

VENUS PUDICA ON A BONE DISTAFF FROM CAPIDAVA*

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REPREZENTAREA ZEIȚEI VENUS PUDICA PE O FURCĂ DIN OS DESCOPERITĂ LA CAPIDAVA

Nota de față face referire la o descoperire recentă (campania 2016) de la *Capidava* din sectorul VII al șantierului arheologic, în cadrul cercetării obiectivului denumit în bibliografia sitului *Capidava* drept *Principia* din faza târzie. Cercetarea la edificiul cu absidă de la *Capidava* a început în anii '50 când s-au cercetat o parte din bordeiele medio-bizantine ce suprapun clădirea. În anul 2013 cercetările au fost reluate, urmând ca an de an să se deschidă noi unități de săpătură, conform unui caroiu prestabilit de 4×4 m, care numără 26 carouri în total. În cadrul campaniei din anul 2016, cercetând nivelul romano-bizantin din secolul al VI-lea p. Chr., ultimul nivel de locuire antică al edificiului, pe podeaua din lut bătătorit s-a descoperit o furcă de tors cu inel, confecționată din os. Furca a fost descoperită pe podea la cca un metru distanță de zidul de nord-est al edificiului, în apropierea colțului de est al clădirii. Pe baza analizei descoperirilor din cadrul aceluiași context arheologic piesa se datează în secolul al VI-lea p. Chr.

Furca este formată dintr-o tijă ce are sculptate în partea superioară o reprezentare stilizată a zeiței *Venus* în ipostaza *Pudica*, iar în partea inferioară un inel folosit pentru a fixa furca pe degetul celei care o folosea. Dimensiunile sale generale sunt de 21,50 cm în lungime și 0,70–1,02 cm în grosime, cu statueta zeiței având 5,37 cm lungime și 1,37 cm lățime. Furca se păstrează integral, starea de conservare fiind foarte bună, și are urme de uzură rezultată în urma folosirii pe inel și partea inferioară a tijei.

Analogiile pentru această piesă au fost descoperite în general în necropole din epoca romană, toate variind ca datare între secolele I–IV p. Chr. Piesa de la *Capidava*, având în vedere contextul de descoperire se datează în secolul al VI-lea p. Chr.

CUVINTE CHEIE: Furcă de tors, *Venus Pudica*, prelucrarea osului, artă provincială romană, *Capidava*.

KEYWORDS: Distaff, *Venus Pudica*, bone carving, Roman provincial art, *Capidava*.

INTRODUCTION

The present article refers to a recent find (during the campaign of 2016) from *Capidava*, roman and early-byzantine fort on the Danube *limes* (provinces of *Moesia Inferior/Scythia Minor*), as part of the research of the 'Edifice with Apse' (in the bibliography of *Capidava* it was also referred to as the 'late *Principia*'). We opted for an individual publication of this artefact due to its novelty, so that it can be introduced without delay to the specialized literature and thus make it available to researchers dedicated to this subject.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND DATING

The research of the 'Edifice with Apse' from *Capidava* started in the 1950s when several early medieval hovels, that were overlapping the building, were excavated. The edifice is situated near the south corner of the fort (Pl. I/1), in the vicinity of the great *Granary*, the largest building discovered so far inside the fort. In 2013 the research was resumed and continued year on year¹. As part of the 2016

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¹ Opreș, Rațiu, Duca 2014, 35–36; Opreș *et alii* 2016, 48–49.

campaign, while excavating the 6th century Romano-Byzantine level, the last ancient occupational level of the building, a finger-distaff was found on the battered clay floor. The distaff was found on the floor approximately one meter away from the north-eastern precinct wall of the edifice close to its eastern corner (**Pl. I/2**). On the same floor, several other discoveries were made such as a lamp of the Danubian type, specific to the 6th century and several fragments of African Red Slip Ware plates datable in the same period. Furthermore, the context of the distaff can be easily datable based on additional artefacts found in other rooms of the building, but within the same stratigraphic sequence such as several ceramic lamps, from the same Danubian type, as well as amphorae dating from the 6th century².

