

A HANDLE OF A WAX SPATULA IN THE SHAPE OF MINERVA FROM BRATISLAVA-RUSOVCE

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Keywords: Bratislava-Rusovce, Gerulata, NW Pannonia, 2nd–3rd century AD, wax spatula, writing equipment, Minerva.

Abstract: A handle of a wax spatula in the shape of Minerva from Bratislava-Rusovce. In Bratislava-Rusovce they have found a surface find consisting in a handle of a copper alloy spatula with a bust of Minerva. Originally, this spatula had an iron blade and it was used to spread wax on wooden writing tablets. It is a type of spatula used mainly in southern Britannia, north-western Gaul and Rhineland. In the Danubian provinces it is only rarely observed and the few pieces date back to the 2nd and 3rd century AD. The depiction of Minerva on the handle of the spatula has to do with her function as patroness of learning. The object is made of copper alloy, zinc, lead, and tin.

1 INTRODUCTION

The collections of the Slovak National Museum – Archaeological Museum preserve a copper alloy object decorated with a bust of Minerva wearing a Corinthian helmet. The object was allegedly found in a field, in the site Dolné pole [Lower field] 2 km south of the Roman camp of Gerulata, today located in the urban space of Bratislava-Rusovce (Fig. 1). No archaeological sites have been recorded in this location for the time being, although several Roman finds have come from it. The artefact can also be linked to the not too distant Roman rural settlement that was researched in the 1990s in the land register of Bratislava-Čunovo (Schmidtová 2012, 268–271).

2 ARTEFACT DESCRIPTION

Handle of a spatula made of copper alloy, ending with a bust of Minerva wearing a gown and a Corinthian helmet with a plume (Fig. 2). On the chest – by means of a bulge – the aegis is schematically represented. On the plume the helmet is bilaterally and asymmetrically decorated with a multiple motif in the shape of the letter “V”. Under the helmet we observe grooves that hint at the goddess’ hair. Her face is damaged; her eyes are made of bumps; the nose is almost completely faded away and the mouth is not preserved. Her gown is decorated with grooves, but the decoration is partially dissolved. The back of the bust is flat. In the lower part of the plume and under



Fig. 1. Bratislava-Rusovce. 1 – Roman castellum, 2 – place of finding (author: I. Bazovský).

Obr. 1. Bratislava-Rusovce. 1 – rímsky kastel, 2 – miesto nálezu (autor: I. Bazovský).

the neck, we observe cavities that have arisen due to faulty cast. The central part of the handle is shaped like a section-rounded rod, with a reinforcement exactly at the point of connection to

