A significant place among the rich archaeological finds from the Viminacium necropoleis is held by shells of marine molluscs (Bivalvia) and snails (Gastropoda), which are more numerous than those of freshwater species. This archaeological material represents a valuable testimony not only to both the day-to-day and spiritual life of the population of Viminacium, but to the city’s dynamic intercultural connections locally and further afield. Individually or in larger numbers, the shells cover a broad chronological range in various funerary forms and contexts. Generally, they are more frequent in the graves of women and children, which is a characteristic shared with necropoleis in other provinces.

The funerary role of the shells has been interpreted in diverse ways, e.g. that they were food remains, personal effects of the deceased, receptacles for cosmetics or jewellery, status symbols, or that they carried a more complex, cultic meaning. The discoveries of large shells of exquisite beauty (Pinctada, Tridacna squamosa and T. maxima, Aspatharia rubens, Cypraea annulus, Cypraea tigris, Tectus dentatus and Nerita) in settlements, residential buildings, graves and sanctuaries in the Mediterranean (Cyprus) and the Middle East (Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Israel) confirm their cosmetic or cultic function.

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1 In the course of my work on this subject, I was greatly assisted by Dr David S. Reese of The Field Museum, Chicago, and Prof. Demetrios Michaelides of the University of Cyprus, to both of whom I am happy to extend my gratitude here.


4 Jackson 1917: 123–140; Reese 1988: 35–41, Fig. 1; Kovács 2008: 9–18; Michaelides 1995: 212; Stroszeck 2012: 67–71; Cnacuh-Byphn 2015b: 272, 273.
An important contribution to the interpretation of the symbolism of shells in Roman graves has been made by Prof. A. Jovanović, who is of the opinion that they are reduced manifestations of essential sacral contents related to the Funerary Venus (Venus Funeraria).6 Functional interpretations are significantly harder and more complex in the case of edible clams and snails whose shells are aesthetically prominent, e.g. Charonia sequenzae, Triton and Pecten jacobaeus.7 A contribution to this subject has been made by analyses of a shell from a Viminacium grave, which, by its function as well as its symbolic potential and beauty, represents a rarity in the territory of Serbia. It is a find of a valve of a seashell, field inventory number C-11209 (03/3919), unearthed at the site of Pecine in 1985, in a layered grave with cremated remains (G1-1026).8 The grave was, for the most part, destroyed by subsequent burials.9 Two burnt balsamaria of bluish glass, field inventory number C-11207, were found in the south-eastern corner of the first layer. The surviving parts of either item (the ring-shaped, thickened rim and the narrow, cylindrical neck) do not lend themselves to precise typological identification (Fig. 1). A bronze coin, field inventory number C-11208, was discovered in the north-western corner of the second layer. It bears a damaged portrait on the left side of the obverse, whereas a standing figure can be made out on the reverse. It has been identified as a 1st century as coin (Fig. 2a–b).10 Based on this coin find, the burial in Grave G1-1026 has been broadly dated to the second half of the 1st or the first half of the 2nd century AD.

The shell valve was discovered in the central part of the western wall of the grave pit. Preserved in the upper part of the valve, close to its right-hand edge, is an elongated fastener made from two layers of thin bronze plate. One end of the fastener is tapered and the other is incised in the shape of a triangle. It is 17 mm long and 1–3 mm wide and affixed to the valve with two small rivets. At the opposite end is a perforation of 2 mm in diameter. The valve is roughly circular, measuring 15 cm in diameter and has a maximum depth/height of 2.3 cm at the umbo. The thickness of the valve varies from 1.5 to 17 mm. It is smooth on the outside, without flutings, and is beige in colour. Its surface has a pearl-like shimmer with gold and pink hues. This high quality surface was produced by scraping and grinding the outer, “mineral” coating of the shell down to the nacreous layer, the so-called mother-of-pearl. The teeth and hollows along the dorsal edge of the valve (the hinge line) were also worked and smoothed.

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5 Michaelides 1995: 212–214, note 10; Reese 1988: 35–39, Fig. 1; Reese 1995: 265–278; Reese 2008: 456–459, figs. 273, 274; that they may have been used as food is indicated by the shells of mollusks that were taken from the sea while still alive, cf. Ktalav 2015, 504–508.
9 Site of “Pecine” 1985, archaeological diary, page 2920, G1-1026.
10 I am grateful to Dr M. Vojvoda for dating the coin.
After that, the valve was meticulously polished. There is a small amount of damage on the part opposite the umbo, where the valve is thinnest. The interior of the valve is completely coated with nacre, showing mechanical damage in the form of circular and dotted indentations. The surviving bronze fastener on the exterior of the valve suggests that this was part of a cosmetic box. The function of the small perforation at the opposite end is not clear. There may have been a safety mechanism there for closing the valve more tightly in order to prevent air from entering the box and spoiling the cosmetic preparation contained in it (Fig. 3a–b; Plate I).

Judging from its state of preservation, this half of the box was carefully deposited in the grave pit, which was allowed to cool down together with the cremated remains, unlike the balsamarium and the coins, which were damaged by heat when the deceased was being cremated.

**Origin, diffusion and distribution**

In the quest for the origin of the Viminacium shell, the thick layer of nacre that enveloped the valve completely was a beacon that lit the way. Based on it and the shell’s morphological features, it was identified as the shell of a pearl oyster, *Pinctada margaritifera*, class Bivalvia (Lamellibranchiata), order Pterioida, and family Pteriidae. All the species of the Pteriidae family are characterised by a thick coat of nacre covering the interior of the shell, which makes them easily identifiable. *P. margaritifera* belongs to a small group of pearl oysters, with habitats in deeper waters (5–30 m) of tropical seas, such as the region of the Indo-Pacific (Australia, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti and Japan), the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. They can grow to a size of 20–25 cm, sometimes even to as much as 30 cm. The shades of nacre, and thereby the colour of the pearl, depend on the geographic origin. The value of the shells comes from the fact that they are not found in the Mediterranean Sea and, for this reason, during prehistory and Antiquity, they were distributed from the Orient as the main source of nacre and pearls.

