial field which employs a darker olive-brown one. On the back side some traces of glazed spillage are clearly visible after the medallion was dipped into it before firing. In several places along the edge there are small pebbles attached to the glaze.

The fragmentary condition of the medallion makes its description a challenging task (**fig. 1a-c**). The main scene features a combat between two gladiators, while a smaller scene in the middle of the two combatants telescopes to the final moment of the gladiatorial encounter.<sup>10</sup> In the latter scene, one of the gladiators finishes off with a sword his opponent, who at this point is lying helplessly on the ground with a sword in his outstretched right arm and a shield beside him. Despite the fact that from the main scene only the lower legs of the left figure are preserved, while the right figure's head and right arm are missing, one may supply the lost details by utilizing the iconographic potential of the smaller internal scene.

The gladiators depicted can be identified as *equites* through their pairing, clothing, and weapons (*armatura*). The figures are facing each other wearing identical brimmed helmets (clearly seen in the smaller scene) and sleeveless tunics belted at the waist, while their lower legs are wrapped instead of being protected by greaves. They are armed with round shields (*parmae equestris*) and short swords (*gladii*). On the back of the better preserved gladiator on the right, a vertical termination of an object is clearly noticeable, the identification of

9. Zannis 2014, 112-115; Garbov 2017, 394-395, fig. 3.

10. Vagalinski 2005, 89.

which remains a puzzle.<sup>11</sup> The fact that both figures are dressed and armed in the same manner is significant, for only an *eques* would always engage with an opponent of the same category.<sup>12</sup>

According to Isidore of Seville,<sup>13</sup> who wrote in the seventh century AD, the *equites* were the first to compete during the gladiatorial games.<sup>14</sup> It took a long time for scholars to connect Isidore's description of *equites* with their extant imagery, which circulated throughout the Roman empire predominantly through decoration on floor mosaics, grave reliefs and ceramic lamps.<sup>15</sup> The first-century AD gladiatorial relief on the tomb of C. Lusius Storax at *Teate Marrucinorum* (Chieti) chronicles the different stages of the involvement of *equites* in the games.<sup>16</sup> After entering the arena with the procession (*pompa*) and, when their horses and weapons were brought in by assistants, the *equites* would fight on white horses, wearing golden feathered helmets and armed with shields, lances, and swords. A gladiatorial relief from near Pompeii's Porta Stabia, traditionally associated with the grave monument of A. Umbricius

11. The possibility that it represents the lowest part of the helmet's plume is unlikely because *equites* usually wore two decorative feathers attached onto their helmets, but without a crest and central plume: Junkelmann 2000b, 47-48.

12. Junkelmann 2000a, 123-124, figs. 192-195; Junkelmann 2000b, 37, 47-48, figs. 34-36; Dunkle 2013, 387.

13. Isid. *Etym.* 18.53: *De ludo equestri. Genera gladiatorum plura, quorum primus ludus equestrium. Duo enim equites praecedentibus prius signis militaribus, unus a parte orientis, alter ab occidentis procedebant in equis albis cum aureis galeis minoribus et habilioribus armis; sicque atroci perseverantia pro virtute sua iniebant pugnam, dimicantes quousque alter in alterius morte prosiliret, ut haberet qui caderet casum, gloriam qui perimeret.* (There are several kinds of gladiatorial games, of which the first is the equestrian game. In it, after military standards had first entered, two horsemen would come out, one from the east side and the other from the west, on white horses, bearing small gilded helmets and light weapons. In this way, with fierce perseverance, they would bravely enter combat, fighting until one of them should spring forward upon the death of the other, so that the one who fell would have defeat, the one who slew, glory... Trans. Barney et al. 2006, 370).

14. Ville 1981, 395, 399-400.

15. Robert 1946, 132-136; Coarelli 1966, 87-88; Berger-Haas 1967; Grant 1967, 61-62; Junkelmann 2000a, 123; Junkelmann 2000b, 48; Flecker 2015, 62 n. 320.