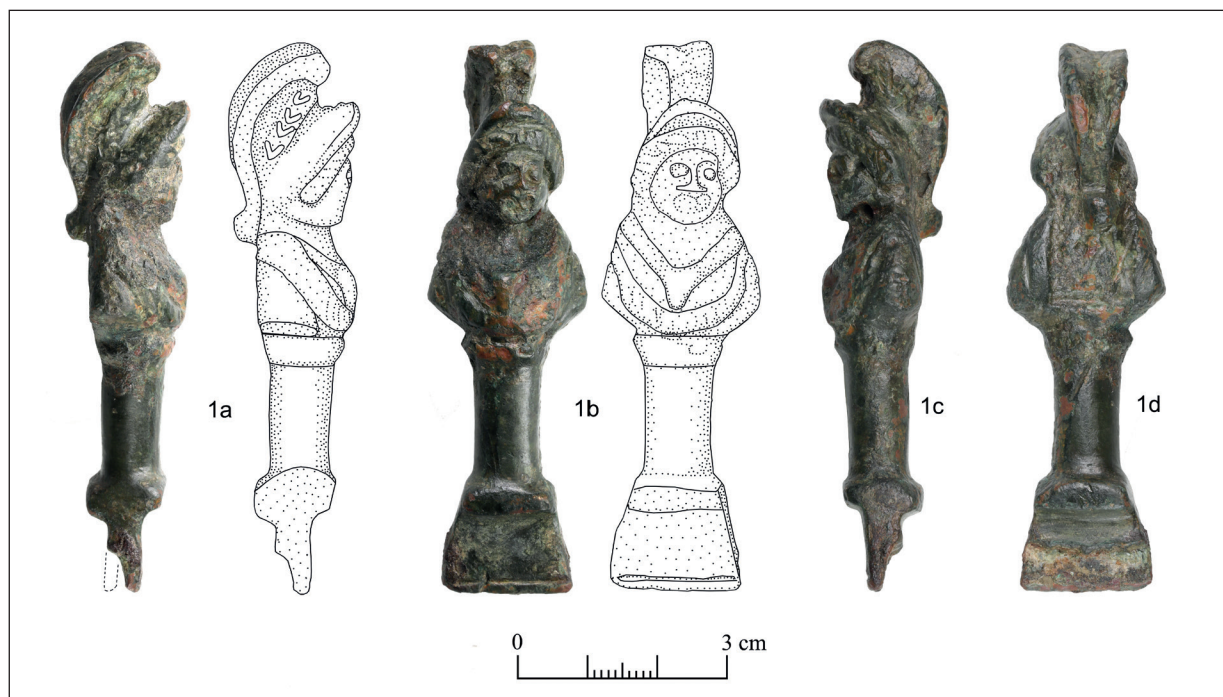


Fig. 2. Bratislava-Rusovce. Handle of a spatula with a bust of Minerva (author: I. Bazovský).

Obr. 2. Bratislava-Rusovce. Rúčka špachtle s bustou Minervy (autor: I. Bazovský).

the bust. At the lower edge, the handle is flat; then it widens towards the trapezoidal plate, which is decorated at the end with a transversal groove. In the lower part, we observe the rest of the groove, while the rear part of the plate has not been preserved. Size: length 7,75 cm; maximum width of the bust 2,20 cm; diameter of the central part 0,90 cm; maximum width of the trapezoidal plate 1,85 cm.

3 X-RAY FLUORESCENCE ANALYSIS OF THE OBJECT

To determine the exact material composition of the object, an X-ray fluorescence analysis was performed. For the sake of the measurement, we have used an XRF analyser type NITON XL3t, from the manufacturer Thermo Fisher Scientific, NITON (USA). This instrument is destined to non-destructive analysis of the chemical composition of material surfaces. At the measuring point on the back side of the trapezoidal plate, a patina was removed containing an increased share of tin and iron. The measurement showed that – based on the composition of the

elements – the material is red brass, with a content of copper (79,9%), zinc (7,1%), lead (6,47%), and tin (5,93%).¹

4 TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The object features a bust of Minerva with an attached rod-shaped part resembling a column completed by a flat trapezoidal plate. This plate, together with the rest of the groove at its end, led us to suppose that it could be the handle of an instrument to which an iron blade was originally attached. On the basis of analogies, it was shown to be the handle of a wax spatula, for removing or spreading wax on wooden writing tablets (*Willi 2021, 76*). The spatula could be used to erase the entire text from the tablet, whereas small corrections were made with the help of the flat ends of styluses (*Willi/Colombo 2021, 43*). According to ancient authors, the wax on the tablets was spread after being well heated and in a liquid state; however, the sources fail to mention the tool that was used to apply the wax (*Merten 1985, 27*). In the past, various researchers had already managed to identify simple iron spatulas on the basis of

¹ The analysis was carried out by Mgr. art. B. Ritterová (Slovak National Museum – Archaeological Museum).

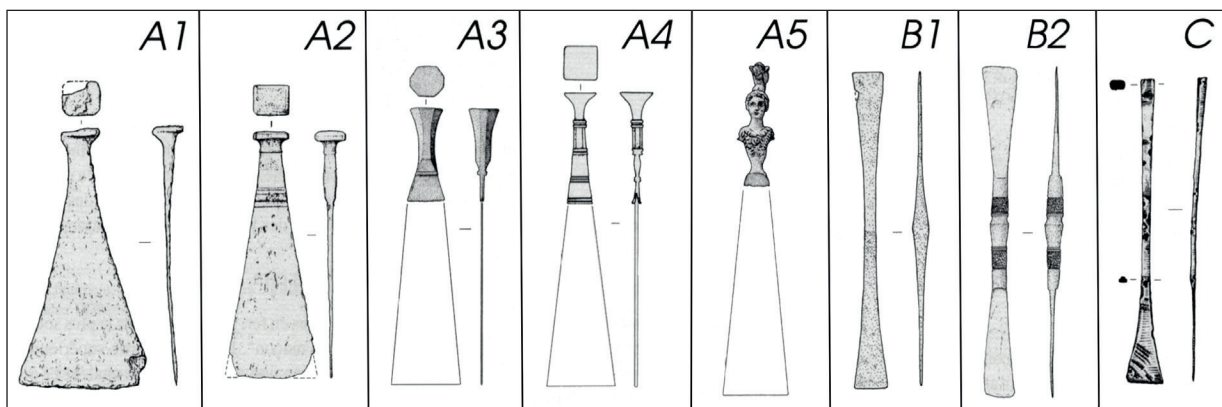


Fig. 3. Typological classification of wax spatulas (according to Feugère 1995, modified).

