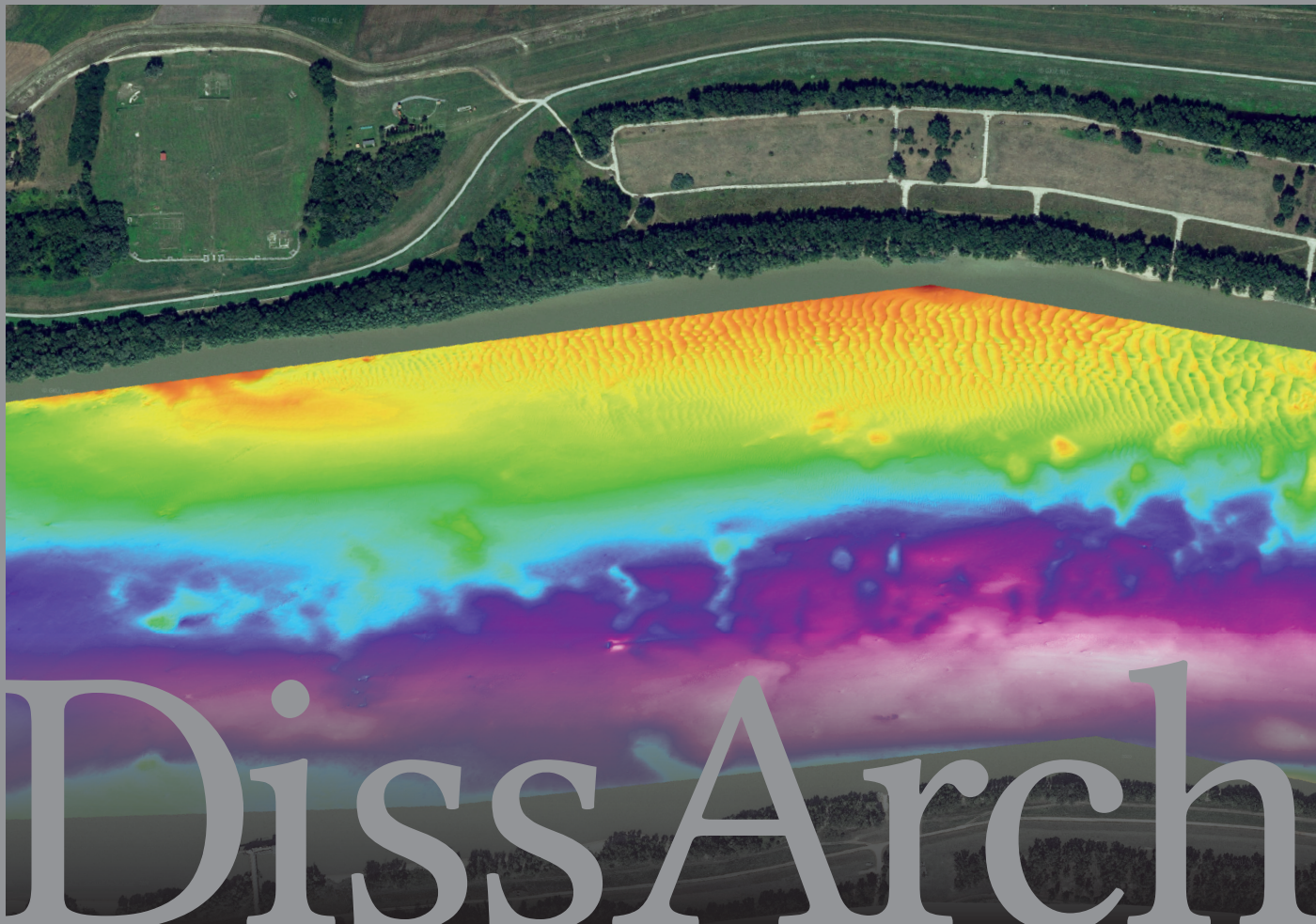


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ex Instituto Archaeologico

Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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Representation and object

A *pyxis* on the sarcophagus of Titus Aelius

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Abstract: The sarcophagus of Titus Aelius was found in 1989 during an excavation conducted by Sándor Petényi at Alsógalla. It stands out amongst sarcophagi depicting married couples for its refined execution and good state of preservation. However, what makes it particularly interesting is the depiction of the woman, who is shown holding a small, round object in her hand. This object was originally described as a jewellery box, but its form more closely resembles that of a perfume box. Building on an assessment of this find, the study evaluates the possibilities for comparing representations with extant objects and presents the results.

