

The Funeral Altars in the Province of Thrace in the 2nd - 3rd centuries

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The funeral altars *arae* in the province of Thrace are homogenous category of funeral monuments used by part of the Roman provincial middle class. The funeral altars have not been a subject of a complex study until now. There are studies on certain finds but they focus only on the analysis of their epigraphic component.

All funeral altars found in Thrace have a quadrangular section and are divided into three types (fig. 1). Each type is defined by the profile of the upper and the lower end. Type I includes the greatest number of finds which have complicated profiles of both ends. There are two sub-types according to the shape of the upper part: subtype 1 - with a flat end; subtype 2 - with a pyramid-shaped end. Subtype 1 was most widely spread in the province and was used mainly in the period until the mid 2nd - mid 3rd century. Subtype 2 is represented by a single find from Perinthus, influenced by the Syrian tradition. The unification of the profiles of subtype I funeral altars hampers the study of the influences and the defining of the typical style of a certain atelier. Type II is represented by a smaller number of finds which have simplified profiles. The complicated transitions of

the former type are replaced by oblique surfaces. This type of funeral altars are dated to the first half of the 3rd century. The type II funeral altars are typical for the Western part of the province of Thrace and Augusta Trajana. Type III includes the finds, which are the simplest in shape. Their ends are connected with the body through a step. It is not possible to propose a precise date for them for the moment.

The appearance of the quadrangular funeral altar (*ara*) as a structural shape in the province of Thrace might have happened via the Western provinces as well as via the Greek East. Their late appearance in Thrace (the mid 2nd century) suggests that they appeared as a result of universal fashion in the provincial culture satisfying the needs of certain section of the society.

The interpretation of *the arae* as a sepulchral mark depends not so much on the rare relief effigies but on their character and shape. The combination of a sacred tradition, enriched by architectural elements and representativeness determined the high value of the funeral altar as a structure in itself.