Obr. 3. Typologické triedenie špachtlí na vosk (podľa Feugère 1995, upravené).

some paintings and finds from Emona and Pompeii. Nevertheless, for a considerable time it was not entirely clear what these spatulas were used for (Božič 2002, 34; Božič/Feugère 2004, 9). It was thought that they could be used as knives, razors, medical instruments or end elements of sceptres (Feugère 1995, 324). It was not until the 1980s that studies specifically dedicated to these tools helped to shed light on their function as wax spatulas for tablets (Gaitsch 1984; Merten 1985). An important element confirming this use is the fact that these spatulas have also been found together with other writing utensils in some graves – for instance in the tomb of St Aegidius in Aquileia (Božič/Feugère 2004, Fig. 21), in the tumulus 26 in Berlingen (Willi 2021, Fig. 3) or in tomb 15 in Brindisi (Fünfschilling 2012, Abb. 6). Apart from simple shapes, more complex bimetal versions also occurred. M. Feugère studied the different types of spatulas and subdivided them into three groups: triangular (A), double-ended (B) and rod-shaped (C; Fig. 3; Feugère 1995, 321, Fig. 1). To date, there is still no unified opinion on how double-ended spatulas were used. According to some authors, they were used in several ways, e.g. as modelling tools in the production of ceramics (Humphreys 2021, 290; Manning 1985, 31). Evidence of the use of these tools as wax spatulas is their common discovery together with some styluses in several graves and in the Titelberg deposit (Feugère 1995, 324). M. Feugère subdivided the triangular spatulas (A) into five types (Fig. 3). The first two types are made of iron (A1, A2), whereas the

other three types (A3, A4, A5) have a copper alloy handle. M. Feugère marked the form of the handle with the shape of Minerva's bust as A5 (Fig. 3).

Surely it is no coincidence that all known finds with anthropomorphic handles feature the goddess Minerva. No doubt this is related to her role in the pantheon of gods. In Rome, Minerva was the virgin patron goddess of wisdom and crafting, but – previously – she used to be a goddess worshipped by the Etruscans. Later, under Greek influence, she was identified with the goddess Athena (Slovník 1974, 389). She was also the goddess of learning and medicine. In Rome, poets and actors gathered in front of her temple on the Aventine Hill (Irmischer 1971, 356). Her importance is also underlined by the fact that she was part of the Roman divine Triad – along with Jupiter and Juno. Since handles in the shape of Minerva were often found without blades, N. Crummy considers that they could have been secondarily used as votive offerings, because Minerva was also attributed thaumaturgic gifts (Crummy 2002, 8). Based on analogies, it is possible that some Minerva-shaped handles were originally decorated with other metal – for example silver (Feugère 1995, 332; Franken 1994, Abb. 12).

The goddess Minerva is relatively often depicted in Roman art – most often in a standing position, and only rarely seated. In addition to single statuettes, small bronze sculptures also include busts which may have been decorative parts of various objects – metal pots, tools,