THE *CAPIDAVA VENUS* FINGER-DISTAFF

The bone distaff from *Capidava* consists of a flat shaft decorated on the upper end with a feminine figure, supposedly the goddess *Venus*, and a circular ring on its lower end (**Pl. II–III**). The „statuette” of *Venus* holds her falling gown with her left hand while she covers her left breast with her right hand. It is a special type of depiction of *Venus*, in which the goddess shyly covers her nakedness (the so-called *Venus Pudica* pose³, from lat. ‘*Pudica*’ = ‘modest’). The shaft bears no decoration. At the lower end the ring is decorated with vegetation motifs near the shaft and two small buttons at the lower extremity.

The distaff was made from a carved cow radius, carefully sculpted and filed into the current shape. The preservation state is intact, has no missing parts and the only alteration of the piece are the traces of usage present on the lower part of the shaft and the ring⁴.

The dimensions of the distaff are: 21.50cm in length and between 0.70–1.02cm in width; the goddess statuette has a height of 5.37cm and a width of 1.37cm; the ring is 2.50cm in diameter with a width of 0.5cm.

The distaff is, together with a spindle, the most important instrument for the production of yarn in antiquity. The washed and plucked raw wool is first put in the form of a coarse knot on the distaff. Then it is spun into a fine thread by the use of a spindle (**Pl. VII/1-2**). The distaffs differ in shape and size, some of them are longer, the waist distaffs for example, and others are smaller and are hand-held, a subcategory being the finger-distaff⁵.

Finger-distaffs are a special form of ancient spinning tools, having a ring at the lower end of the rod, which the spinner strides over the ring finger. Their upper end often carries a figurative decor. This type of utensil is usually made from wood, glass, bronze, bone or ivory⁶.

SYMBOLISM OF *VENUS* FINGER-DISTAFFS

In a study of women burials from Roman *Pannonia* is stated that the distaff and/or spindle are always found in graves of adult women⁷. Not surprisingly, all the distaffs found in burials are unused⁸, which is valid for most of the artefacts found in graves: they were all purchased for the burial purpose. In my opinion the presence of a spindle and/or distaff in a grave, or depicted on a gravestone for that matter, has clearly to do with the burial ritual and have a symbolic value, as well as other objects present in the grave.

However, the finger-distaff discovered at *Capidava* is used, which information changes the discussion altogether.

² Opreș, Rațiu, Duca 2014, 35–36, 275, fig. 14.

³ Buell 2016, 21; Havelock 2007, 69–70.

⁴ A more complete analysis of the object itself was made by Dr. Corneliu Beldiman, and will be published soon.

⁵ Bíró 1994, 49–50; Cremer 1996, 136–138.

⁶ Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 126.

⁷ Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 126.

⁸ Vass 2013, 61.

Some experts argue that the distaffs present in graves are a symbol of marriage and emphasize the faithfulness, respectability and industriousness of the deceased wife⁹. However, this conclusion is partially true as based on a survey¹⁰ made on a group of fifteen funerary *stelae* from Pannonia on which spindles and distaffs are present, only in one case the woman was properly and legally married according to Roman laws. Therefore, one can argue that probably the institution of marriage was not the primary characteristic that these objects were trying to emphasize but rather the attributes of virtuousness and faithfulness of Roman women.

The ring distaffs are more often discovered throughout the eastern part of the Roman Empire, from *Pannonia*, the Lower Danube and beyond. The *Venus* distaffs are somewhat rarer, but even within this category there are different subcategories. There are three different poses in which the allegedly goddess *Venus* is depicted¹¹: naked lady with a child in her arms, half-naked girl in the *Venus Pudica* pose and naked girl standing and holding a *fascia pectoralis* over her breasts.

Venus embodies feminine beauty and eroticism and is also the ancestral mother of the Roman people, as *Venus Genetrix*¹². It often appears as hand jewellery or in some cases on hand utensils and is frequently related with fertility and sexual health.

The *Venus Pudica* pose was introduced by Praxiteles in the 4th c. B.C. with his creation, Aphrodite of *Cnidos*, and was reproduced by various artist ever since, throughout history¹³. The image of the beautiful naked woman barely covering her nakedness has become a symbol of femininity, sexuality, frailty of the fairer sex etc. Taking into account the different opinions on the subject I incline to concur with the scepticism of Judith Pasztókai-Szeöke¹⁴ for the identity of the depicted figure.