The popularity of the shell in the Hellenistic and Roman periods is evident in numerous artisanal works, of both profane and sacred character. Various materials were used to produce diverse clam-shaped objects: vessels, toilet bottles, cosmetic boxes, parts of

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11 Due to the working and removal of the dark colored external coarse layer of a knobby and fluted structure, it is not possible to establish whether this is the ventral or the dorsal part of the shell.

12 My gratitude on this occasion goes to Dr D. Reese and Prof. M. Vujović (Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, Department of Archaeology) for their assistance in determining the taxonomic status of the clam.

13 BMNH 1901: 34–36, fig. 28; Michaelides 1995: 215, 217, fig. 3; Láng 2006: 150,151. The lands around the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea have access to a major source of pearls produced by the species *Margaritifera vulgaris*. The most famous pearl oysters are those from the Torres Strait and off the coasts of the Malay Archipelago, followed by those from Mexico, Panama, and the Red and South Seas. The market name of *P. margaritifera* was “Egyptian shell” or “Alexandria shell”, cf. Kunz, Stevenson 1908: 65–70, 85–87, 89–91.


15 Walters et al. 1921: 25–26, No 93, Fig. 35; Де Симоне, Вержи 1979: 113, 115; Kent, Painter (Ed.) 1977: 46–49, No. 94.

16 Isings 1957: 109, form 91/c.
jewellery, lamps, architectural sculpture for tombstones, etc. A decisive influence on their production was exerted by objects made from unworked/worked shells, as in P. margaritifera box from Viminacium. The research of Dr David S. Reese and Prof. Demetrios Michaelides in Cyprus and other parts of the world has demonstrated that Pinctada and other exotic shells, regardless of whether they were used as receptacles, decorative and prestige, status-related or cultic objects, had a long history and impressive distribution throughout various cultural epochs.

The earliest finds, most commonly of buttons and pendants made from the shells of P. margaritifera, date from the Neolithic period (BC 6000–5000), from the area of present-day Kuwait, Arabia, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Levantine coasts, the very areas of the clam’s natural habitat. The greatest concentration of the shells during prehistoric times has been recorded in the areas of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, with several isolated finds also recorded in the Far East. Shells of the pearl oyster bearing cartouches from c. BC 3200 prove that they were also used in ancient Egypt. One type of ornament made from P. margaritifera was discovered in an Early Bronze Age grave in south-eastern Anatolia (Kurban Höyük), whilst another, from the same period, was found in Italy (Reggio Emilia). Finds from the Post-Archaean period in Cyprus confirm that the use of P. margaritifera shells, pearls and other expensive Oriental commodities rapidly increased following the Graeco-Persian wars.

In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the shells of P. margaritifera were also used in the decoration of furniture, production of buttons, etc. Pliny, Ptolemy and Strabo state that, in addition to pearls, the shells of the pearl oyster also represent important items of merchandise, a fact attested by numerous archaeological finds. Several such items from Egypt (Naukratis, Fayum) are known from the 1st, 2nd and 4th centuries AD, as well as several others from the Islamic period, found at Quseir-al-Qadim, an important port city on the coast of the Red Sea. 2nd century finds have come from the area of Upper Zohar, near Jerusalem. Fourteen items from the Roman, Early Byzantine and Islamic periods have come from Jordan. Three of them are from graves: two are Roman, from the fort of al-Humayma, near Amman, and the third is an Early Byzantine fragment of P. margaritifera decorated with rosettes, from Aqaba. A Roman find has come from Nuzi, in present-day Iraq, and a P. margaritifera from Uruk-Warka has been dated to the Parthian-Sassanid period. A shell found in a 3rd–4th century grave in Georgia (Mtskheta) is among some of the more exotic finds of the clam, as is the one from Kobadian in Bactria, which is indicative of strong trade relations with the Far East. As regards European finds, six fragments have come from Pompeii and one from Voghenza. The same type of shell from the 1st century BC/1st century AD

21 Reese 1991: 163, 172, 189; Reese 1995: 265–278; Reese 2008: 456–461; Michaelides 1995: 215, Fig. 1; Trubitt 2003: 243, 244.
22 Carter 2005: 143, 144, 162, Fig. 2: 190–197, Table 1; 201–203, Table 6.
23 Michaelides 1995: 219, Fig. 2.
24 Kunz, Stevenson 1908: 5, 6.
25 Reese 1991: 172; Läng 2006: 151, 152, note 10; Michaelides 1995: 219, 221, 222, Fig. 2.
27 Läng 2006: 152,153, fig. 6, Table I; Reese 2008: 456–459, Figs. 273, 274. Ancient civilisations were familiar with pearl oysters and pearls, but their knowledge of the process of pearl creation was all too meagre. Pliny the Elder mentions “fishing for” oysters, and Strabo and Pliny state that, in addition to pearls, the shells of the pearl oyster also represent important items of merchandise, a fact attested by numerous archaeological finds. Several such items from Egypt (Naukratis, Fayum) are known from the 1st, 2nd and 4th centuries AD, as well as several others from the Islamic period, found at Quseir-al-Qadim, an important port city on the coast of the Red Sea. 2nd century finds have come from the area of Upper Zohar, near Jerusalem. Fourteen items from the Roman, Early Byzantine and Islamic periods have come from Jordan. Three of them are from graves: two are Roman, from the fort of al-Humayma, near Amman, and the third is an Early Byzantine fragment of P. margaritifera decorated with rosettes, from Aqaba. A Roman find has come from Nuzi, in present-day Iraq, and a P. margaritifera from Uruk-Warka has been dated to the Parthian-Sassanid period. A shell found in a 3rd–4th century grave in Georgia (Mtskheta) is among some of the more exotic finds of the clam, as is the one from Kobadian in Bactria, which is indicative of strong trade relations with the Far East. As regards European finds, six fragments have come from Pompeii and one from Voghenza. The same type of shell from the 1st century BC/1st century AD
The largest number of *P. margaritifera* shells from the Hellenistic and Roman periods have come from Cyprus, where 39 shells had been found by 1993, for which reason Cyprus has been singled out as a strong distribution point on the East-West trade route, both in Antiquity and post-Antiquity. Most shells from Cyprus come from tombs at Nea Paphos and its surroundings, and also from other sites (Palaepaphos, Souskiou, Marion, Evrychou, Larnaca, Limassol, Prastio, Amathous and Kourion). Interesting shells of unknown provenance are kept in the Cyprus Museum and there are also several in the British Museum.42