16. Coarelli 1966, 87-88; Papini 2004, 138-142, figs. 57-62; cf. Junkelmann 2000b, 48, fig. 34; Flecker 2015, 205-209 cat. no. A27.

Scaurus, illustrates the episode as well; there the *equites* are shown fighting on horseback with lances.<sup>17</sup> When fighting on the ground, however, they would use only their short swords and round shields.<sup>18</sup> This particular stage of their engagement entered the visual lexicon of artists working in different media, who would more often choose to depict them dismounted and fighting on foot. Ultimately, this was the reason why for a long time the identification of *equites* as a separate gladiator type had gone unrecognized.<sup>19</sup> In the Imperial period, the iconographic type depicting gladiatorial combat of *equites* fighting on foot became widespread in the western Roman provinces as part of the decoration of villas, baths, and amphitheaters. For example, *equites* figure prominently on floor mosaics at Augsburg, Augusta Raurica, Bad Kreuznach, Reims, and Zliten as part of larger visual narratives, or as a stand-alone image, *emblemata*.<sup>20</sup>

The best parallel for our iconographic analysis is a Late Roman mosaic, found in the seventeenth century on the *Via Appia* outside Rome in the property of “Orto del Carciofolo”, and now kept in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid with no. 3601.<sup>21</sup> The combat between two *equites* is shown in two registers (fig. 3); the lower one depicts the engagement between *Martens* and *Habiles*, flanked on either side by two referees. The demise of *Martens*, who is being killed by *Habiles*, can be seen on the upper register.<sup>22</sup> On our medallion, the two stages of the combat described above are compressed

17. Hönle, Henze 1981, 44, figs. 20-21; Sabbatini Tumolesi 1980, 63-66, pl. III, figs. 1-2. Kockel 1983, 73-85 and Flecker 2015, 242-244 cat. no. A56, have opted for an identification of Festus Ampliatus as the owner of the tomb, showing that the inscription of A. Umbricius Scaurus did not belong to it. For an *equus* on horseback depicted on a ceramic lamp dated to the 1st cent. AD, see Dejean 2011, 34 cat. nos. M665, L946, M450, 57-58 cat. nos. L476, L216, L9.

18. Galen (13. 601) described the wound on the lower thigh of an *equus* as deep and gashing; Mattern 2013, 93-94 n. 23.

19. Robert 1946, 132-137; Berger-Haas 1967.

20. Parlasca 1959, 101-102, pl. 97; Papini 2004, 56-63, figs. 17-21, 138-143, figs. 57-62; Junkelmann 2000b, figs. 34-35; Stern 1957, 33-35, figs. XI-XIV; Hönle, Henze 1981, 34, fig. 10c.

21. Papini 2004, 165-170, figs. 75-76, with references; for the inscriptions, see *ILS* 5140.

22. Dunbabin 1978, 70 n. 26, 214 n. 78; Brown 1992, 204-205, fig. 9.10; Junkelmann 2000a, 136, fig. 215; Dunkle 2013, 99-100.

into a single pictorial frame, while the referees are omitted. Unlike the mosaic, where the two different stages develop in two different registers, on the medallion the fight of the two gladiators is made the principal and dominant theme: it is clearly the one chosen to be advertised and/or promoted (by the manufacturer, following the consumers'/viewers' likings), while the outcome of the combat, with the eventual victory of one of the two combatants and the demise of the other, is emphatically subordinated to near caricature. Of two different points in time, one is subordinated to the other in a "babushka" pictorial effect, that is, in relevant accordance with the actual development of events, the eye is captured by the scene of the engagement and only then "reads" the scene depicting the final call of the battle.<sup>23</sup>