PARALLELS AND SIMILAR OBJECTS¹⁵

Until now, we know only of one close analogy for our distaff in the province of *Scythia Minor*, namely the piece discovered at *Dinogetia* (Pl. IV/3) and published by Gh. Ștefan in 1940¹⁶. Even though the archaeological context of the discovery is not clearly mentioned, the piece from *Dinogetia* is a remarkable analogy, being found inside the fort and most probably in a Late Roman or even Early-Byzantine context. Another close parallel is the distaff discovered at *Porolissum*¹⁷, in *Dacia*, which even though fragmentary, bears a close resemblance to the *Capidava* distaff (Pl. IV/4). The representation of *Venus* on distaffs is encountered more often in the oriental provinces, but there are also western examples. The earliest dated distaff, 1st c. A.D., was discovered in the necropolis from *Viminacium*¹⁸, province of *Moesia Superior* (Pl. V/1). Another two early dated discoveries come from the German provinces, from *Lauriacum*¹⁹ and Haselbach²⁰, both dated in the 2nd c. A.D (Pl. V/2-3). Other such distaffs, but without a certain discovery place, are part of the collections of the Nemzeti Múzeum in Budapest²¹, and by comparison they were dated in the 2nd or 3rd c. A.D (Pl. V/4-5).

⁹ Cremer 1996, 138–139; Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 132.

¹⁰ Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 129–130.

¹¹ Typology adopted from: Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 132.

¹² Kouser 2010, 290–291.

¹³ Buell 2016, 4; Havelock 2007, 69. For more information and discussions about the Knidos Aphrodite, see Corso 1997.

¹⁴ Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 132–133.

¹⁵ Most of the parallels were carefully documented and researched by Vass Lorand and published in Vass 2013. Therefore, a more elaborate discussion, for the Hungarian speakers, is available there.

¹⁶ Ștefan 1937–1940, 414, 417, fig. 22.

¹⁷ Vass 2013, tab.4.

¹⁸ Spasić-Djurić 2002, 101, fig. 82.

¹⁹ Kloiber 1962, 77–78, Abb. XXIX/2–2a.

²⁰ Farka 1975, 105, Abb. 5/3

²¹ Bíró 1994, 49 – 50, 92, 120, pl. XXXVI/385 (the author renders it a decorative pin), pl. LXXXVII/853.

Other parallels, dated late in the 4th c., were found closer in *Bosporus*²² (Pl. V/7), *Salona*²³ (Pl. VI/1-4), but also in Egypt, at *Madytos*²⁴ (Pl. VI/5), or in *Asia Minor*, at *Ephesus*²⁵ (Pl. V/6-7) and other unidentified places²⁶. There are a few other examples not mentioned here, but the image is clear: the area of diffusion for this type of instrument, and this type of décor, is wide. There is a predilection of discoveries in the Eastern part of the Empire, but I believe that it is only the state of research and not the historical reality.

Most of the mentioned distaffs are found in graves, with the singular exception from *Dinogetia*, and are without marks of usage, practically brand new. They were put there to emphasize the good and feminine qualities of the departed. Some researchers are of the opinion that all the *Venus* distaffs are only symbolic and not for usage, or that they are merely wedding gifts²⁷. As for the distaff from *Capidava*, we propose another theory altogether. The artefact has serious marks of usage, naturally, on the handheld parts: the shaft and the ring. The goddess on top of the shaft has no usage marks, which is only natural because only the unspun wool was fastened there. Moreover, from the same context several spindle whirls were found²⁸, attesting that the distaff was in fact used for spinning wool.

REPRESENTATION OF RING-DISTAFFS ON SCULPTURAL MONUMENTS

The ring-distaffs are represented on several funerary monuments, some of them discovered in Asia Minor. The headstone of *Apphe* and *Nicandros*²⁹, from Iznik (Turkey), dated in the 3rd c. A.D., depicts in its upper registry the usual day-to-day utensils of a woman, among which a ring-distaff. The same situation is encountered with another headstone dedicated to a woman named *Ia*³⁰ (Pl. VIII/1), again from Iznik, but dated in the 2nd c. A.D., on which the ring-distaff is represented together with the spindle. As mentioned earlier, in Pannonia there are fifteen headstones depicting distaffs and spindles (Pl. VIII/2, 4). All of them are dated in the first two centuries A.D. and are similar to their Asian parallels.