Keywords: *pyxis*, Roman period, representation, identification

Research history

Pyxides were used from the 5th century BC onward, primarily to store ointments, perfumes, and jewellery.¹ These small jars were made of a variety of materials, each with characteristics that influenced their design. *Pyxides* were assembled from several pieces but consist of three basic parts: a cylindrical body, a base, and a lid, sometimes with a lid knob.

The first *pyxides* were published in 1867 from the Roman cemetery at Nîmes.² The earliest specimen found in Hungary—discovered in the Silasbalhás tumulus—was published in 1904.³ Over the following 110 years, excavation reports and site publications regularly documented the discovery of an increasing number of specimens; the rate increased considerably during an upsurge in fieldwork in Gaul and Pannonia in the 1970s and 1980s. However, no targeted publication was sentenced to this specific find group. The first work with *pyxides* in focus, on which research on this find group still relies today, is the typology developed by Jean Claude Béal and Michael Feugère in 1989, based on the bone *pyxis* finds of Gaul.⁴ At the same time, the first thematic catalogue of *pyxides* was published only in 1994, followed by more after 2000.⁵ Sabine Deschler-Erb complemented Béal and Feugère's 1998 framework, also classifying *pyxides* by shape, but using broader categories.⁶

As most *pyxides* were made of wood, the significance of this object type cannot be fully understood without considering wooden specimens. Wooden finds from Britain were collected by Paola Pug-sley in 2003.

1 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 115–112; T. BÍRÓ 2000, 91–82; MÁRTON 2019, 196.

2 REVOIL 1867.

3 NÉMETH 1904.

4 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 115–126.

5 T. BÍRÓ 1994; T. BÍRÓ 2000; T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012; DESCHLER-ERB – AMMAN 2019.

6 DESCHLER-ERB 1998, 179–180.

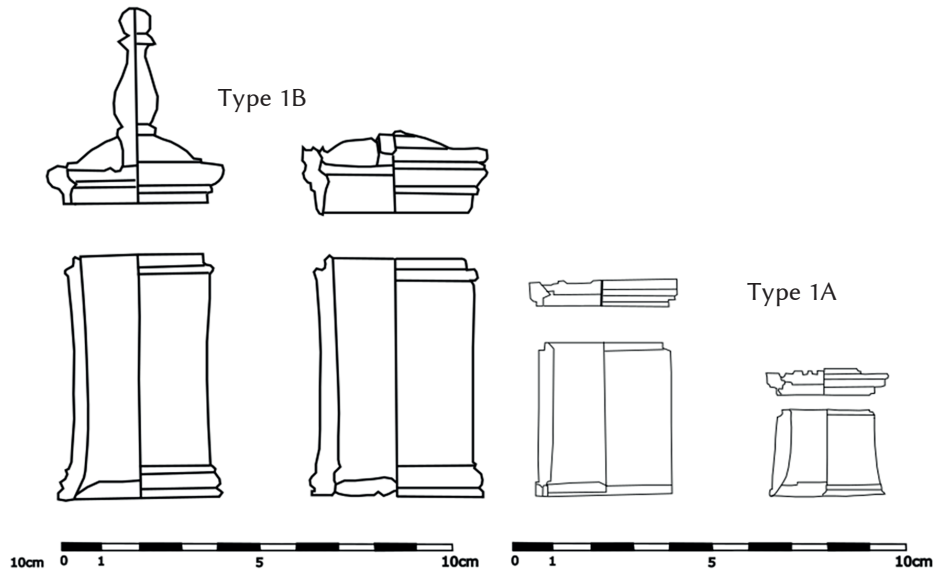


Fig. 1. Type 1a and 1b from Béal and Feugère (drawing based on BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983).

The best-known pieces from the Hungarian part of Pannonia were made of bone and tusk; these small finds are often mixed with the archaeozoological material during excavation and in museum collections and are rediscovered during post-excavation processing. Accordingly, Mária T. Bíró first processed the bone artefacts in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum,⁷ publishing all finds in 2000.⁸ In 2012, she participated in the processing of the bone artefacts in the collection of the Aquincum Museum, together with Alice M. Choyke, Lóránt Vass, and Ádám Vécsey.