### Inscription

Autopsy established the presence of a Greek inscription, which has so far escaped attention, crowded in the empty space beneath the gladiators (**fig. 1c**).<sup>24</sup> The ground line, on which the human figures stand, serves as a natural border between the iconography and the text, which follows a slightly curved line some 0.08 m long. It is significant that the letters are rendered in relief rather than being scratched with an instrument after firing (*post cocturam*). They are slightly irregular and unevenly arranged around the frame. Apparently they were not created by a stamp. This would support the idea that (a) the medallion was moldmade and (b) the inscription was applied by hand in a retrograde fashion onto the mold before firing (*ante cocturam*). This would further imply that the lettering was meant from the outset to accompany the iconography, and, thus, they should both be treated as contemporary. Height of letters: 0.007-0.009 m.

Text: C Ω T H Π I Δ A C A I A C

Transcription: Σωτηρίδας Αἶας

23. For the elaboration on this point I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer.

24. I first noticed the presence of inscribed letters during a visit to the Regional Museum of History in Blagoevgrad in September 2013. The reading of the inscription was later confirmed by Nicolay Sharankov (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"), who accompanied me during my work at the museum in November 2015.



The lunate *sigmas* and the *omega* are consistent with a date in the third century AD.<sup>25</sup> Due especially to their miniscule size, they merely provide a general indication for the chronology. The names *Soteridas* and *Aias/Ajax* seem to correspond to the gladiators (*equites*) depicted above. *Soteridas* is a Greek name, with the greatest number of examples attested in Laconia.<sup>26</sup> A gladiator named *Aias*,<sup>27</sup> documented in an epigram from Thasos, perished not in combat but died of natural causes.<sup>28</sup> Coincidentally, another inscription from Thasos mentions two *tirones*, belonging to Archeleos' *familia* of gladiators, who fought as *ἱππεῖς* or *equites*.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, an *eques* named *Aiax* is depicted in a fight with another *eques*, *Aprius*, on a floor mosaic in a bath complex at Augsburg dated to the second or third century AD.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, these names are professional pseudonyms or "stage names".<sup>31</sup> Gladiators would often choose or acquire such names on account of physical traits, exceptional abilities, or by association with characters from mythology and epic poetry.<sup>32</sup> It was not uncommon for gladiators to travel and fight in different places, but it cannot be assumed that the artistic representations of Ajax from Palat, Thasos and Augsburg refer to the same gladiator,<sup>33</sup> especially when one considers that all three examples are vaguely dated.

25. Woodhead 1992, 64; McLean 2002, 41. Local epigraphic examples, using lunate *sigmas* and *omegas* similar to these of the inscribed medallion, as e.g. a funerary inscription of the end of the 2nd or early 3rd cent. AD, possibly from Heraclea Sintica (Sharankov 2016, 66 no. 10, fig. 8), might lower the chronological limit of the gladiators' inscription.

26. LGPN IIIA, s.v. Σωτηρίδης.

27. For attestations of this name, see LGPN I, II, IIIA, IIIB, IV, VA, VB, VC, s.v. Αἴας.

28. Robert 1971, 113-114 no. 55, 293.

29. Bernard, Salviat 1962, 607-608 no. 22. Another *ἱππεύς* is recorded in a gladiatorial inscription of the 2nd cent. AD from Claudiopolis in Bithynia: SEG 39, 1339. However, it remains uncertain whether *ἱπποδιώκτης*, a term attested in inscriptions from Sardis and Smyrna, should be equated with *eques*, cf. Robert 1971, 67 nos. 137, 246 n. 3; Carter 1999, 96 n. 118.

30. Parlasca 1959, 101-102 no. 12, pl. 97; for the date, see Papini 2004, 87 n. 195 with bibliography; for the inscription, see CIL III 5835a.