The depiction of the distaff and spindle on the headstones of women is evidence for the symbolic value of these objects. Their role is to emphasize and project onto posterity that the departed was a virtuous matron and a faithful wife.

CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The symbolism behind the carefully carved distaffs is deeper than the usual house chores for which they were intended. In ancient times spinning was one of the domestic duties of women. In Roman society spinning took a new and more important symbolism. Spinning utensils characterize a Roman woman as a virtuous and industrious, a real mistress of the house. From the second millennium BC, up to Late Antiquity, spindle and distaff are regarded as statute symbols of the distinguished and modest wife. One of the later dated (6th c. A.D.) representations of women spinning is in Vienna Genesis³¹ (Pl. VII/3), and depicts the allegory of the good and the bad wife; the bad wife tries to take other women's husbands while the good wife is spinning (with a hand distaff no less!) and raises her children.

²² Fedoseev, Csevelev 1999, 178, fig. 4.

²³ Ivcevic 1999-2000, 478, fig. 1-4.

²⁴ Cremer 1996, 137, Abb. 3-4.

²⁵ Schintlmeister 2013, 35, no. 56-57, 128, abb. 56-57;

²⁶ Vass 2013, tab. 2/1-2.

²⁷ Vass 2013, 69.

²⁸ The spindle whirls are from clay, have a biconical shape, and are currently in processing. They will be illustrated in a future study.

²⁹ Adak, Şahin 2005, 151, no. 19.

³⁰ Adak, Şahin 2005, 151, no. 14.

³¹ Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 134, fig 8.

The distaff discovered at *Capidava* is the latest of this type and also the only one found in a clear housing context and it was clearly used according with its original function. The small statuette carved on top of the object may or may not be a late representation of *Venus Pudica*; it may well be a syncretic symbol of fertility combining older beliefs with Roman tradition.

The novelty in this discovery, the real find, is not the artefact *per se*, but the endurance of an early Roman, even republican, set of values transposed in a housing complex from the 6th c. on the outskirts of the Empire. Making wool with a beautifully carved bone distaff and a spindle in the comfort of one's own home represents the genuine image of Roman living in a time when the grasp on civilisation is thin and the Dark Ages are only a few decades away.