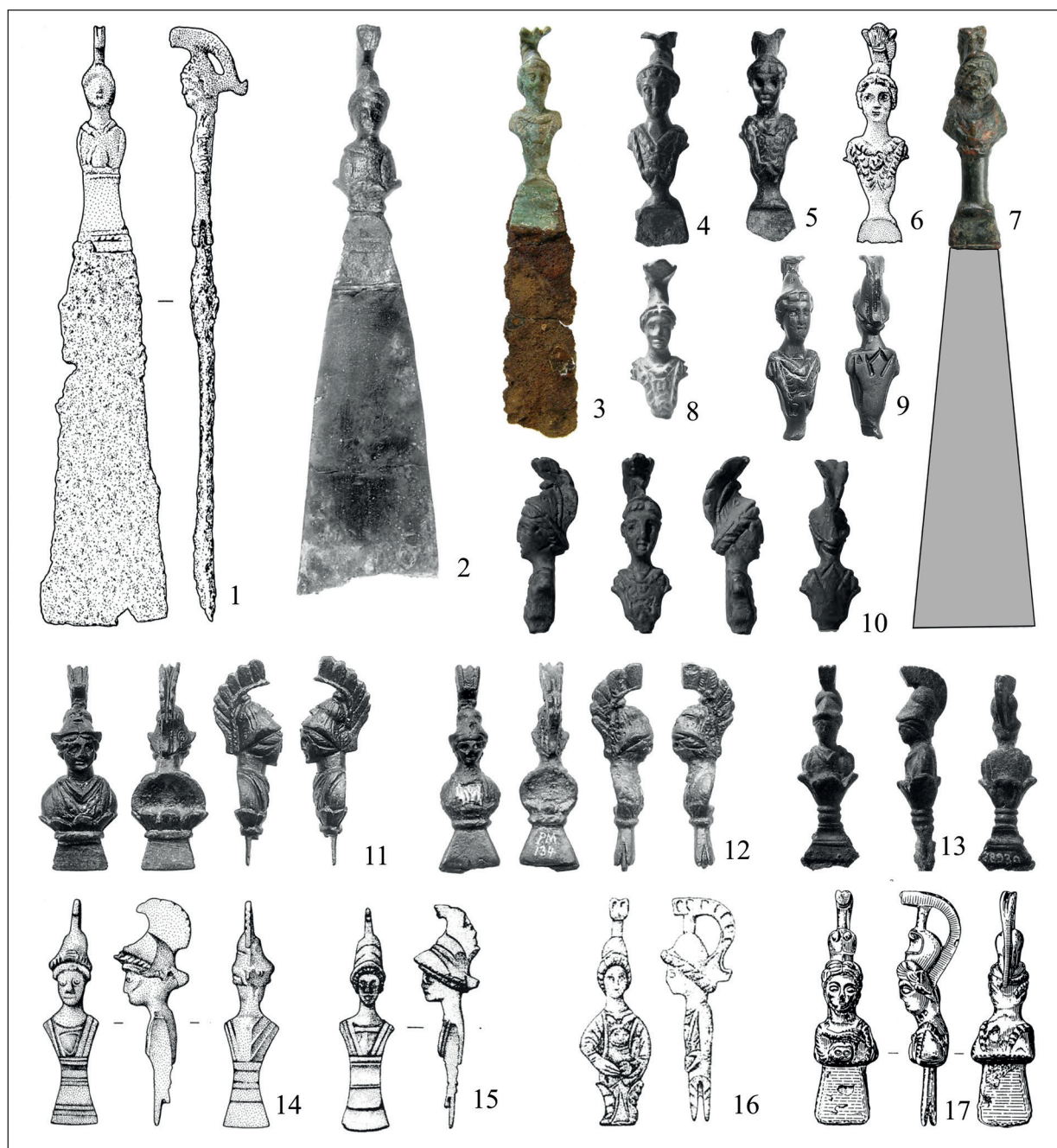


Fig. 4. Finds of spatulas with handle in the shape of a Minerva bust: 1 – Ospringe, 2 – Remagen, 3 – Higworth, 4 – near Norwich, 5 – Roeselare, 6 – Blicquy, 7 – Bratislava-Rusovce (reconstruction), 8 – Carnuntum (?), 9 – Honthheim, 10 – Aquileia, 11, 12 – Trier, 13 – Compiègne, 14 – Kingscote, 15 – Warnborough, 16 – Micheldever, 17 – Stonea (according to: 1, 5, 6, 13, 14, 17 – *Feugère 1995*; 2, 9, 11, 12 – *Faust 1998*; 3 – *Willi 2021*; 4 – *Dawson 2008*; 8 – *Fleischer 1967*; 10 – *Feugère/Giovannini 2000*; 15 – *Worrell 2003*; 16 – *Worrell 2002*).