Fig. 4. Diffusion of *P. margaritifera* shells in the Roman Empire, modified map based on Láng 2006: 152, Fig. 6

Сл. 4. Распространение *P. margaritifera* в Римском царстве, переработанная карта, предыдущая: Láng 2006, 152, Fig. 6

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38 Michaelides 1995: 221; Reese 2008: 457, Fig. 274/7; Láng 2006: 152.
39 Ifantidis 2014: 14, figs. 3, 4.
41 By 1984, only one *P. margaritifera* shell was extant. Since then, owing to excavations of tombs at Paphos, new finds have been made and the shells kept in museum storage have been identified, cf. Michaelides 1995: 214, 215, Fig. 1; Reese 1992: 123–127, Pl. XXVI/ 2; Reese 2008: 458, 459; Láng 2006: 152, note 13.
42 Michaelides 1995: 219, 221; Reese 1992: 12; Reese 2008: 458, 459. I am grateful to Dr David Reese for the information on and the photograph of the shell kept in the British Museum (Palaepaphos).
At present, the *P. margaritifera* box from Viminacium represents an only find in the territory of modern-day Serbia and, together with the published shells, is one of only a small number of finds in Europe. It is possible that this fact does not reflect the real state of affairs, but rather a failure to identify the shells or a tendency for archaeologists to treat them as second-rate material.

The *P. margaritifera* box from Viminacium is a unique item of exquisite beauty accentuated by its size, careful workmanship and the well preserved nacreous coating, the last-mentioned fact being extremely rare due to the fragility of the shell.

A map showing the location of the extant finds of *P. margaritifera* from the Hellenistic and Roman periods reveals a striking absence of finds in the western Roman provinces (Fig. 4).\(^{43}\) The westernmost find, dated to the 1st century AD, comes from Pompeii.\(^{44}\) The range of *P. margaritifera* shells during prehistoric times and the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the areas of the clam’s natural habitat (the Indo-Pacific, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea)\(^{45}\) points to the locations of workshops where the shells were worked and decorated. They are localised to the area of present-day Israel, Jordan and Syria, with the Syrian hinterland playing a major role. From these centres, the shells were distributed as exclusive merchandise to Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece and Etruria by way of trade routes, with Cyprus being the first and most important stop.\(^{46}\) The discoveries in the Roman Balkan provinces (at Aquincum, Savaria and Viminacium) point to the Danube as a possible trade route by which luxury goods were transported to the Danubian urban and military centres.

**Decoration and construction features**

Most Hellenistic and Roman shells of *P. margaritifera* have survived as fragments or single valves. They were commonly used undecorated, in which case the outer, dark brown layer was removed and the edges, that is to say the lateral teeth, whose purpose is to close the shell, smoothed. Such are the shells from Grave 214 at Amatus, from BC 600–475.\(^{47}\) Decoration is more common on early Hellenistic shells, with simple geometric or, less frequently, floral or zoomorphic motifs prevailing around the inner edge, whilst the central part of the shell is free of decoration. The motifs were most often executed in punched dots or slanted lines in one or two rows, as evident in the shells in the Cyprus Museum and from Kourion, or as combinations of slanted lines between holes.\(^{48}\) A somewhat more complex decoration with a motif of a double spiral is found on the shells from the Paphos tombs and the shell from Pompeii.\(^{49}\) The earlier mentioned shell from Aqaba, in Jordan, bearing a motif of a rosette executed using a divider calliper, also belongs to this group.\(^{50}\)

Other shells exhibit certain variations, but of the same type of ornament.\(^{51}\) A small number of *P. margaritifera* shells are decorated with zoomorphic, floral or architectural motifs.\(^{52}\) The Aquincum shell belongs to this group.\(^{53}\) It is a fragment of a large shell (it measures 10.7 cm long and 6.6 cm high and is 2 mm thick) discovered in 1993 in a refuse pit of Building XXVI, better known as the Sanctuary of Diana. The inner, nacre coated side is decorated with depictions of running animals, executed in punched dots. Based on a wider context, it has been dated to the Severan period and identified as the property of newcomers from the East, most likely Syria.\(^{54}\)

Much rarer is the ornament of a stylised bird’s head on the umbo or near the edge. Such decoration is found on shells of unknown provenance kept in the Cyprus Museum,\(^{55}\) on a shell from Fayum,\(^{56}\) as well as on a fragment from Palaeapaphos, now in the British Museum, which is decorated with concentric circles and densely arranged punched dots on the inner edge.\(^{57}\) Particularly

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\(^{43}\) Michaelides 1995: 216, Fig. 2, 219; Láng 2006: 151–153, Fig. 6, Table 1.

\(^{44}\) Michaelides 1995: 221, Fig. 16; Reese 2008: 459.

\(^{45}\) Michaelides 1995: 215, 216, Fig. 2, 219; Láng 2006: 152, Fig. 6; Reese 2008: 458, 459.


\(^{48}\) Michaelides 1995: 221, Figs. 10, 11.

\(^{49}\) Michaelides 1995: 218–222, Figs. 6, 7, 16.

\(^{50}\) Cf. footnote 32.