31. Robert 1971, 299; Gregori 2011.

32. Ducros 2018, 352 nn. 69-71.

33. Robert 1971, 295-296; Carter 1999, 82-83.



### Function and comparanda

Gladiatorial scenes with inscribed names depicted on various media, including ceramic medallions, are quite common, especially in the western provinces of the Roman empire. The medallion from Palat has been compared to a ceramic mold (diam. 0.152 m) from Savaria in Pannonia Superior dated to the third century AD, with the name of the winning gladiator inscribed in a retrograde fashion (**fig. 4**).<sup>34</sup> Ceramic medallions were mass-produced in molds and found at various sites in Gaul. They are in their majority of smaller dimensions (0.07-0.1 m) and were used as appliqué for ceramic vessels.<sup>35</sup> Larger examples (0.1-0.18 m) have holes on top for attachment to a wall, and probably served as decorative pieces in domestic space. The second or third century AD ceramic medallion from Cavillargues (Gard), which is the one with the largest diameter (0.167 m) and depicts the gladiatorial fight between Xantus and Eros, was used as a cover for an urn (**fig. 5**).<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Vagalinski adduced, as comparanda for our example, two ceramic medallions for appliqué pottery (imported from Gaul) found in a grave near the Roman castellum at Barboși, Moldova, and dated to second-third centuries AD.<sup>37</sup> The larger dimensions of the Palat medallion may suggest that by design it was intended to be hung on a wall in the privacy of a domestic residence. The possibility of funerary use should not be excluded, however. In any case, both hypotheses lack conclusive evidence because of the medallion's fragmentary condition and uncertain provenance.

Most frequently, ceramic medallions of smaller dimensions (0.06-0.1 m) are identified with the so-called *crustula* or durable imitations of pastry, i.e. round-shaped cakes, which were distributed among participants during celebrations related to the imperial cult, religious festivals, or public games.<sup>38</sup> Two types of molds were involved in the manufacturing process: one with scenes and lettering in negative to produce the actual cakes (*matrices*), and clay models in relief to make other molds (*patrices*) or ceramic renditions of pastry.<sup>39</sup>

34. Vujović 2011, 201 n. 5; cf. Alföldi 1938, 338 no. 46, pl. LXVIII/2 a, b.

35. Wuilleumier, Audin 1952, nos. 111-116, 194-197, 210-213, 290-292; Nuțu, Paraschiv 2013, 130-132.

36. Wuilleumier, Audin 1952, 32-33 no. 34, pl. II; Junkelmann 2000a, fig. 213.

37. Vagalinski 2005, 90; cf. Sanie 1981, 104-108, pls. 22/6-7, 22bis/2, 5.

38. Alföldi 1938; Brukner 1997.

39. Migotti 2000; Leleković 2004; Vujović 2011.

The iconography associated with *crustula* had to do with images representing the imperial family and/or various gods, such as Athena, Tyche, Isis and Serapis, and Hermes.<sup>40</sup> Another thematic circle of iconographic types revolves around representations of gladiatorial combats or of Nemesis, who is closely associated with gladiators and public spectacles in the amphitheaters.<sup>41</sup>

### Public entertainment at Parthicopolis

The ceramic medallion assumes further socio-political significance when examined alongside other epigraphic and archaeological data from Parthicopolis related to Roman spectacles. For example, a marble relief plaque with a poster invitation for *venationes* proves that wild beast hunts were held at the nearby Parthicopolis during the reign of Severus Alexander.<sup>42</sup> The plaque, reused later in the baptistery of a Christian basilica of fifth-sixth century AD and now kept in the Sandanski Museum, contains a partially preserved inscription as well as several images of *venatores*, with their names prominently displayed. Among the animals shown are a bear and a bull.<sup>43</sup> The subject of *venator* fighting a bear was reproduced in other media in the Middle Strymon region, as is evident from two ceramic lamps found in Parthicopolis and Heraclea Sintica.<sup>44</sup>