Obr. 4. Nález špachtlí s rúčkou vo forme busty Minervy: 1 – Ospringe, 2 – Remagen, 3 – Higworth, 4 – near Norwich, 5 – Roeselare, 6 – Blicquy, 7 – Bratislava-Rusovce (rekonštrukcia), 8 – Carnuntum (?), 9 – Honthheim, 10 – Aquileia, 11, 12 – Trier, 13 – Compiègne, 14 – Kingscote, 15 – Warnborough, 16 – Micheldever, 17 – Stonea (podľa: 1, 5, 6, 13, 14, 17 – *Feugère 1995*; 2, 9, 11, 12 – *Faust 1998*; 3 – *Willi 2021*; 4 – *Dawson 2008*; 8 – *Fleischer 1967*; 10 – *Feugère/Giovannini 2000*; 15 – *Worrell 2003*; 16 – *Worrell 2002*).

carriage decorations, furniture, etc. Since iron blades have only rarely been preserved on most of the spatulas with Minerva's bust, the copper alloy handles have often been regarded as handles for knives or razors (Feugère 1995, 324; Franken 1994, 311). In order to identify these objects as spatulas – including their original size (approximately 20–24 cm) – it is essential to refer to fully preserved finds from Ospringe and Remagen (Fig. 4: 1, 2; Feugère/Giovannini 2000, 35). The Remagen spatula is also significant for the chronological framing of the objects themselves; it was found in a tomb together with a coin of Trajan and can therefore be dated to the 2nd century. The Osterburken spatula dates back to the times of the creation of the castellum (between 155 AD and the half of the 3rd century). On the basis of these and other finds, the spatulas with the handle in the shape of Minerva's bust can be dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Faust 1998, 105; Franken 1994, 313). An early attempt to list spatulas with a handle in the shape of Minerva's bust was that of N. Franken, who records 15 specimens (Franken 1994, 315). However, already the following year, M. Feugère published a list containing 37 specimens (Feugère 1995, 326–331). It has been shown that their finds in Roman territory are concentrated in southern Britannia, north-western Gaul and Rhineland (Feugère 1995, Fig. 9). From then on, the number of finds has been growing – especially in Britain, where one can assume there was a workshop for their production and where local variants are often found (Crummy 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; Dawson 2008; Eckardt 2014; Geake 2002; Worrell 2002; 2003; 2008, 356, Fig. 10). In an inventory from 2014 H. Eckardt reported 37 finds in Britain and subdivided them into four groups (A–D) which included far more processed and sometimes highly stylised specimens (Eckardt 2014, 187–193, Appendix 9). The internet database with finds from Britain mentions 39 specimens with regard to the year 2016 (PAS). In the Danubian provinces, this type of tool is found only relatively seldom. As for Pannonia, we know two older finds from Carnuntum (?) and Aquincum (Kuszinszky 1890, 128, tab. I: 2;

Fleischer 1967, 46, Taf. 24: 31); a further find comes from Sarmizegetusa, Dacia (Alicu/Popp/Wollmann 1979, 87, tab. 117: 88). The spatula handle from Sarmizegetusa is interesting because – unlike the others – it has a trapezoidal plate with two holes for inserting rivets to secure the blade. The way the blade was fastened without the use of rivets could be the reason why the spatulas were not preserved in their entirety. The types with Minerva's bust can also be divided into two macro-groups: the first group is rather homogeneous and includes spatulas with the bust directly attached to the trapezoidal plate (Fig. 4: 1, 3–10, 14–17); in the second group we can classify spatulas in which the bust appears to grow from a perigoneum (Fig. 4: 2, 11–13). Within the first group, we can distinguish a subgroup consisting of morphologically uniform spatulas with prominent shrinkage between the bust and the plate – the use of which is not limited to a specific geographical area. This subgroup includes the finds from Highworth, Norwich, and Scawby, Great Britain (Dawson 2008; Willi 2021, Fig. 53; Worrell 2008, 356, Fig. 10), from Roeselare and Blicquy, Belgium (Feugère, 1995, 326, Fig. 5: b, c), from Hontheim, Germany (Faust 1998, 103, Abb. 5), from Aquileia, Italy (Feugère/Giovannini 2000, Fig. 4), and the two above-mentioned Pannonian finds from Aquincum and Carnuntum. A narrower central part can also be observed in the handle of the spatula with bust from Bratislava-Rusovce – with no major similarities among all the material published so far. It differs from other spatulas mainly because of the length of its central part, shaped like a round-sectioned rod which is reinforced at the point of connection with the bust – thus resembling a column.