In 2013, Annamária R. Facsády addressed the function of *pyxides* in her work “*Forma bonum fragile est...*” (*Architecture in the Roman period*).⁹ In 2016, Anikó Bózsza presented a more detailed analysis in her PhD dissertation.¹⁰ The publications of smaller museums are sometimes difficult to access; this makes the 2019 work of András Márton, which presents a collection of *pyxides* found in Pannonian graves from the 1st–3rd centuries AD, particularly important for identifying parallels.¹¹

Pyxides in depictions may be identified based on design, but the interpretation of the representations themselves and the find contexts cannot be ignored either. The most important books in this respect are Gizella Erdélyi’s *A római kőfaragás és kőszobrászat Magyarországon (Roman Stone Carving and Stone Sculpture in Hungary)*¹² and *Pannonian Tombs I–III – Roman Death Cult in Present-*



Fig. 2. Bone pyxis from the Hungarian National Museum, unknown context (drawing based on T. BÍRÓ 1994, 189).

7 T. BÍRÓ 1994.

8 T. BÍRÓ 2000, 91–92.

9 R. FACSÁDY 2013, 78–83.

10 PUGSLEY 2003.

11 MÁRTON 2019, 196.

12 ERDÉLYI 1974.

day Hungary by Dorottya Gáspár.¹³ In the last five years, *pyxides* from Pannonia, Noricum, and the Barbaricum were the focus of research.

The sarcophagus

The sarcophagus of Titus Aelius was discovered during an excavation conducted by Sándor Petényi at Tatabánya-Alsógalla in 1989; it is one of the few sarcophagi for which the circumstances of discovery are known. The robbed grave was discovered accidentally while a trench was being dug for a water pipeline; it contained neither human remains nor grave goods. Only a few fragments of a yellowish-brown, lead-lined cup were found nearby, parallels to which are known from the Augur tomb at Brigetio.¹⁴ A hole, approximately 20 cm in diameter, was drilled through the centre of the inscription field—perhaps by the workers—rendering part of the text illegible.

A full-length portrait of a woman in a niche occupies the left side of the image field. She wears a long tunic and a cape; the upper part of the cape covers her hands. She holds the opposite hem of her dress with her left hand and a small, round object in her right. This object was identified as a jewellery box,¹⁵ but its form more closely resembles that of a perfume box, as in the example from the Seuso treasure.

A closer look makes clear that the two objects cannot be of the same type. The perfume box in the Seuso treasure is large, weighing almost 2 kg. Even if the primary aim of depictions on sarcophagi were to portray meaning rather than to stay true to details, it would certainly not have been depicted in this way. This research considers all aspects of whether *pyxides* can be identified from representations.

What is considered a *pyxis*?

The wide variety of functions, shapes, sizes, and definitions in contemporary sources makes it difficult for modern researchers to determine exactly what constitutes a *pyxis*.

Bone *pyxides* from Gaul were classified based on their three-part structure. While this is a good solution for a variety of reasons, it cannot be adapted to all other materials. Anikó Bózsza refers to *pyxides* as ‘small wheel-turned jars with a cylindrical body’, while

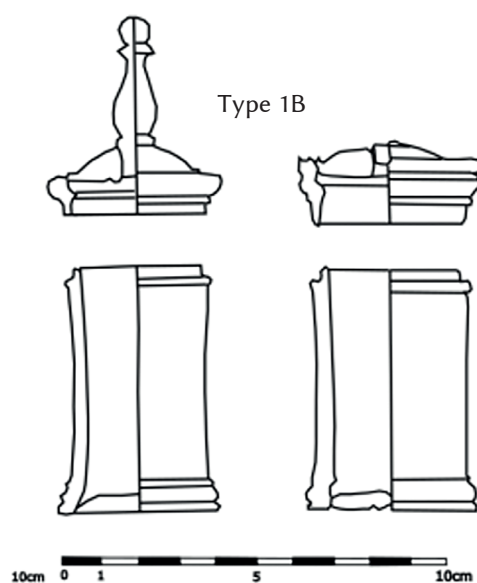


Fig. 3. Pyxis type 1b from Béal and Feugère (drawing based on BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983).