\(^{51}\) Michaelides 1995: 217, Figs. 4–7; 221, Figs. 10–11, 221, Figs. 6–7, Figs. 12–13; 14–15; Láng 2006: 153, 154, Table 1; geometric ornaments also appear in later finds, such as a *Pinctada* shell from Iran (Qasr-i abu Nasr), from 7th–8th c., cf. Reese 2008: 457, 458, Fig. 274/6.

\(^{52}\) Reese 2008: 459.

\(^{53}\) Láng 2006: 150, 151, Figs. 3, 4.

\(^{54}\) The entire figure of an animal (lion or panther?) and the rear part of another animal, also with a tail (deer?) have survived, whereas the animal in the lower left corner is presumed to be a fish, cf. Láng 2006: 149–151, Figs. 3, 4, 154–157; Zsidi 2004: 216, Abb. 20.

\(^{55}\) Michaelides 1995: 17, Figs. 8–9.

\(^{56}\) Reese 2008: 459.

\(^{57}\) See footnote 42.
beautiful is the completely preserved *P. margaritifera* box now in the Haifa Museum, in Israel, decorated with floral motifs (lotus flowers?) on the outside of both valves.\(^{58}\) A unique specimen of a *P. margaritifera* box was found at Salamis, in Cyprus, in 1877, now known only from a drawing. The box was formed from the shell, and fitted with a hinge mechanism. It was decorated with geometric and floral motifs on the outside, whereas on the inside there was the cursive inscription “Toilet box of Habros.”\(^{59}\) The inscription, which unambiguously indicates the function of the box, carries innuendos of eroticism, as it represents a carefully selected and sophisticated expression of affection for an unknown lady. In some specimens, the decoration has become shallower or has disappeared altogether over the course of time. Some shells are assumed to have been painted (e.g. the box from Salamis), but the paint has faded over time.\(^{60}\) A 3rd to 4th century shell from Mtskheta, in Georgia, bears a peculiar depiction of a building with two wings and of a bird (eagle?), in which researchers have recognised a Sassanid gymnasium.\(^{61}\)

The rise of Christian and Islamic symbolism in the 7th and 8th centuries led to reinterpretations of some of the symbols.\(^{62}\) The tradition of decorating *P. margaritifera* shells continued in later times, mostly in the Holy Land and predominantly for the purpose of producing souvenirs for pilgrims.\(^{63}\) In this period, Cyprus retained its role of a distribution centre. A substantial number of *P. margaritifera* shells were discovered in tombs in Cyprus (Kourion, Amathus, Nea Paphos, Palaepaphos), Anman, Mtskheta, Pompeii and Voghenza. Some of them were unearthed within settlements (Kobadian, Qesir-al-Quadin, Uruk-Warka, Jerusalem, Pompeii, Nuzi, Fayum), whereas several shells originated in houses at Paphos, Kourion and Athens.\(^{64}\)

The morphologically and geographically closest analogy to the Viminacium specimen is the fragment of a *P. margaritifera* valve from Aquincum. However, the Viminacium valve is rather large and preserved in its entirety and was also worked in a different manner: the rough layers have been completely removed from the valve and, therefore, it consists entirely of nacre, whilst the outside of the Aquincum valve has not been worked at all and contains traces of marine parasites. Based on the context of the find within a complex of buildings identified as a sanctuary of Diana, the *P. margaritifera* shell from Aquincum is linked with the cult of the goddess.\(^{65}\) Constructionally and functionally and by their state of preservation and closing mechanism, i.e. a hinge and lock, the *P. margaritifera* box from Salamis, in Cyprus, and the entirely preserved *P. margaritifera* box from Haifa, from an unknown site in Israel, are closest to the Viminacium box.\(^{66}\) In both cases, the hinge mechanism contains two identical fasteners affixed to the valves with rivets.\(^{67}\) The preserved part of the closing mechanism on the Viminacium half-box contains a two-layer bronze plate fastener, damaged near the edge of the valve. Based on its similarities with the Salamis and Haifa boxes, it may be assumed that the Viminacium box contained a closing mechanism identical to theirs (Plate I, IIa–b, III, Fig. 5), the only difference being the position of the hinge on the valve. On the Haifa box, the hinge is at the end opposite the umbo, in the section where the valve is much thinner, whereas in the case of the Viminacium box the fastener/hinge is closer to the umbo, where the valve is much thicker, similar to that found on the Salamis box. For static-load reasons, the hinge was difficult to affix at the end opposite the umbo, as the shell is thinnest there (1.5 mm) and would probably have failed to withstand the weight of a mechanism that could secure the mobility of the thicker and therefore heavier end of the valve.

We are of the opinion that these elements played a crucial role in affixing the hinges laterally, not far from the umbo, both in the case of the Salamis box and the one from Viminacium. Namely, the thickness of the shell at the selected section allows for safer drilling and provides a stable surface for the hinge mechanism, which was necessary for fixing the hinge in place tightly and

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58 My gratitude for the photograph and information goes to Dr D. Reese, who is going to publish this box.

59 Michailides 1995: 219; Láng 2006: 152, 155, Fig. 9.


61 Michailides 1995: 221, Fig. 17; Láng 2006: 153, 154, Fig. 7; Reese 2008: 459.

62 Michailides 1995: 220, 221; Reese 2008: 457, 458, Fig. 27a/b.

63 The most common are mother-of-pearl buckles intended for the eastern Mediterranean market, as well as large christening spoons distributed to Western Europe. Even though their decoration is richer and executed in relief in the nacreous layer, it is not overly different from Hellenistic and Roman decoration, cf. Michailides 1995: 221, 223.


65 E. Márity proposes that the disk-shaped shell adorned priestly robes. Another hypothesis holds that the shell was used as a water spoon in the said cult. However, the suppositions have been widely rejected and the opinion that the fragment of the shell is linked to the cult of Diana has prevailed, cf. Láng 2006: 149, 150, 155, note 36.