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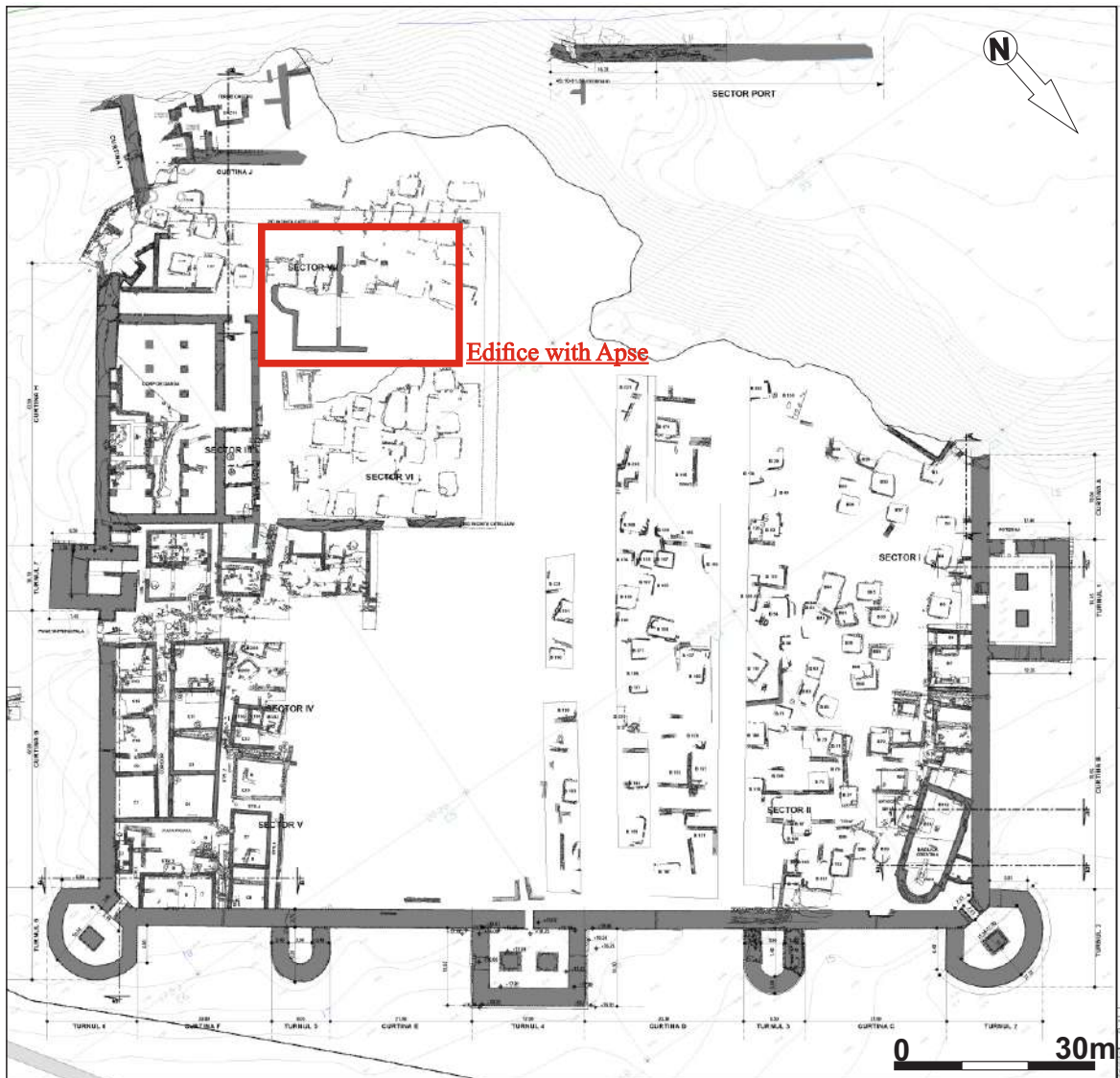
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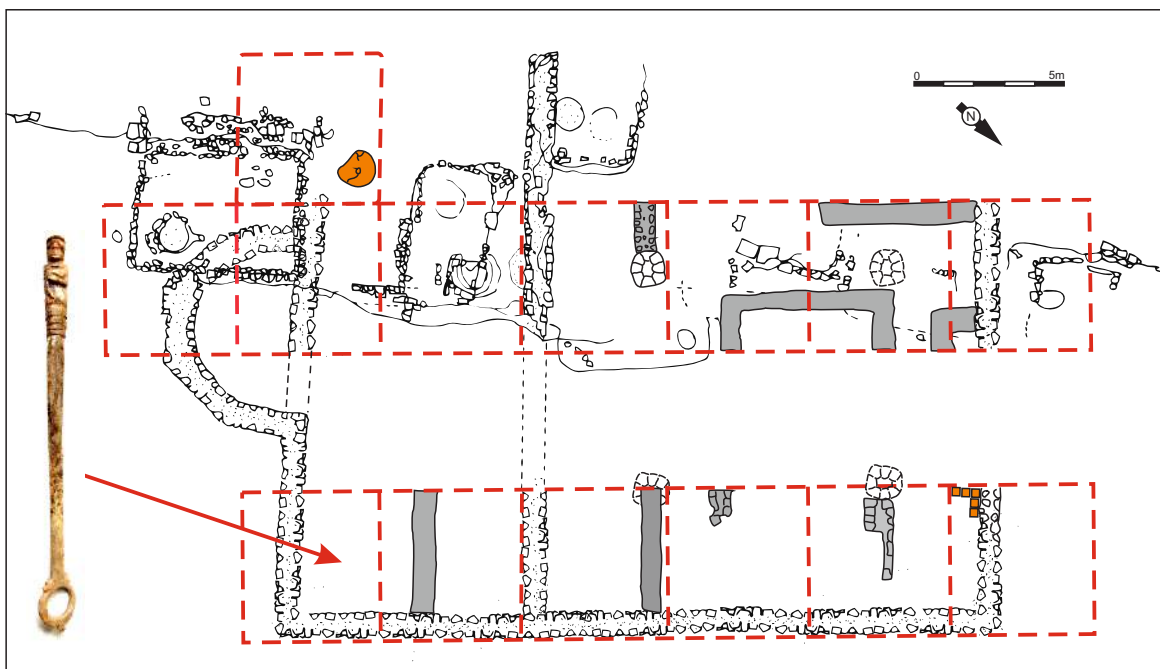