Fig. 4. Bone pyxis from Emona, Kozolec site, Grave 86 (photo: Narodni Muzej Slovenije).

¹³ GÁSPÁR 2016.

¹⁴ KOVÁCS – PETÉNYI 2014, 427.

¹⁵ KOVÁCS – PETÉNYI 2013, 114.

András Márton simply calls them ‘cosmetic boxes’. Elsewhere, they are identified with one of their functions, *narthecium*.

Form, completed by an estimation of function, seems to be the best starting point for the identification of *pyxides*. These vessels are certainly small (about 2–20 cm high), cylindrical, hexagonal, or possibly octagonal jars, intended to hold toiletries used primarily by women and usually kept in a kind of beauty case. They were used for storing creams and jewellery, sewing utensils, and other items associated with personal care and hygiene, which in the Roman Empire included make-up and perfumes. A *pyxis* containing a sewing kit was found in the Kerch peninsula.¹⁶

Based on available archaeological evidence, Roman *pyxides* could be made of bone, clay, wood, metal, terracotta, glass, amber, silver, and gold.¹⁷ Metal (bronze and silver) pieces occur in treasures¹⁸ and, therefore, are rare, just like glass and terracotta specimens. Bone and pottery *pyxides* with no decoration, geometric patterns, or a mythological scene are the most common in Pannonia. If the material allowed—that is, in most cases—they were made of three parts: a cylindrical or nearly cylindrical body, a base disc, and a disc-shaped or conical lid. Sometimes the damaged parts were replaced with ones made of another material, like in the case of an ivory jar in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the missing base of which was replaced with a wooden disc, probably made to measure, which, with time, caused the lower part of the body crack due to the different thermal expansion of the materials.

Currently, three sources are available for research on *pyxides*. The first comprises the artefacts themselves. Upon discovery, *pyxides* are rarely sealed, preserving the materials or objects they contained, such as sewing tools, jewellery, and other small items.

However, a *pyxis* does not have to be closed or complete for its former contents to be identified. Small amounts of dyes and perfumes may be preserved as residues precipitated on the interior, allowing the ingredients to be determined through scientific analyses. Material-composition tests on the *pyxides* found at Szihalom-Budaszög have revealed that the composition of the dyes in some specimens is almost identical to that of modern make-up products. Moreover, coriander, sulphur, and clove were found in several of them; these were presumably used as preservatives or medicinal plants.

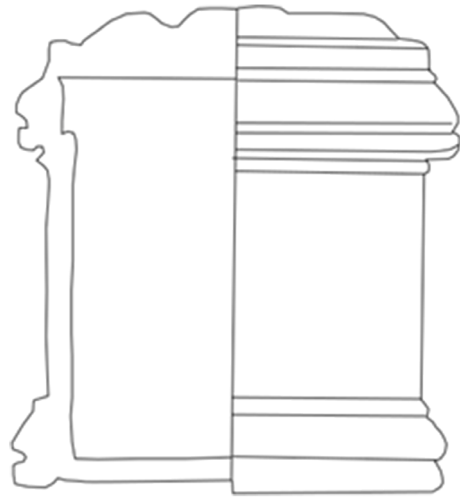


Fig. 5. Bone pyxis from Emona, Kozolec site, Grave 86 (drawing based on PETRU 1972).

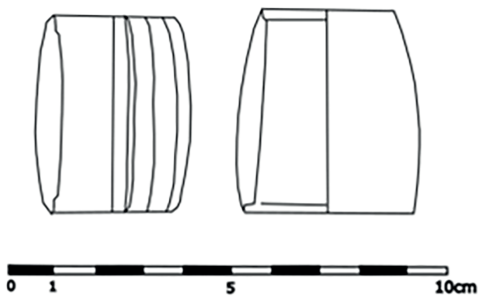


Fig. 6. Pyxis Type 3 from Béal and Feugère (drawing based on BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983).

16 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116; VAULINA – WASOWICZ 1974, 147, Fig. 69.