66 See footnote 58.

67 Michailides 1995: 219; Láng 2006: 154,155 Fig. 9.
for its functionality, for which purpose the two-layer bronze plate fastener was probably used. Only on the Haifa box is the hinge affixed to the thinner portion of the valve which, by all accounts, depended not only on the skill and experience of the artisan, but on the size of the shell as well. We assume that, for the purpose of closing the Viminacium box/shell more tightly, there was also an additional rivet on the opposite side. The proposed reconstruction (Plate III; Figs. 5, 6) is based on the similarities with the well preserved *P. margaritifera* boxes from Salamis and Haifa and the structural properties of the shell as a hardy but brittle material. Since the shell consists of two symmetrical valves, it is difficult to decide whether the Viminacium valve/half-box was used as a receptacle or a lid.69

68 Láng 2006: 155, Fig. 9.
69 Kunz, Stevenson 1908: 38–40, 68, 69, 72, 73; BMNH 1901: 34–36, fig. 28.
**Chronological determination and workshop identification**

The *P. margaritifera* box from Viminacium has been dated to the second half of the 1st or the first half of the 2nd century AD. Cremation as a funerary practice eliminates the possibility that the deceased woman was from the East and thereby that she had brought the box from there herself. It had been brought to Viminacium from a workshop in Syria, Jordan or Israel by way of a trade route or as spoils of war, and thereafter it was bought by or presented to the presumed female person buried in Grave G1-1026.71

There is plentiful epigraphic and archaeological evidence of populations from the East (Egypt, Syria) living in the territory of Viminacium, particularly from the end of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd centuries AD, during the Severan period. The size of the Viminacium territory and the archaeological material from that period are indicative of the area’s economic stability and prosperity and its highly developed trade exchange with the East.72 However, archaeological evidence of trade exchange between Viminacium and the regions surrounding the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea in the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD is still scarce and we can currently classify it only as sporadic. It also includes the *P. margaritifera* box, which is indicative of trade contacts or other methods of exchange between Viminacium and the areas with workshops where exotic shells were worked. We must not neglect the economic background of military campaigns either, particularly of the Parthian Wars, which led to the activation of local markets, the establishment of trade links and regional exchange of commodities.73

The appearance of the *P. margaritifera* box as a prestige item creates the initial conditions for a more in depth analysis of exclusive objects and the tracing of trade communications and distribution mechanisms by which exclusive commodities were being brought from the Near and Middle east in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.74

**Functional and contextual analyses**

The function of *P. Margaritifera* shells has been the subject of numerous debates for a long time now. The views that they had a toilet/cosmetic function are the best substantiated ones and are supported not only by the discoveries of the *P. margaritifera* boxes at Salamis and Haifa, but also by traces of pigments, that is, some kind of cosmetic preparations, on the shells of *Tridacna*, an exotic species similar to *P. margaritifera*.75 However, this does not exclude their secondary purpose as receptacles for jewellery, game pieces and food, or as incrustations.76

D. Michaeelidis believes that the cosmetic/toilet function of the boxes is further indicated by the distribution of decorations, which are limited to an outer and a rather narrow interior belt, with the deepest part of the shell being unembellished.77 However, even though this distribution of decoration is characteristic of most Cypriot specimens, the boxes from Salamis and Mtskheta and the *P. margaritifera* fragment from Aquincum, decorated on the inside of the valve, make this view rather suspect. The differences in the arrangement and motifs of the decoration probably represent stylistic characteristics of different workshop centres.

The toilet/cosmetic purpose of *P. margaritifera* shells/boxes is attested in written sources. In his *Naturalis Historia* (IX, 54, 109), Pliny the Elder mentions that the shells of pearl oysters are used as receptacles for cosmetics “…cohaerenties videmus in conchis hac dote unguenta circumferentibus.”78 An artistic illustration of Pliny’s words and evidence of the sacral function of *P. margaritifera* shells/boxes is found in the fresco, the Aldobrandini Wedding, from the Esquiline Hill in Rome (c. BC 20). It is believed that the depiction of the ritual of preparations of the bride is key to resolving the issue of the function of *P. margaritifera* boxes/receptacles. The fresco depicts Venus comforting an

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71 Anthropological analyses of the cremated remains have not been carried out.
72 Influences of the Orient are manifest in grave shapes, funerary rituals (mummification methods, remains of flowers and fruit in the graves), and grave goods of eastern Mediterranean origins, cf. Cnacah-Typhus 2015: 51–53. Similarly to Aquincum, the existence of a Syrian diaspora and a class of affluent newcomers from the East has also been established at Viminacium, cf. Mirkovic 1968: 69.
73 Important in this respect are the 1st century military campaigns in the East, as well as the arrival of eastern auxiliaries (cohorts I Antiochensium, I Cisipadensium, I Thracum Syriaca), and, in particular, the participation of the Legio VII Claudia in Trajan’s Parthian Wars, in AD 113–114, cf. Mirkovic 1968: 25–33, 59.
74 More massive arrivals of populations from the East and the formation of the Syrian diaspora at Viminacium have been dated to the Severan period, cf. Mirkovic 1968: 69.
75 The shells of *Tridacna hippopus* from the Philippines are still used as luxurious receptacles for various kinds of soap, cf. Michaeelides 1995: 212, 213; Láng 2006: 154, Fig. 9.
76 Michaeelides 1995: 212, 213.
77 Mishaelides 1995: 212.
anxious bride, with her companion Suada/Peitho, a goddess of persuasion, pouring oil to be used in the course of bathing/purifying the bride from a flask into a shell (Fig. 7). The formal characteristics of the shell/receptacle in Suada/Peitho’s hand are suggestive of the earlier mentioned Tridacna shell, which originates from the areas of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Its connection with other female deities is confirmed by discoveries in the temple of Aphrodite at Amathus, the temple of Hera on Samos and the temple of Athens at Lindos. The apparently idyllic scene is permeated with the bride’s fear, which Venus is trying to dispel and transform.