5 CONCLUSION

Spatulas with handles in the shape of Minerva's bust were used for spreading wax on wooden writing tablets and they represent an important testimony to Roman written culture. This specific type of spatula was marked by M. Feugère as 5A and it is present mainly in southern Britannia, north-western Gaul and Rhineland.

In the other regions of the Roman Empire it appears much more rarely. It dates back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Minerva's motif undoubtedly relates to her function as patroness of learning. The find from Bratislava-Rusovce does not present closer analogies and can be assigned to the shapes with narrower central part of the handle. Apart from the design of the bust, another difference lies in the rod-like shape of the central part, which could be interpreted as a column. If so, it would be the depiction of a bust on a column – i.e. a fact that has not been documented so far for any other handle described in publications.

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RUKOVÄŤ ŠPACHTLE NA VOSK V TVARE MINERVY Z BRATISLAVY-RUSOVIEC

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V zbierkach Slovenského národného múzea – Archeologického múzea je uložený predmet z medenej zliatiny zdobený bustou Minervy v korintskej prilbe. Predmet bol údajne nájdený na poli v polohe Dolné pole 2 km južne od rímskeho tábora Gerulata, ktorý sa v súčasnosti nachádza v intraviláne Bratislavy-Rusoviec (obr. 1). V tejto polohe zatiaľ nevidujeme archeologickú lokalitu, hoci z nej pochádzajú viaceré povrchové nálezy z doby rímskej. Nález môže súvisieť aj s neďalekou rímskou vidieckou usadlosťou, ktorá bola skúmaná v 90. rokoch 20. storočia v katastri Bratislavy-Čunova.

Na bustu Minervy nadväzuje tyčinkovitá časť rúčky kruhového prierezu ukončená lichobežníkovitou platničkou (obr. 2). Röntgenovo-fluorescenčná analýza ukázala, že predmet je vyrobený z tzv. červenej mosadze ktorá obsahuje okrem medi (79,9%) aj zinok (7,1%), olovo (6,47%) a cín (5,93%).

Platnička so zvyškom drážky na konci nás priviedla k predpokladu, že predmet slúžil ako rúčka nástroja, ktorého čepeľ sa nedochovala. Na základe analógií sa ukázalo, že ide o rúčku špachtle na vosk, ktorá sa používala pri odstraňovaní, resp. nanášaní vosku na drevenú písaciu tabuľku. Zobrazenie bohyně Minervy na rúčkach nie je náhodné – táto bohýňa múdrosti bola považovaná za patrónku učencov. Typológiou špachtlí sa zaoberal M. Feugère, ktorý ich rozdelil do troch skupín: na trojuholníkovité,

dvojité a tyčinkovité. Špachtle s bustou Minervy patria do skupiny trojuholníkovitých špachtlí a sú označené ako typ A5 (obr. 3). Tento typ sa vyskytuje najmä v južnej Británii, severozápadnej Galii a v Porýní, v iných oblastiach Rímskej ríše sa objavuje zriedkavejšie. Datovaný je do 2. a 3. storočia. Pri väčšine nálezov sa zachovala len rúčka z medenej zliatiny, preto boli pre ich funkčné určenie a stanovenie pôvodných rozmerov (cca 20–24 cm) kľúčové nálezy kompletne zachovaných analogických špachtlí z Ospringe a Remagenu.

Špachtle s bustou Minervy môžeme tiež rozdeliť na dve väčšie skupiny – do prvej rôznorodejšej skupiny patria špachtle, na ktorých je busta priamo napojená na lichobežníkovitú platničku (obr. 4: 1, 3–10, 14–17), zatiaľ čo do druhej skupiny môžeme zaradiť exempláre s bustou vyrastajúcou z okvetia (obr. 4: 2, 11–13). V rámci prvej skupiny môžeme ešte vyčleniť podskupinu tvarovo takmer identických špachtlí so zúžením medzi bustou a lichobežníkovitou platničkou, z ktorých sa najlepšie zachoval nález z Highworthu (obr. 4: 3). Zúženú strednú časť má aj rúčka z Bratislavy-Rusoviec, avšak bližšiu analógiu k nej medzi publikovaným materiálom nepoznáme. Osobitá je najmä tyčinkovitou strednou časťou so zosilnením v mieste napojenia busty, ktorú možno interpretovať ako stĺp. V takom prípade by išlo o zobrazenie busty na stĺpe, aké nemáme doložené na žiadnej z publikovaných rúčok.

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