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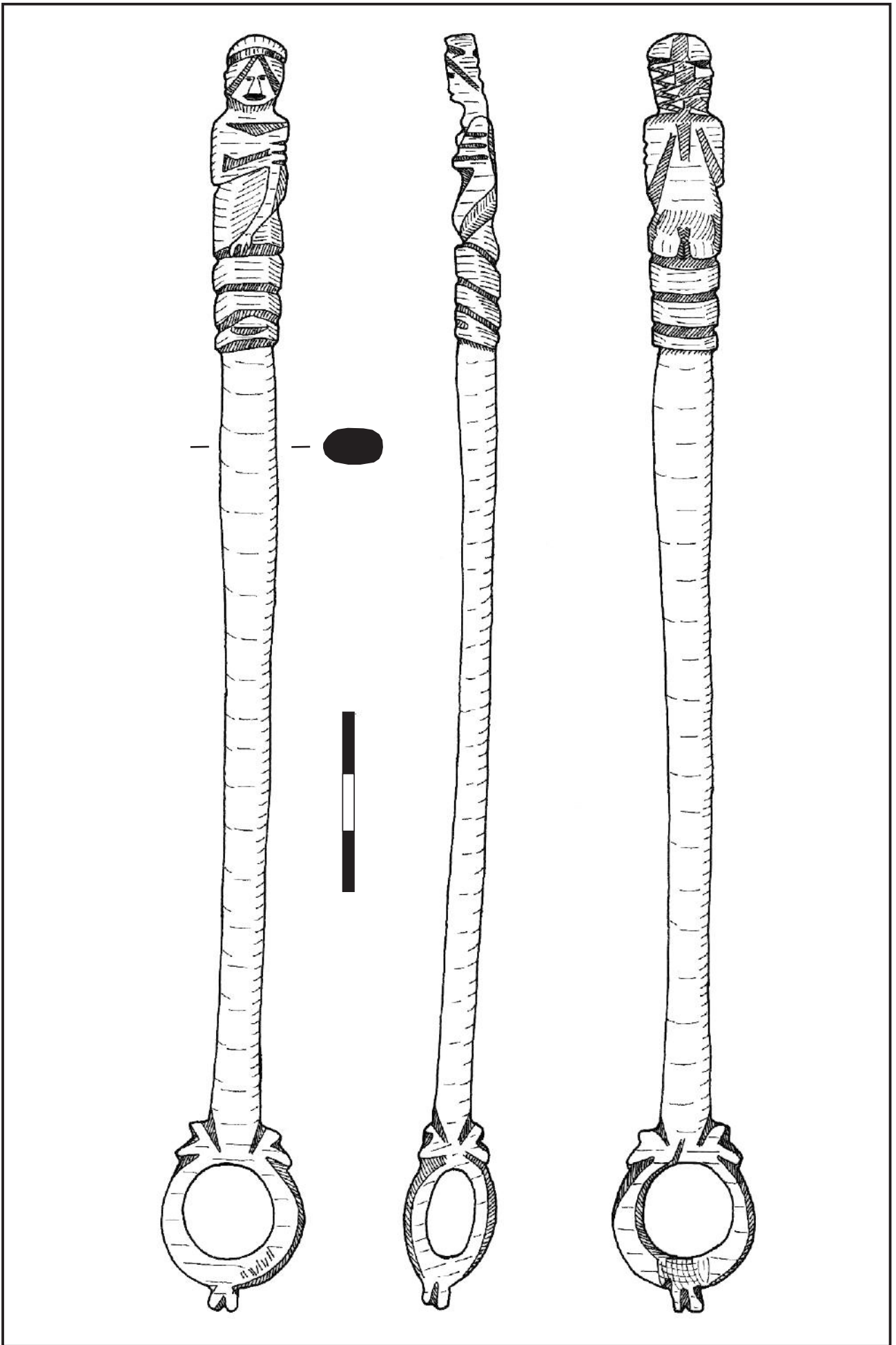
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Pl. II