Recent rescue excavations at Parthicopolis have partially exposed architectural remains of what has been interpreted as a theater.<sup>45</sup> According to the excavator, this theater was subsequently remodeled in order to accommodate gladiatorial events<sup>46</sup> – a practice commonly attested at several theaters in the Roman province of Macedonia<sup>47</sup> and elsewhere in the eastern provinces.<sup>48</sup> So far, there are no coins or reliable stratigraphic data for the chronology, which

40. Kalcev 1991, 247, figs. 117–118; Cociş, Ruscu 1995; Ivanovski 2001.

41. Gavrilović 2011, fig. 1; Ducros 2018, 345–346.

42. Vagalinski 2009, 109 cat. no. 104; SEG 59, 754.

43. Gerasimova 2010, 197–201; SEG 60, 749; BullÉpigr 2012, 293.

44. Popova 2016, 223, fig. 2; Vagalinski 2009, no. 139; Bozhinova 2015, 251.

45. Petrova 2016, 190–197, figs. 2–9.

46. Petrova 2016, 198.

47. The theaters at Thasos, Philippi, Stobi and Heraclea Lyncestis have yielded clear evidence for architectural remodeling in order to accommodate gladiatorial events during the Roman period. For a recent survey, see Di Napoli 2018 *passim*, with further bibliography.

48. Dodge 2009, 40–41.

is exclusively associated with the historical date of the aforementioned poster invitation.<sup>49</sup> While intriguing, this hypothesis is built on rather tenuous evidence requiring further substantiation.

The existence of public spectacles in the Roman province of Macedonia is predominantly attested in funerary reliefs of gladiators. A substantial number of inscriptions and epigrams testify to the popularity of *munera* in cities like Thessaloniki, Philippi, Dion, Edessa and Amphipolis.<sup>50</sup> Epigraphic evidence reveals the existence of gladiatorial schools established in Beroia<sup>51</sup> and on Thasos.<sup>52</sup> Poster invitations, such as those from Parthicopolis and Thessaloniki, offer iconographic details regarding variety of animals preferred during *venationes* of the third century AD.<sup>53</sup> Evidence for the existence of different gladiator types, and particularly that of *equites*, is currently available from Thasos<sup>54</sup> and now from the territory of Parthicopolis (Palat).

In the eastern provinces, *munera* were invariably linked to the imperial cult and local elites would normally defray the cost.<sup>55</sup> Being a Roman foundation promulgated during the late reign of Trajan or early reign of Hadrian (AD 117-119), Parthicopolis obtained much of its subsequent standing via frequent appeals to the imperial chancery.<sup>56</sup> Apart from the poster invitation, the establishment of the imperial cult in the town is attested in two dedications set up by eminent citizens of Parthicopolis who served as high priests of the *Augusti*.<sup>57</sup> On other occasions, such as imperial visits, civic authorities felt obliged to appeal to emperors by organizing periodic public spectacles in their honor, in which *munera* and *venationes* played an essential part. In fact, these events were meant to showcase the city's allegiance in expectation of imperial benevolence.

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49. Petrova 2016, 196-197.