17 MÁRTON 2019, 196.

18 PAINTER – HUNTER 2013, 263–274; VRKIĆ – SKELAC 2016, 206; KAUFMANN-HEINIMANN – MARTIN 2017, 213–284.

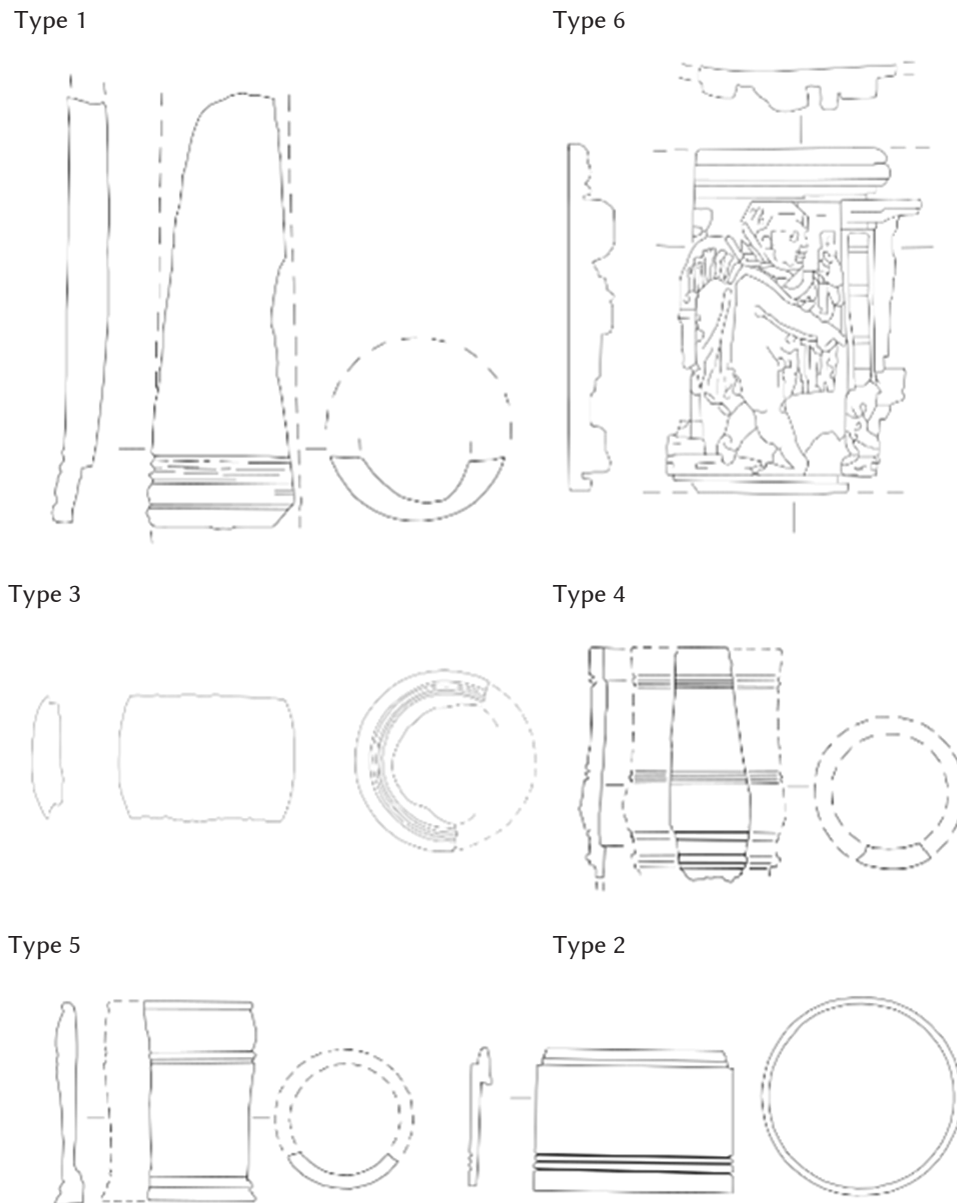


Fig. 7. Pyxis types by Sabine Deschler-Erb (drawing based on [DESCHLER-ERB 1998](#)).

Pyxides also appear in written sources. Several documents, for example, by Lykianos,¹⁹ Pliny the Elder,²⁰ Ovidius,²¹ and Scribonius Largus,²² mention them in general as containers for cosmetics. More specific accounts are also known: Martialis writes about an elderly courtesan who stores his teeth, false eyelashes, and false hair in *pyxides*,²³ while Petronius mentions someone storing false eyebrows in them. In Caput XXIX of Petronius' *Satyricon*, a small golden bowl (*pyxis aureus*) is placed on a cupboard, "which contained the first beard of the master".²⁴ The container, however, cannot clearly be identified as a *pyxis*.

