

Viktorija Sokolovska

Phenomenon - Demir Kapija, the Ancient Stenae

UDK: 904:711.424(497.714)“652”

Museum of Macedonia
Ćurćiska b.b., Skopje

For me and my after war generation of archaeologists, Demir Kapija was a mystery, which has roused a strange feeling, from which radiated attractive power that culminated in desire to seize and illuminate its secrets. This is not only the natural beauty of magnificent rocks that make the defile through which Vardar makes his way towards Aegean Sea (fig. 1). Neither is the fact that those mighty, breathtaking rocks, divide two geographical regions. That feeling is planted in us by the knowledge that there a numerous vases were found, made in Attic pottery workshops.¹ We were aware that those red-figured vases, came to us as import for the needs of local inhabitants, but, in the same time, as luxurious objects which immigrants from south brought along.

Between various pottery shapes and types (lekythos-aribaloí, oinochoes, gutti, kylikes, skyphoi and others), prominent place belongs to well known hydria (fig. 2a), on which, in remarkable drawing the scene connected with Dionysus and his thiasos is depicted by the Athenian painter Medias towards the end of 5th century B.C.² No less significant is another vase, a pelike, bearing representation of Maenad surrounded by two Satyrs (fig. 2b).³ The appearance of those vases with the scene of Dionysus sphere are connected with the beginnings of drama, one significant achievement in the cultural development of our region, long before appearance of the permanent theater objects in Stobi, Heraclea and Lychnidos.⁴ On the other hand, the presence of white-ground lekythoi (discovered in Grave 5), connected with funerary rites, confirmed that in Demir Kapija immigrants from Athens were present (fig. 2c). That happened at the

¹ The vases are discovered during construction of limekilns in Demir Kapija, gathered by Gorgi Mirčevski, the teacher from Prilep, in 1947 arrived in Archaeological museum in Skopje. Even today, they are the richest collection of Attic vases in the Museum of Macedonia. See: Dušanka Vučković Todorović, *Grčki grob iz Demir Kapije*, *Starinar* IX-X, 1958/59, Beograd, 281 sqq; *Antička Demir Kapija*, *Starinar* XII, Beograd 1961, 229 sqq.

² *Ibid.*, Fig. 30.

³ *Ibid.*, Fig. 51.

⁴ For the beginnings of drama on our sites, see: V. Sokolovska, *Pokretni arheološki materijal sa teatarskom tematikom iz Makedonije*, *Antički teatar na tlu Jugoslavije*, Novi Sad 1981, 221-227.



Fig. 1. View to Demir Kapija

end of 5th century B.C., when Demir Kapija, the ancient Stenae, was still in the frames of Paenonia, and their high cliffs were natural border to the south toward Macedonia.

In that period, it seems that at the head of paenonian state was Teutaos, an unknown ruler, which is lately known by discovery of one coin - diobolos, with the bull on obverse and kantharos on the reverse (fig. 3).⁵ His residence, as that of the later paenonian rulers Agis and Lyppeios, was located on the summit of Demir Kapija massive, known as Ramnište, where the ruins of their fortress witness the king's power.⁶ A hundred years later, on paenonian throne was Patraus (340/35-315 B.C.), whose coin is found in Demir Kapija.⁷ It belongs to the type where the portrait of the ruler is presented on the obverse and boar on the reverse, as symbol of his power (fig. 4). After Lyppeios, Patraus is the second paenonian ruler whose image is presented on his coins. If we have in mind that the portrait is the highest achievement in the art of sculpture, than it is possible to imagine the cultural level on which the paenonian king's house was raised.

Periodically conducted excavations by archaeologists,⁸ brought to conclusion that Stenae was never developed into real urban agglomeration. Numerous small settle-

⁵ V. Lilčić - P. Josifovski, MNG 1, Skopje 1994, 27-37. The coin is found at Markovi Kuli, Korešnica. This is a unique example of this ruler. See, N. Šeldarov, Makedonija i Pajonija, Skopje 2003, 147, no. 758.

⁶ N. Petrović, Demir Kapija, Arhitektonski nalazi na sektoru "Manastir", Starinar XII, Beograd 1961, 217-228.

⁷ V. Sokolovska, Novija arheološka iskopavanja u Demir Kapiji, Starinar XXIV-XXV, Beograd 1975, 182-192, Pl. III, Fig. 7.