A wedding as a rite of passage plays an important social role in the shift from the status of a girl to that of a woman, and the roles of Venus and the clam shell are emphasised in the act of initiation. The presence of Venus ensures fertility and beauty, with certain traditional aspects of the goddess being particularly highlighted. The oil poured from a balsamarium into a shell assumes magical properties when it comes into contact with the nacreous surface, which is indicative of its lustral function during the initiation of the bride. We believe this is the only logical explanation of the intentional pleonasm in the depiction, where two different receptacles are used for the same cosmetic preparation.

The scene in the Aldobrandini Wedding, together with other works of arts and crafts, strongly highlights the Aphrodite/Venus/clam union and its cultic importance in the Graeco-Roman profane and sacral life. Mythological depictions in art and literature influenced funerary rites to some extent, as is evident in the decoration of tombstones or sarcophagi. However, they can be seldom identified in funerary rites, because they most commonly feature as grave goods used to support the notion of the continued existence and protection of the deceased. Some of the finds in Viminacium graves confirm that this influence cannot be completely ruled out and that it is manifested in its reduced form in individual objects/symbols, as is also the P. margaritifera box. Inevitable in this case is the dilemma: is it a matter of conscious ritual manifestations of more educated layers of society or simply of an accidental overlap between artistic and funerary contents.

We believe that Grave G1-1026 and the P. margaritifera box manifest a certain connection between art and funerary practices. Among other things, it is of importance to the understanding of the visually rich artistic depictions of Venus with a clam shell, among which the Aldobrandini Wedding stands out by virtue of its complexity. The parallelism between this depiction and the funerary context of the P. margaritifera box affirms the connection of shells-receptacles with rites of passage/initiations.

81 Different forms of content and fertility are predominant, i.e. properties arising from the complex competences of Aphrodite Erycina, in whom Semitic elements were fused with Greek concepts. She was attended by sacred prostitutes, whereas sheaves of grain and doves linked her to the Cypriot goddesses of the East. Ovid calls on “immoral” women (vulgares puellae) of the capital city to ask Venus, while offering incense between mint, myrtle and flower wreaths, to grant them beauty, popular favour, lovemaking skills, pleasure and words adequate for the games they are most skillful at. For this reason her sanctuary was outside the city, extra pomerium, so that it may “not be in the way of contaminating the matrons and youth with the influence of lust.” In Rome, thereafter, in memory of the victory on Mount Eryx, the victorious aspect of Venus became predominant. cf. Dimezil 1997: 326, 327, 362–364, 412, 413; Schmidt 2004: 84.
82 Нарро 1998: 48, 49, fig. 49; Miles, Norwich 1997: 59, 60, 123; Де Симоне, Верки 1979: 88, 92.
84 On the similarities between wedding and funerary rites, as well as the ritual elements common to both, cf. Пилипович 2007: 28, 29, 32, 33, 36, 40.
As a funerary reflection of the said depiction of wedding preparations, the *P. margaritifera* from Grave G1-1026, sophisticatedly, through the idea of *pars pro toto*, compensates for the cultic functions of the Funerary Venus (*Venus Funeraria*), whose symbolic presence in the graves of girls and unmarried women was pointed out by Prof. Aleksandar Jovanović.\(^85\) In addition to clam shells, the Viminacium necropoleis also contained terracotta Venuses and mirrors with scenes from the cult of Venus as symbolic expressions of the goddess’ cultic-protective powers.\(^86\)

Existing analyses have indicated that, in addition to their profane purpose, worked/unworked shells of *P. margaritifera* and other exotic species also had a sacral function.\(^87\) Shells of marine clams, including that of *P. margaritifera* from the sanctuary of Isis at Sava-ria, are also suggestive of their sacral function, even though it has been pointed out that unworked shells could also be receptacles for skin, hair and clothes care prescriptions. There is still the dilemma, however, whether these were symbolic personal offerings, items necessary for performing the purification ritual, or items used by a priest of the cult of Demeter.\(^88\) The connection of the clam shell with this goddess is evident in a 1\(^{st}\) century relief from Ostia: looming over an upper-body depiction of a priestess of Magna Mater is a shell with an inscription underneath.\(^89\) Its cultic connection with other goddesses has already been mentioned in relation to the discovery of *Tridacna* shells.\(^90\) The *P. margaritifera* shell fragment from Aquincum is connected to the cult of Diana, but it has been pointed out that the significance of boxes made from *P. margaritifera* shells and their contents in the rite of purification comes from the cultic function of Venus.\(^91\) The above contexts indicate that the finds of *Tridacna* and *P. margaritifera* shells at Cyrene, Savaria and Aquincum could be explained by their lustral function in the rite of the purification/bathing of the statue of the goddess and the initiation of her followers.\(^92\)

The strong connection between the clam shell and Aphrodite/Venus, further strengthened by the numerous finds in Cyprus, supports the opinion that boxes made from *P. margaritifera* shells represent cultic symbols of Venus. Exceptionally important in this respect is the recently discovered *P. margaritifera* shell bearing a depiction of Aphrodite in the area of the Red Sea.\(^93\) As symbols of social status or exclusive personal property, *P. margaritifera* boxes played an important role in funerary cults, but their funerary function does not exclude their profane use.\(^94\) Their connection in the Venus-shell cultic union is a result of the biological and chemical properties of *P. margaritifera* and other exotic pearl producing species.

Due to its biological and chemical properties, *P. margaritifera* was used in traditional medicine by the oldest civilizations of the Far East and India. According to numerous beliefs, the shell and pearls ensure prosperity and long life, whilst the clam shell itself symbolises longevity and represents a cure-all that protects from all evil. Ancient Chinese and Hindu writings and Oriental literature mention pearls as the main ingredient of numerous elixirs.\(^95\) In Antiquity, pearls were used for medicinal purposes, that is, for skin beautification and cleansing the body of toxins, particularly in Oriental lands.\(^96\) Due to their medicinal properties, and those of their shell contents in the rite of purification/bathing of the statue of the goddess, or is related to the initiation of her followers.\(^92\)

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\(^85\) Jovanović 2000: 13–18.