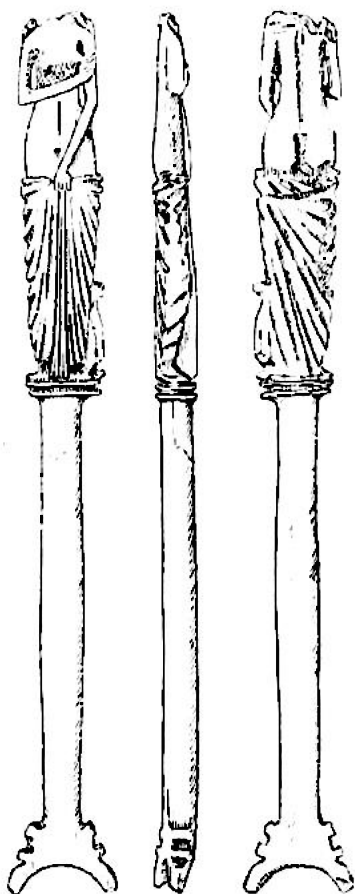
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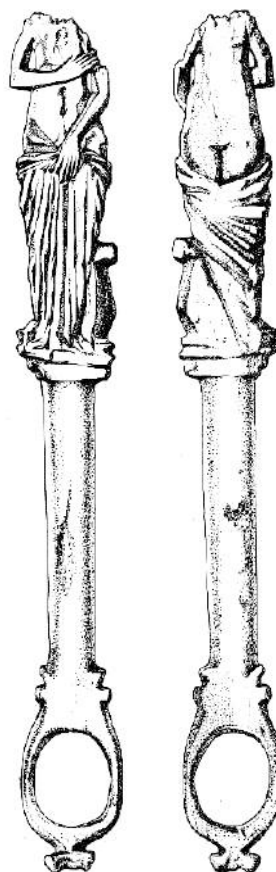
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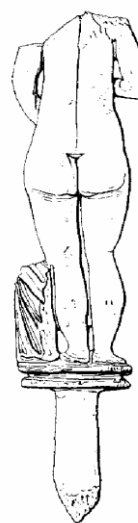
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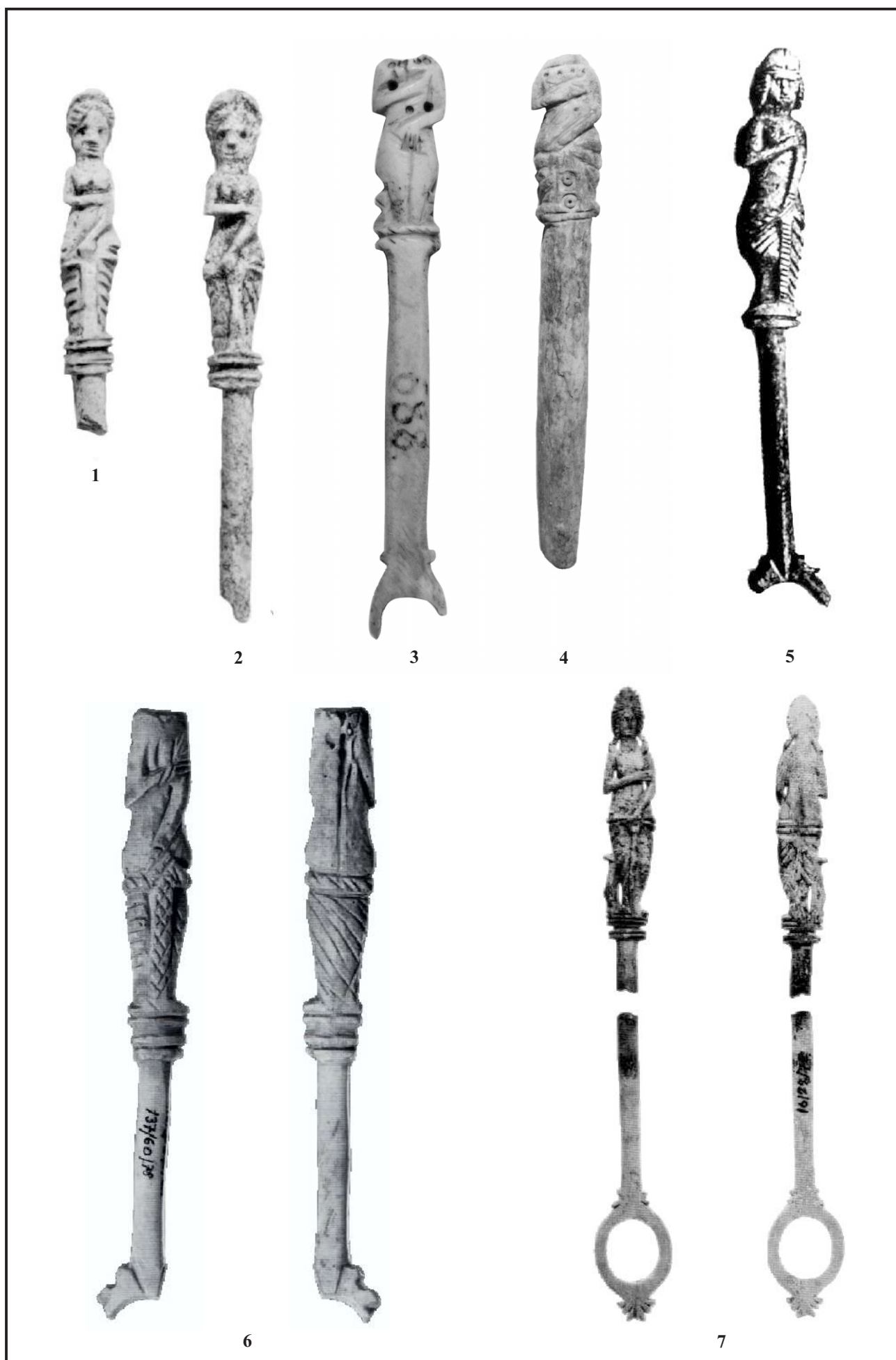