⁸ The archaeological excavations are conducted in the period from 1948-1953 by the part of Yugoslav team under guidance of D. Vučković Todorović, and later, in 1970-1971 by the part of Archaeological museum in Skopje under guidance of Viktorija Sokolovska and Radmila Pašić. See: V. Sokolovska, Arheološki istraživanja vo Demir Kapija, Maced. acta archaeol. 4, Prilep 1978, 93-112; R. Pašić, Praistorijska iskopavanja u Demir Kapiji, Starinar XXVI, Beograd 1976, 155-158.



Fig. 2a. Hydria, late 5th century B.C., b. Pelike, late 5th century B.C.,
c. White ground lekythos, late 5th century B.C.

ments dispersed in the vicinity, whose names are unknown, some fortified with strong ramparts, among which Markovi Kuli at Korešnica is the most impressive one, testified that they arose as settlements of local or immigrant population in the search for mineral wealth, especially of lead-silver ore, of which this region is abundant. Maybe, that is the reason why Demir Kapija did not give a whole urban picture, and the investigators had to be satisfied with partial discoveries, i.e. isolated occurrences, whose results should be connected in one unit.



Fig. 3. Coin, diobol
of Teutaos, c. 430-400 B.C., found
at Markovi Kuli, Korešnica



Fig. 4. Coin, drachma of Patraos
(340/35-315 B.C.), found in Demir Kapija
on the area of necropolis

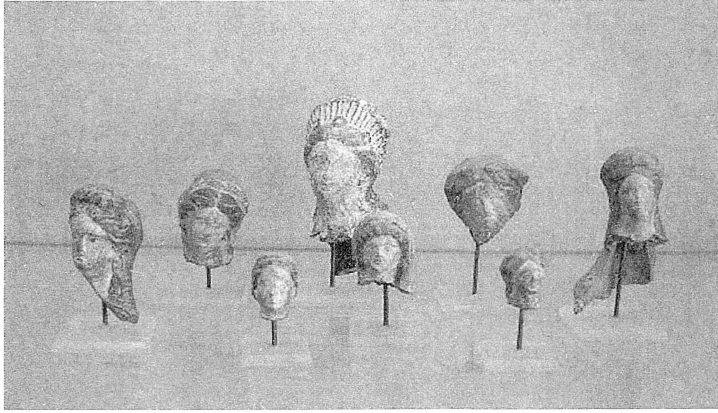


Fig. 5. Images of goddess in terracotta, late 2-1 centuries B.C., found in the cave at Dren

During the time, we sought that this important site was destined to reveal its secrets through chance discoveries. That is confirmed by the discovery of numerous terracotta figurines in the cave at Dren, in the Demir Kapija vicinity, site explained as an ancient sanctuary, *locus sanctus*.⁹ This occurrence, which has its roots in the Bronze Age, is

