CHILD-BURIALS AND SUPERSTITION IN THE
ROMAN CEMETERY OF SUCIDAVA (DACIA)

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Plates XC-XCI

The excavations carried out between 1966 and 1975 in the cemetery of Sucidava, the Roman citadel and settlement situated on the left side of the Danube in Dacia Inferior, have brought to light about 500 graves dating from the 2nd c. AD to 4th c. AD. Two pieces from the grave-goods found in 1967 particularly command our attention with regard to certain burial practices which reflect the religious thought and superstition of the time and the ancient attitude towards death.

We refer to a terracotta statuette and an anthropomorphic clay vessel discovered in two graves dating respectively from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD and the 4th century AD.

The statuette (Pl. XC) was found in an inhumation grave containing the skeleton of an infant, a child until two years old, extended on its back and orientated South-West to North-East. The object was placed together with three flagons near the foot-bones. The flagons are typical to the Roman provincial pottery in Dacia from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. An illegible bronze coin was found in the mouth of the corpse. The statuette (ht. 0.12 m) represents a "grotesque" figure (child ?): a bare male torso with a bald head. The large head, in comparison with the proportions of the body, has enormous ears and eyes and a mouth with thick lips expressing a grimace rather than a smile. A crescent-shaped pendant (lunula) hangs down from the necklace worn round the short and massive neck. The bust ends in a grooved base which is semi-circular in

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2 Anthropological examination was carried out by Dr. Dardu Nicolaescu-Plopșor, Bucharest.
section. The surface of terracotta is red colour-coated. This type of figurine is very well known in the Roman Empire during the 2nd-3rd centuries AD; it occurs in Gaul, Germany, Pannonia, Greece and Dacia and has mainly been discovered in graves. The archaeological litterature terms it “Der Lachende Knabe” or “L’enfant rieur”.

The anthropomorphic vase (pl. XCI) was found in a grave (with the bottom burnt) containing the remains of two corpses, both buried in the same time: 1) the cremated bones of a teenager-adult; 2) the very badly preserved skeleton of an infant between 1 and 2 years old, extended on its back and orientated West-East. The vase was found together with two bronze coins near the skull of the child. A fragment of pottery decorated in relief with a Dionysiac figure (Pan and grapes) and a large iron nail (length = 8.5 cm) was discovered at the feet of the skeleton. Both coins belong to Constantius II and are issues of the last years of his rule. According to their disposal in the grave, all the above mentioned objects belong to the grave goods of the child. The vase (ht. 0.18 m) represents the bust of Hecate draped in a chiton with two disc-brooches on the shoulders and wearing a calathus on her head. The vase has a small oval base and was red colour-coated. From the artistic point of view, the figure of the goddess can be considered as a typical product of the neoclassical “renaissance” of the 4th c. with the form imitating classical models, but there are also some details which reflect late Antique traits such as, for example, the manner of the disposal of the folds of the draped chiton.

What is the significance of the presence of these objects in the graves? Since they were placed in child-graves, we must consider

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