50. Adam-Veleni 2012, 307-308; Ducros 2018, 343-344; Nigdelis, Tzelepidou 2015-2016.

51. Allamani-Souri 1987; Nigdelis, Stefani 2000; Koukouvou 2006.

52. Ducros 2018, 343 n. 8.

53. Gerasimova 2010; Adam-Veleni 2012.

54. Robert 1971, 113-114, 293 no. 55; Bernard, Salviat 1962, 607-608 no. 22.

55. Mann 2009, 279-281; Streinu 2018.

56. Sharankov 2016, 58-61.

57. Gerasimova 2010, 195-196, fr. V; cf. *IGBulg* IV 2267; *IGBulg* V 5896; cf. Sharankov 2017, 34 n. 52.

The ceramic medallion from Palat is most probably a local product, as suggested by the discovery of workshop installations for the manufacture of similar ceramic artifacts in the neighboring city of Heraclea Sintica.<sup>58</sup> It bears testimony, therefore, to the Roman cultural influence within the territory of Parthicopolis that was channeled through the presence of military personnel and settled veterans.<sup>59</sup> Circumstantial evidence –such as the poster invitation from Parthicopolis dated in the reign of Severus Alexander (AD 222-235) and the inscribed ceramic molds and medallions from e.g. Savaria, Barboși and Cavillargues– combined with the letter forms of the present medallion’s inscription, could point to a date in the first half of the third century AD. The iconography, which is inspired by imagery current in the western provinces, indicates that the *equites*’ role in the games was duly commemorated through the medium of ceramic medallions along the Thracian frontier as well. The presence of captions on such objects personified the gladiators in the eyes of the consumer, thereby extracting them from the anonymity of their external appearances as *equites*, *murmillones*, *Thraeces*, *retiarii*, etc.<sup>60</sup> It seems that in the area of Parthicopolis, as in the western part of the Empire, there existed a commercial enterprise of depicting famous gladiators in different media in order to meet popular demand. This lucrative enterprise for marketing minor objects with gladiatorial themes ultimately provides evidence for a public fascination with staged entertainments also in this part of the Roman world.

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58. See n. 7.

59. For a brief discussion of the epigraphic evidence, see Zannis 2017, 97-98.

60. Buonopane 2016, 503-508.

### Summary

This paper reconsiders a ceramic medallion found near the village of Palat on the right bank of the Strymon River, ca. 8 km northwest of the town of Sandanski in southwest Bulgaria. The cluster of Roman settlements near the village of Palat may have belonged to the territory of Parthicopolis (mod. Sandanski), which fell under the jurisdiction of *Macedonia Prima*. The medallion illustrates a gladiatorial combat between two *equites*, who are identifiable through their pairing, clothing and weapons. Autopsy established the presence of a Greek inscription, which had so far escaped attention. The recorded names, Σωτηρίδας and Αἶας, seem to correspond to the *equites* depicted. Gladiatorial scenes with inscribed names are quite commonly represented on various media, including ceramic medallions, especially in the western provinces of the Roman empire. Ceramic medallions, serving a range of functions, were mass-produced in molds. The larger dimensions of our example, most probably a product of a local workshop, could be intended to be hung on a wall in the privacy of a domestic residence, although the possibility for funerary use cannot be excluded. This artifact from Palat, inspired by imagery current in the western provinces of the Roman empire, bears testimony to Roman cultural influence in the territory of Parthicopolis in the first half of the third century AD. At the same time, it offers hitherto overlooked iconographic indications that the *equites*' role in the games was commemorated through the medium of ceramic medallions along the Thracian frontier, as it was in the western provinces of the Roman empire.

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Fig. 1. Ceramic medallion from the village of Palat. Regional Museum of History-Blagoevgrad, inv. nos. 1.2.-154<sub>1</sub>, 1.2.-154<sub>2</sub>: (a) obverse and reverse; (b) graphic reconstruction; (c) inscription (© Regional Museum of History-Blagoevgrad, photos and drawings by Emil Nankov).