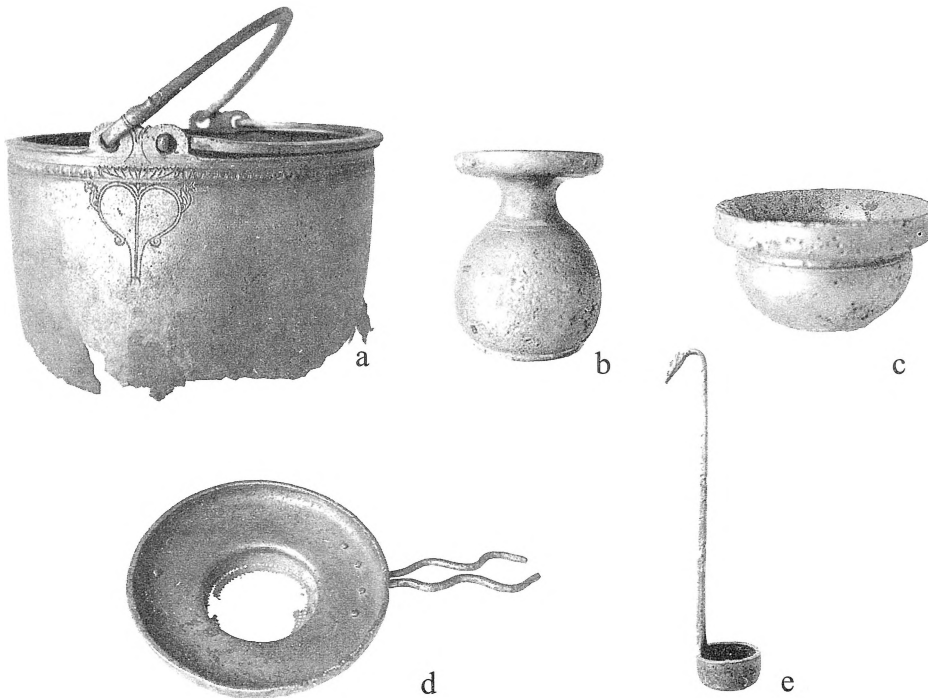


Fig. 6a-e. Bronze finds from grave No. 3, end of 5th century B.C.

⁹ For terracotta's from the cave at Dren, see: V. Bitrakova Grozdanova, *Spomenici od helenističkiot period vo SR Makedonija*, Skopje 1988, 138, Pl. XI; For the beliefs in the Antiquity along Vardar River see: Ead., *Religija i umetnost vo antikata vo Makedonija*, Skopje 1999, 188, 204, 206, 244.

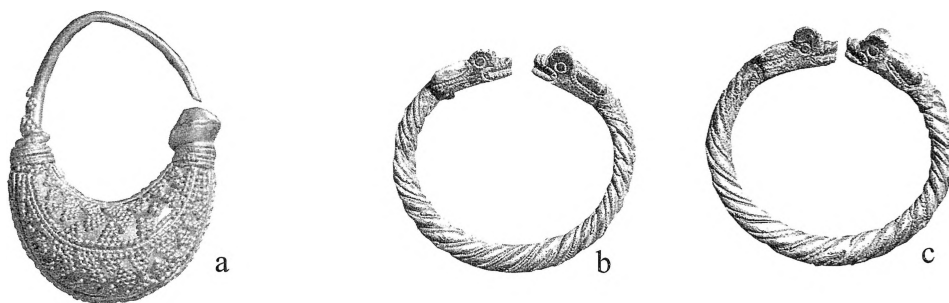


Fig. 7a-b. Gold earrings of boat type and silver bracelets, 5th century B.C.



Fig. 8a-b. Finds from grave No. 44, 4th century B.C.

present on the Macedonian soil through the whole period of antiquity. The images of female goddesses (fig. 5), among which Aphrodite has prominent place, speak of the spiritual necessity of local people to express its religious feelings. The aesthetical appeal of the images and diversity of presentations testifies that they are works of good artisans, which in the early antiquity worked for numerous customers.

Among the finds which are discovered in Demir Kapija, in the area of the necropolis, should be mentioned the ones from grave No. 3: a bronze situla, simpulum with handle shaped as swan head, strainer and two small round vessels with accentuated molded rim, vessels for perfumed oil (figs. 6a-e), that apparently has their role in the funerary rite.¹⁰

Another example that should not be surmounted is the gold earring in the shape of moon, known as boat-type (fig. 7a) decorated in the granulation technique with triangles and rhombs. The clear shape as original idea, without additional elements, and the extremely fine execution speaks that this earring is a product of Chalkidian masters from the end of 5th century B.C. Another inspiration, belonging to the same art sphere, is represented on a pair of silver bracelets which belong to the animal type or so called "Serpent stile" (figs. 7b, c), and, another similar pair with ends in shape of palmettes.¹¹

¹⁰ D. Vučković Todorović, *Antička Demir Kapija*, Figs. 16-20.

¹¹ I. Mikulčić, *Nakit klasičnog doba iz Demir Kapije*, *Starinar* XXI, Beograd 1972, 137, Pl. I, 181, 424, 425, 428, 429.