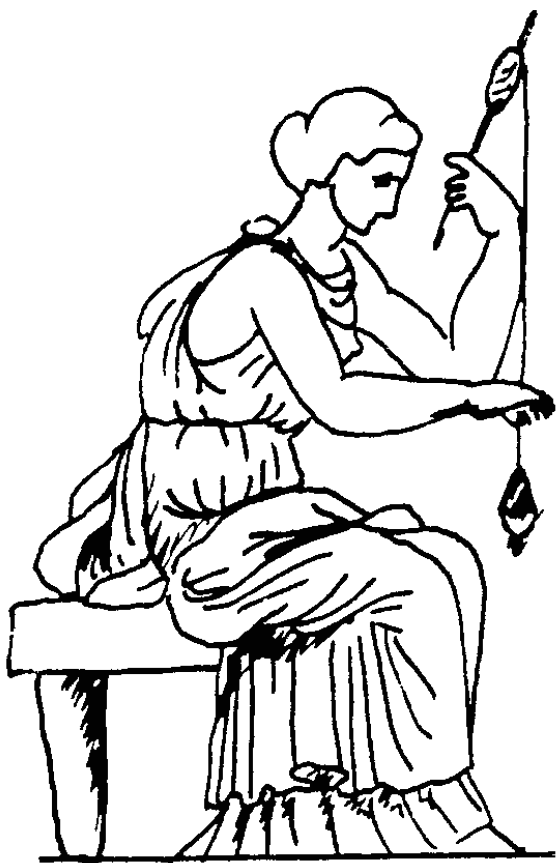
6



7







1



2



3