\(^86\) Outstanding among these is the terracotta figurine of Venus, from Grave G-3500 at the site of Pecine, C-10600 (03/3747); it was deposited at the outer side of the upper arm, with its top part turned towards the head of the deceased. cf. Cnacouh-Typh 2015a: 103, 104, kat. 73.

\(^87\) Two shells of the *Cypraea tigris* snail have been found in the sanctuaries of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene, in Libya, cf. Reese 1988: 37, 38.

\(^88\) Läng 2006: 154,155, note 27.


\(^90\) See footnotes 75 and 80.

\(^91\) Läng 2006: 154,155.


\(^95\) Jackson 1917: 101–104.

\(^96\) These beliefs among the ancient Hindu go back to the 3\(^{rd}\) millennium BC. According to Narahari, a physician of Kashmir (c. 1240), the pearl cures diseases of the eyes, is an antidote to poisons and increases strength and general health. At the start of the Christian era, pearl powder was used for therapeutic purposes. The range of its curative power is broad: it cures auge, indigestion and haemorrhaging, but it is also an aphrodisiac, tonic and an important ingredient of prescriptions used in curing impotence, heart disease, etc. Pearl powder, or pearl oyster shell powder, was mixed with lemon juice and used for washing the face. Arab physicians used it to treat melancholy and hemorrhaging and believed that the pearl, while still in its shell, could cure leprosy. Pearl powder was also used as dentifrice, to strengthen the gums, and to treat skin diseases. Pearls also featured in medieval medicine and magic. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) mentioned pearls among medicines for the prolongation of life, cf. Kunz, Stevenson 1908: 301–307. Today, pearl powder is rather popular in the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries, being used in prescriptions for skin regeneration, as an ingredient in

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Dragana Lj. SPASIĆ-DURIĆ

*Pinctada Margaritifera* Box from Viminacium (75–93)
the shells in which they grow, pearls were also put into drinks. The generative and biological and chemical properties of the pearl oyster that provide health, vitality and beauty were crucial for the creation of its mythological links to Aphrodite/Venus.

**Conclusion**

Existing archaeological finds are indicative of the cultic symbolism of exotic clam shells. In order to resolve the issue of the profane and sacral functions of the *Pinctada margaritifera* box from Viminacium, we believe that the cultic background of the *Aldobrando* *brandini Wedding* and the synthesis of the organic chemical, generative and iatric properties of the pearl oyster belong to the cultic domain of Venus. Moreover, the inner, nacreous layer is of the greatest significance and is attributed with strong regenerative and magical properties that, together with Venus, provide girls and young women not only with passion, skills of seduction, prospective love and fertility in marriage, but also with eternal beauty and youth. Therefore, the shell of the pearl oyster represents an important initiation and lustration prop, primarily linked to Venus and, as indicated by some archaeological finds, to the cults of other goddesses. It is evident that the sacral competences of Venus and iatric functions of *Pinctada margaritifera* and other exotic clam shells are complementary, for which reason the latter became essential elements/symbols in rites of passage.98

Just as the cultic and initiation-related powers of Venus and the shell work together and complement each other in a wedding preparation ceremony, so the ambivalent function of the *Pinctada margaritifera* box is manifest in the burial rites performed for the deceased woman from Grave G1-1026 as a sublimated symbol of Venus, whose indirect presence in the grave is indicated by the idea of *pars pro toto*. In the funerary context, the *Pinctada margaritifera* box and its contents, besides serving a practical purpose during the rituals of bathing and preparing the body for cremation or inhumation, probably also had a symbolic role, that is, to carry the soul of the deceased over waves to the Isles of the Blessed in the Ocean of Immortality. Specifically, in the example of the burial in Grave G1-1026, the religious and philosophical concept of a new beginning and existence is materialised and symbolised through the complex iatric and significative potentials of the pearl oyster/box.99

Having summarised the finds from temples and graves and bearing in mind the scene from the *Aldobrando* *brandini Wedding*, as well as a wide range of medical and symbolic properties, we may conclude that the practical and initiative, lustral functions of *Pinctada margaritifera* boxes are closely intertwined, particularly in rites of passage as radical and dramatic changes in life. For these reasons, it is difficult to draw a clear line between their profane and cultic-symbolic functions.100 In view of the inscription of Habros in the box from Salamis, as well as the scene from the *Aldobrando* *dini Wedding*, the shell box can be regarded as a symbol of love and death. The view that *Pinctada margaritifera* boxes are initiation props and symbolic of status changes is close to the interpretation of A. Jovanović that the clam shells in the graves of young girls and unmarried women are symbols of the Funerary Venus. The powerful generative and regenerative properties of the shell box suggest the presence of Venus and compensate for the wedding ceremony/change of status that the person did not live to experience, thus symbolically restoring the broken life and cosmic cycles.101 Significant in this respect is the metaphysical idea of pain, from which comes the greatest natur-
al perfection – the pearl, and for which reason *Pinctada* species and other exotic clam shells were of particular importance in the practical and spiritual life of a number of civilisations.102

The analysis of the *P. margaritifera* box and its funerary context in Grave G1-1026 and the supposition that it had an important lustral function during initiation in the rite of passage confirm the opinion of Professor A. Jovanović, who surmised that this funerary material contained infinite depths of the transcendent. Physically and factually, the *P. margaritifera* box from Viminacium symbolises and integrates the depths of the warm seas wherein its nacreous beauty matured, the likely religious affiliation of the deceased woman and her social status, as well as both direct and indirect relationships between Viminacium and the areas of present-day Israel, Syria and Jordan in the 1st and the first half of the 2nd century AD. As a manifestation of the idea of *pars pro toto* in Grave G1-1026, it is a materialisation and strong symbolisation of the rite of initiation and the visual mythological narrative known from Roman painting.