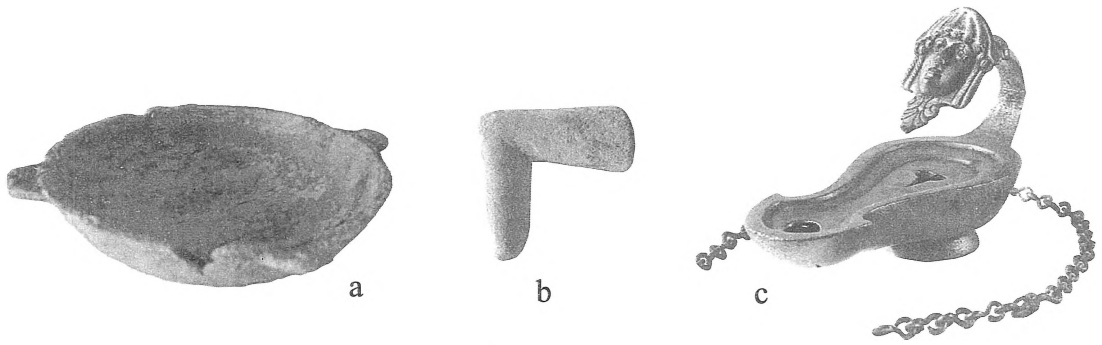


Fig. 9a-c. Finds from grave No. 45, 1st century B.C.

. Their small size suggests that they were made for funerary aim, appearance that is present on our region.

The occasional excavations on the area where the necropolis is spread gave several graves with interesting finds. In a child grave (No. 44) are found two female terracotta figurines, one earring in the shape of Eros, one necklace with biconical beads and one necklace - chain which ends are shaped as lions' heads (figs. 8a, b).¹² Even today, this gold jewellery is interesting as work of Macedonian thoreutes from the late 4th century B.C. In another, male grave (No. 45), an iron spear and sarissa and bronze strigilis are found, which are rear on our sites.¹³ Another grave contained very interesting finds: a marble medicine bowl with pastle, and bronze lamp on which handle is tragic mask, one very rear Alexandrian product which came at our Demir Kapija (figs. 9a, b, c).¹⁴ In this case, again, we have no information about the original position of the finds, except that a medicine man was buried in this grave.

Another discovery has extraordinary significance. That is the sanctuary dedicated to Dioskures, the sons of Zeus and Leda, twin brothers Kastor and Polideuk. Located to the north, at the exit of Demir Kapija Gorge, although from this building a small part is discovered, it is enough to understand his position and function.¹⁵ Inside the walls are discovered - tree statuettes depicting the Triad in style of Lysippus and tree reliefs (figs. 10-11). Today these founds offer several aspects of examination: are they represent the warship of Dioskures as bearers of light and protectors of sailors, or suggest the worship of the goddess in which service they were, or their sister Helena or Artemis Thalamos, protector of the marriage room is in question. Maybe is the name of MAKETIANOC who wrote his name on one votive relief as dedicator. Those elements

¹² V. Sokolovska, *Novija arheološka iskopavanja u Demir Kapiji*, Pl. II, Figs. 1-4; V. Bitrakova Grozdanova, *Spomenici od helenističkiot period vo SR Makedonija*, Skopje 1987, 64.

¹³ V. Sokolovska, *Novija arheološka iskopavanja*, Pl. III, Fig. 1-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Pl. IV, Fig. 1-5.

¹⁵ V. Sokolovska, *Svetilište na Dioskurite kaj Demir Kapija*, ŽA XXIV, Skopje 1974, 267, Pl. 1-2, Figs. 1-4; In this article the statuettes of Dioskuroi and goddess, as the relief's, I have dated to 2nd - 3rd century. Today, I have come to conclusion that they belong to much earlier time, to 2nd century B.C., the time to which belong the coins of Thessalonica and Amphipolis found in the same sanctuary.