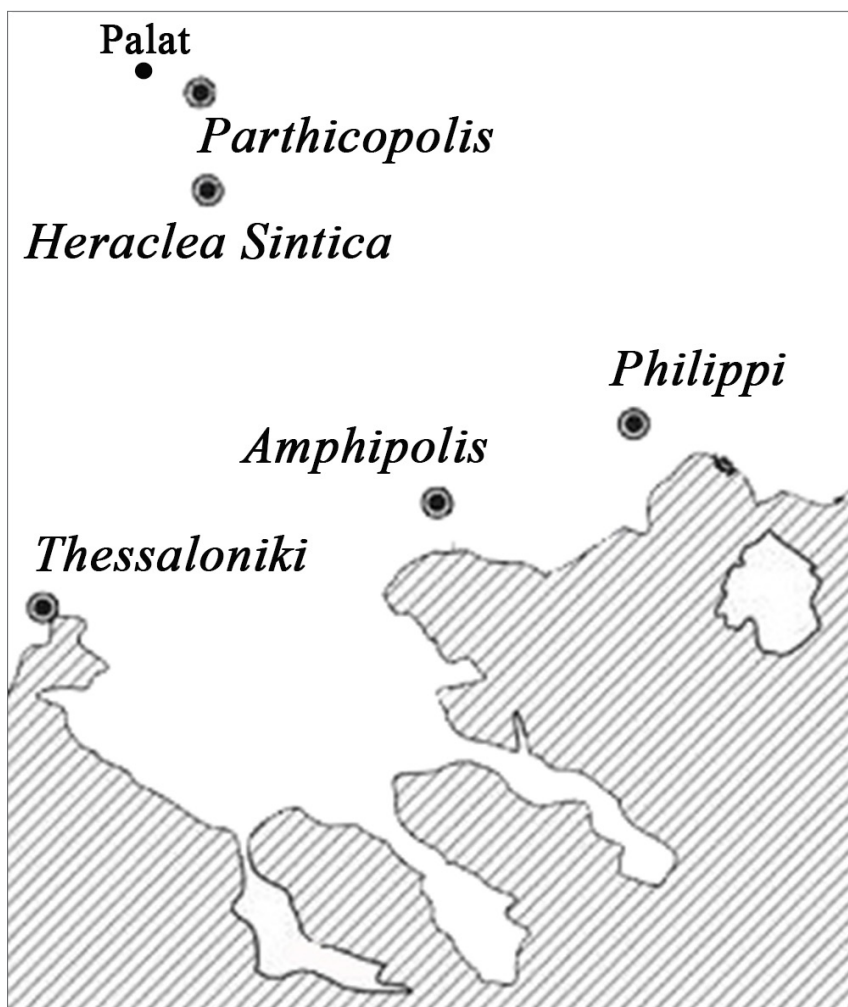


Fig. 2. Location of the ceramic medallion's findspot.

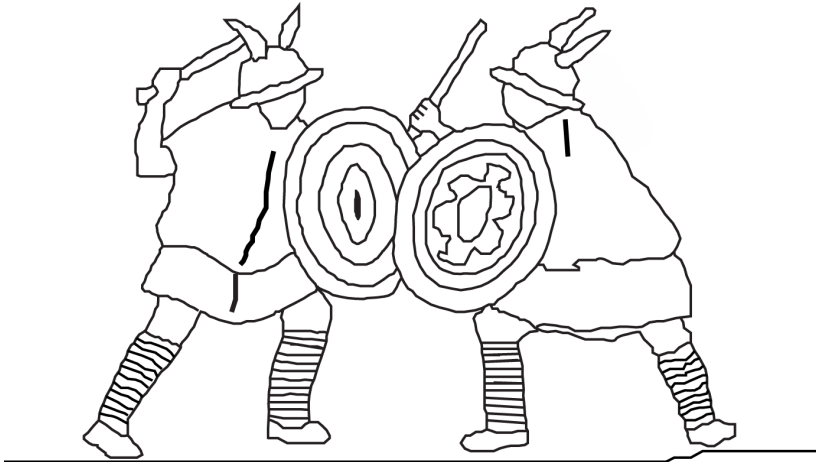


Fig. 3. Detail of floor mosaic from *Via Appia* at “Orto del Carciofolo”, Rome. National Archaeological Museum of Madrid, no. 3601 (after Ensoli, *La Rocca* 2000, 444 no. 30; drawing by author).





Fig. 4. Ceramic mold with gladiatorial scene from Savaria, Pannonia (after Alföldi 1938, no. 46, pl. LXVIII/2a).



Fig. 5. Ceramic medallion with gladiatorial scene from Cavillargues, Gaul (after Wuilleumier, Audin 1952, no. 34, pl. II).