19 [Lukian.](#), *Am.*, 39.

20 [Plin.](#), *Nat. Hist.*, VIII. 108.

21 [Ov.](#), *Rem. Am.*, 355.

22 [Scrib. Larg.](#), *Comp.*, 30, 37–74.

23 [Mart.](#), *Epigr.*, 9, 37.

24 [Petr.](#), *Sat.* CX, 2, XXIX.

Most specimens are known from graves, which gave rise to the theory that they were exclusively sacrificial objects. However, examples from settlement contexts and coeval references to the use of *pyxides* contradict this hypothesis.²⁵

The third source is representations: *pyxides* are most commonly depicted in use on gravestones, providing an excellent basis for identifying them and their functions.

Typology

Béal and Feugère divided *pyxides* into three basic groups, each consisting of subgroups A and B.²⁶ All *pyxides* included in their study have the same design, with the lid plugged into a cavity in the body and a disc-shaped base fitted into a groove similar to the lid's and fastened with pegs or glue. The lip of the rim widens, so the rim diameter is larger than the central diameter of the body.

Subtype 1a (Fig. 1)²⁷ represents an evolved variant from the basic type with two or more grooves around the outside of the body at the bottom, forming a moulding (Figs 2–3). According to Béal and Feugère, such *pyxides* are known from Britain, the Middle East, and Hungary, including the six bone specimens in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum.²⁸

The characteristic feature of Subtype 1b (Fig. 4) is a ridge between the grooves on the lower edge of the body.²⁹ The grooves are also different from those of Subtype 1a because they exhibit a V profile rather than simple incisions (Fig. 5). Such specimens are known from Trier, Pompeii, Egypt, Cyprus, and the Balkans.



Fig. 8. Fragment of a bone pyxis from Aquincum (after T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 95).

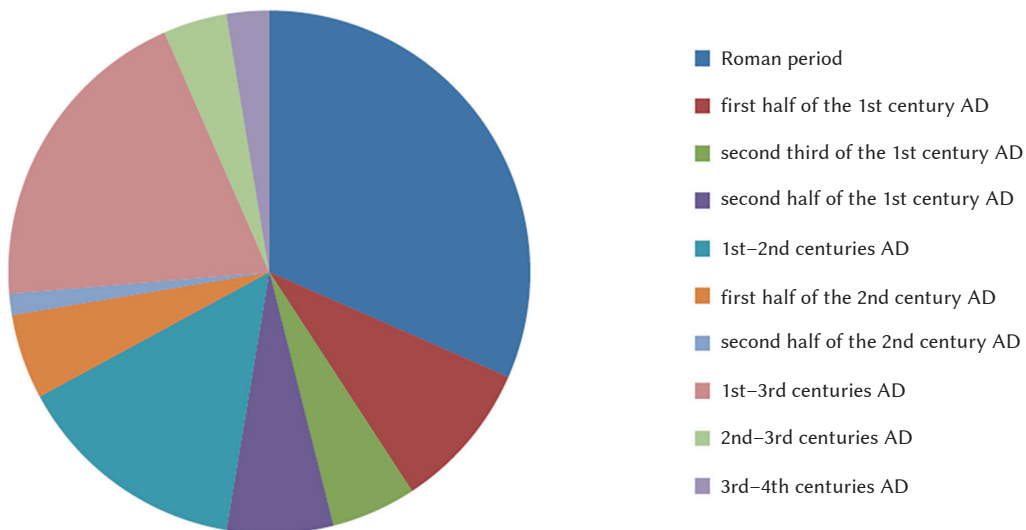


Fig. 9. Dating of the roman pyxides from Pannonia.

25 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116.

26 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116.

27 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116.

28 T. BÍRÓ 1994, 41, Pls 51–52; Inv. nos 8.1908.14, 23.904.24, 1871.199.2, 54.66.39, 54.66.38, 10.1951.121.

29 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 117.

The most characteristic feature of Type 2 *pyxides* is a perfectly cylindrical body (Fig. 6) reinforced by D-profile ribs at both ends (Fig. 7). The structure of the conical lid, the bottom of which sinks into the body like a plug, can be best observed in this variant. It consists of three discs: a lower, smaller one (the actual 'plug' part), a wider middle one (lid plate), and the uppermost protective disc. A knob inserted in a hole at the centre of the discs helps hold them together.