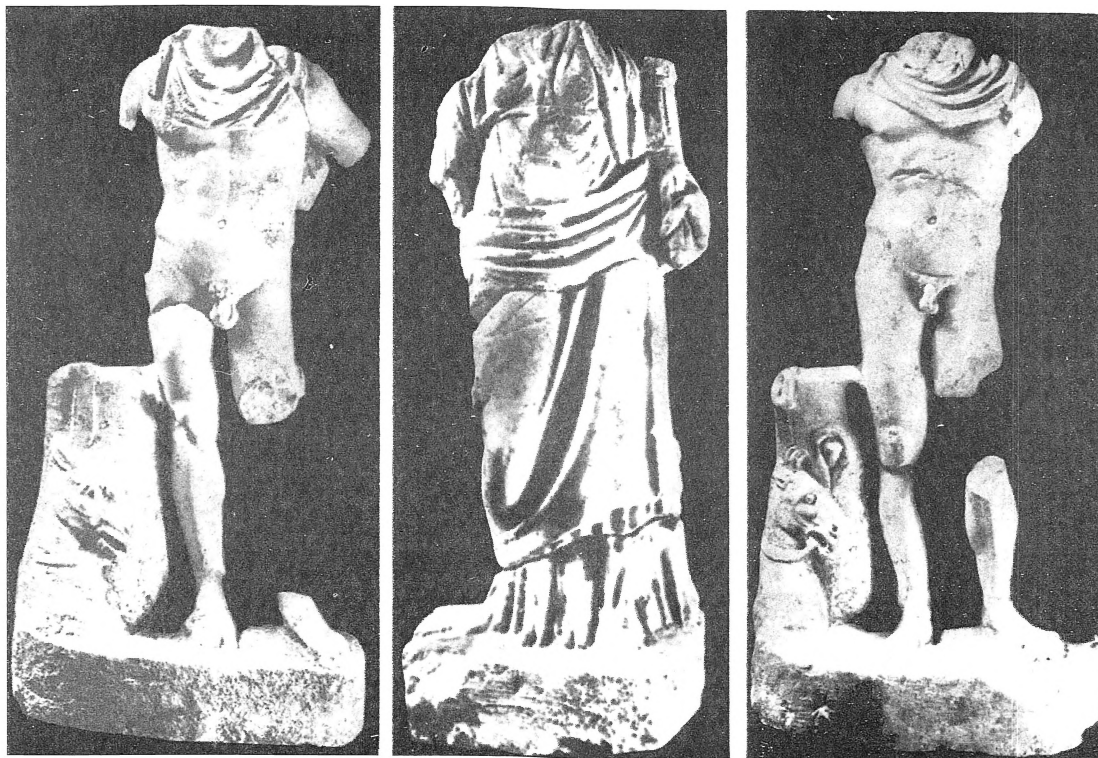


Fig. 10. Statuettes depicting Dioskuroi and goddess, late Hellenistic time



Fig. 11. Relief depicting Dioskuroi and goddess, late Hellenistic time

that need more profound research rise from this discovery.¹⁶ On all examples as a rule is presented the ordinary iconographic scheme of the Triad, but in individual manner of the artisan who made them.

In the Roman time, Demir Kapija for a long time was in the frames of Macedonia, but even then it did not receive urban phisionomy. On the Peutinger map, it figured as station Stenae on the road between Stobi and Thessalonika. It seems that life in that time was pretty modest. Some occasional grave with rich finds confirms existence of higher social class, which had possibility to buy luxurious and expensive things as for example this necklace of gold, and

¹⁶ See: V. Bitrakova Grozdanova, *Vrskite megu Pajonija i Trakija, Religija i umetnost vo antikata vo Makedonija*, 238 sqq.

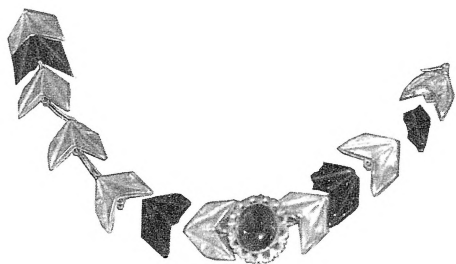


Fig. 12. Part of gold necklace, found at Budur Čiflik, 3th century A.D.



Fig. 13. Portrait head of man, middle of 3th century A.D.

gagat and amethyst as middle ornament (fig. 12). We have examples of citizens in whose honor statues and busts were raised, from which the portraits are preserved up to today. What is fascinating is the circumstance that in Demir Kapija is found one male portrait head in marble, which belongs to the time of emperor Gallienus (253-268 A.D.) (fig. 13).¹⁷ The head was destined to be inserted in the statue, which is not found. This head is the last portrait discovered at our region, which marks the end of, up to now, significant sculptural activity in Macedonia, which is forever broken with the invasion of Goths in 268/9 A.D.¹⁸

I believe that the future will bring new discoveries which will crystalize the picture of phenomenon Demir Kapija, the ancient Stenae, thus becoming more clear and more close to us.

¹⁷ N. Vulić, *Antički spomenici naše zemlje*, Spomenik 71, Beograd, No. 98; V. Sokolovska, *Antička skulptura vo SR Makedonija*, Skopje 1987, 131, No. 52.

¹⁸ Zosim, I, 43.