On the metaphysical plane, the *P. margaritifera* box is a symbol of Venus and an initiative, lustral prop of pearly shine and iatric powers. During a rite of passage and a change of status, together with its cosmetic contents enriched with nacre, as a divine essence, it ensures the beauty and immortal youth of girls/women. In the funerary context, it returns the deceased women to the mainstream of love, where they will be united with Venus or another goddess of fertility and resurrection. Materially and spiritually, it is evidence not only of the closeness between wedding and burial rites, but of a link between certain artistic representations and funerary practices, wherein objects of a strong and sophisticated symbolism, such as the *Pinctada margaritifera* box, are encountered.103

The analyses of the *P. margaritifera* box from Viminacium and the views expressed do not provide finite answers, but rather represent a contribution to the understanding of the symbolic character of this type of object in Roman profane and sacral life.

Translated by Ivan Delač

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102 The symbolic value of the clam shell is different in different cultures. Generally, due to its similarities to the vulva, the shell integrates lunar and water principles (life, regeneration, love, marriage, fertility), and, on the metaphysical plane, the pearl, as a child of life and a natural perfection, symbolises a transformation of pain/suffering into crystallised light and beauty, for which reason it is also a symbol of initiation. The idea of pearly purity is found in many religions: in the Hindu civilisation, the pearl is regarded as the most appropriate wedding present, in the Greek civilisation, it is linked with conjugal love, whereas in the Roman civilisation it is dedicated to Venus. In Christianity, the pearl symbolises purity, innocence, baptism and salvation. Around AD 850, the Archbishop of Mainz stated that “the pearl signifies hope of the kingdom of heaven or charity and the sweetness of celestial life.” In Western civilisation, the pearl as a gift represents an ill omen and symbolises tears that will be shed in the married life. Due to the belief that it is created when lightning penetrates a clam shell, the pearl became a symbol of crystallised light, cf. Kunz, Stevenson 1908: 308–315; Kuper 1978: 14, 167.

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Током истраживања Виминацијума 1985. године на локалитету Пећине откривен је гроб са кремацијом, Г1-1026, у којем је нађена половини козметичке кутије. Израђена је од ѐлутура P. margaritifera, егзотичне врсте чија се станишта налазе у региону Индо-Пацифик, Персијског залива и Црвена вода. На основу гробне форме и новца, кутија је опредељена у другу половину I и прву половину II века, а сахрахана покојника/це у прву половину II века.

У морфолошком и функционалом смислу, кутија P. margaritifera из Виминацијума представља раритет у Србији, а заједно са примерима из Аквикума и Саварије, је релевантна за стручне дискусије.

У конструктивном и функционалном смислу, кремационог кутија, P. margaritifera из Виминацијума представља раритет у Србији, а заједно са примерима из Аквикума и Саварије, је релевантна за стручне дискусије.

Кутија је стављена у гроб, Г1-1026, налази се у току гробневих обреда и њихових припрема, у њима се налазе предмети који представљају иконостас, али и пророчки правац у њиховим функцијама. Урна сачувана је у форми ћелије, чија је функционална улога и функционална целина представљена у форми ћелије. У релевантним контекстима, као што су Слава, Венера и Тинка, кутија P. margaritifera из Виминацијума представља раритет у Србији, у њима се налазе предмети који представљају иконостас, али и пророчки правац у њиховим функцијама.

На основу биолошко-хемијских и ијатичких својстава ћелије и кутије, изнесьа је претпоставка о иницијацијској, лустративној функцији кутија P. margaritifera и њиховог козметичког садраја у обредима прелаза/промене статуса.

У функционалном контексту, кутија P. margaritifera је садрај, осим практичне примене током ритуала купања и припреме тела за кремацију или сахрахану, имала су снажну симболичку улогу – да душу покојнице преко таласа пренесу до Острва блаћених у Океану бесмртности. На конкретном плану, у случају гроба Г1-1026, релативно-филозофски концепт новог почетка и трајања добија своју јасну материјализацију и симболичност преко сложених ијатичких и синификативних потенцијала бисерне ћелије.

Као функционални референт ритуала венчања са фреске „Алдобрадинска свадба”, половини кутије P. margaritifera из гроба Г1-1026, кроз идеју pars pro toto, сублимирано комбинује кутију и гроб, на чије је симболично присуство у гробовима девојчица и девојака указао проф. А. Јовановић.

Материјално и духовно, она доказује блискост између обреда венчања и посмртног ритуала, али и везу појединих уметничких представа и фунаралне промене у којој се срећу поједини предмети сажене и софистициране симболике, као и ћелија i кутија P. margaritifera.

Примерак из Виминацијума представља ексклузивни објекат који је доказао на директне или индиректне контакте Виминацијума, крајем I и почетком II века, са Блиским истоком, тј. регионима данашњег Изraelа, Јордана и Сирије, где су претпостављене радиние за њихову израду.

Кремација као гробни ритуал искључује источно порекло покојнице, те стога и кутију као непосредно власништво донето у постхроније. Она је трговачким путем или као ратни плени донета у Виминацијум, а потом је, куповином или као поклон, постала власништво, вероватно, женске особе сахрахане у Г1-1026.
Plate I – Half of a P. margaritifera box, Viminacium, Grave G1-1026; (drawing by S. Živanović).

Табла I – Половина кутије Pinctada margaritifera, Вимницамум, гроб Г1-1026 (цртеж: С. Живановић)

Plate II – a, b) Hinge mechanism, reconstruction (drawing by S. Živanović).

Табла II – a, b) Шарир механизам, реконструкција (цртеж: С. Живановић)
Plate III – P. margaritifera box, reconstruction (drawing by S. Živanović).

Табла III – Култура Pinctada margaritifera, реконструкција (цртеж: С. Живановић)