The slightly barrel-shaped body (but not the rim) of Type 3 *pyxides* differs from the previous cylindrical variants (Fig. 8).³⁰ Such vessels are known from the territory of Gaul and Italy.

Some specimens do not fit into Béal and Feugère's typology. These include, among others, *pyxides* with a slid-on instead of a cork-like lid,³¹ alongside those with a faceted (sight- or eight-sided) cylindrical body.

Sabine Deschler-Erb's typology covers a broader range of forms, allowing additional objects to be classified. Her Types 1 and 2 correspond to Béal and Feugère's Type 1a, and her Type 3 to their Type 3. Deschler-Erb also provides an example of a baluster- or inverted baluster-shaped *pyxis*, of which only a few specimens are currently known.³²

Anikó Bózsa also classified the Hungarian finds into four categories. The specimens in the first resemble Béal and Feugère's Types 1a and 1b. The second category contains pieces more similar to 1b. The relief decoration of the *pyxides* in the third category is shallower than in the previous ones, but their bodies are similar to Béal and Feugère's Type 1a. Examples in the fourth group are shorter and not necessarily cylindrical.

It is a question whether a typology based primarily on bone *pyxides* can be applied to specimens made of other materials, which require different techniques. *Pyxides* with external lids seem to constitute a separate category,

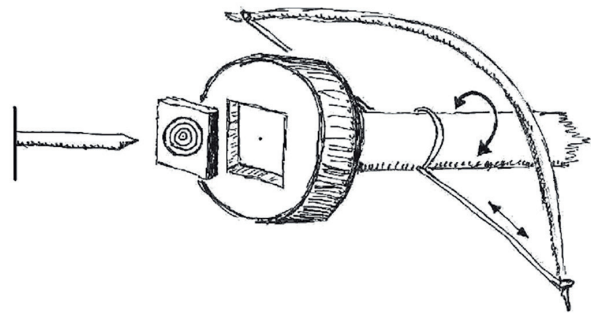


Fig. 10. One hypothetical technique to fix the bone support to make lids and bases for *pyxis* (drawing by Ádám Vecsey, based on T. Bíró *et al.* 2012, Fig. 43).



Fig. 11. The lathe used as a drill (object made by Ádám Vecsey, based on T. Bíró *et al.* 2012, Fig. 52).



Fig. 12. Ivory *pyxis* (Metropolitan Museum Collection of Art, New York, online catalogue).

30 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 118.

31 T. BÍRÓ 2000, 92; BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116–118.

32 DESCHLER-ERB 1998, 180.

encompassing most known metal, glass, and terracotta specimens. As antler, bone, tusk, and wooden *pyxides* were made practically the same way, it may be assumed—which the known examples corroborate—that their forms are also identical or at least very similar.

Chronology

The find context of only a few objects is closed, which makes establishing a chronology of *pyxides* rather difficult. *Pyxides* are typical of the 1st–3rd centuries AD; most datable examples have been recovered from graves.

Pyxides were common in the 1st–3rd centuries AD. Most finds from Pannonia—similarly to those from other provinces—date to the 1st century AD. Their numbers began to decrease slightly in the early 2nd century AD, but they remained popular throughout the century. They became considerably rarer in the 3rd century AD and had almost disappeared by its end.

Mária Bíró suggested a logical arc for the temporal distribution of *pyxides* in Pannonia. According to her hypothesis, these small vials are most typical of the first period of Roman settlement in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. In the 3rd century AD, the population became impoverished due to military conflicts and the overall deterioration of the political situation, and the social stratum following Italian cultural patterns started to diminish, leading to a decline in the number of related objects. This eventually led to the complete disappearance of this type by the 4th century, when Pannonian pottery centres lived their heyday.³³

Making a *pyxis*

Manufacturing technique

Making objects from bone and clay was not markedly different in Roman times from modern methods. In his work on Aquincum's bone artefacts,³⁴ Ádám Vécsey notes two tech-



Fig. 13. Glass pyxides (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, online catalogue).



Fig. 14. Pyxides in decreasing size that fit perfectly inside the previous one (after BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983).



Fig. 15. Inkwell (British Museum, online catalogue).

³³ T. BÍRÓ 2000, 91.

³⁴ T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 66.

niques: the body of the *pyxis* was formed either by turning or by drilling³⁵ (which may sound misleading to those unfamiliar with bone- and woodworking, as both were carried out using a lathe).

Ancient lathes worked on the same principle as modern machines (Fig. 11). The object was gripped at one or both ends, and rotary motion was achieved by driving the machine. The most striking difference lay in the drive mechanism: whereas modern machines are electric or geared to amplify human motion, their ancient predecessors were powered exclusively by human effort.³⁶

There were two ways of holding the bone to be machined in the lathe. One method involved placing it between two clamping spikes (Fig. 12), which left marks on the surface of the finished product. However, the objects were often sanded after machining, so these traces are not always visible.³⁷

The other method involved chuck mounting, although there is often no evidence for this, as it left no visible trace. The cuts on the object suggest that, in some cases, both methods of fixation may have been used simultaneously.³⁸

On a bow-driven lathe (Fig. 13), the raw material was rotated, and various hand tools—including knives, milling cutters, and other bone-working implements—were used to shape the desired form and decoration on the piece.³⁹

It was also possible, especially in the production of smaller objects such as the base of a *pyxis*, that the object to be worked was not gripped directly but embedded in a hard material, such as hardwood, and fixed in this manner.⁴⁰

Once finished, the surface of the object was sanded and further worked. The specially prepared base was then attached. The disc, which was often decorated with concentric circles,



Fig. 16. Depiction of a *pyxis* on a funerary monument, Gaul (Musée de la Cour d'or, source: <https://lupa.at/27319>).



Fig. 17. Depiction of a *pyxis*, Thiasos sarcophagus, Roma (Museo Nazionale Romano, source: <https://lupa.at/31959>).

35 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 66.

36 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 62.

37 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 63.

38 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 56.

39 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 65.

40 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 63.

could be fixed to the body of the *pyxis* in two different ways. One method was simply to glue it on. The other was more complex but provided a stronger attachment: the disc was secured with small bone rivets.⁴¹

Decoration

Pyxides are usually simple and unadorned.⁴² Bone *pyxides* are most commonly decorated with mythological scenes, especially geniuses or puttos (Fig. 9).⁴³ There is no evidence of painting on these reliefs. Glass jars—such as the ones in Fig. 10—were usually coloured and sometimes bear relief patterns. The terra-cotta jars, when decorated, were mostly embellished with barbotine.⁴⁴ Most decorations concentrate on the body and only occasionally on the lid.⁴⁵ When depicting a series of scenes built of figural and ornamental motifs, carvings are always composed around a central motif.⁴⁶ The set of motifs appearing is limited and unsuitable for typological or chronological classification.



Fig. 18. Servant carrying perfume set on a wall painting in an grave at Silistra (photo by Konstantin Tanchev, source: www.otkrivam.com).

The use of *pyxides*

The form known as a *pyxis* had several uses, the most common of which was related to women's lives: the storage of cleaning and cosmetic products.⁴⁷ Bone *pyxides*—and probably wooden ones, too— were most commonly used for keeping mascara and thick, creamy perfumes known as *unguentum* in them; contemporary sources mention this type as *narthecium*.⁴⁸ However, the find material also attests to other uses. For example, a set of five connected *pyxides* containing paint remains⁴⁹ was found in a 2nd-century AD grave in the western cemetery of Aquincum.⁵⁰ *Pyxides* in diverse sizes and materials could have served various functions, holding, besides perfumes and make-up, sewing implements and jewellery.⁵¹ A second group of *pyxides* was used for storing medicines and medicinal plants.⁵² Such finds are less frequent, presumably because organic substances,

41 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 115.

42 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 115.

43 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 115.

44 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 118.

45 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 118.

46 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 120.

47 BÓZSA 2016, 288.

48 T. BÍRÓ 2000, 92.

49 T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 65.

50 Budapest, District 3, Graphisoft Park, Inv. no. 2007.3.24-31; T. BÍRÓ *et al.* 2012, 39.

51 BAÛ 2004, 58.

52 Lukian., *Am.*, 39; Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, VIII.108; Ov., *Rem. Am.* 355; Scrib. Larg., *Comp.*, 30, 37–74.

even when sealed inside the jar, are less likely to be preserved. A possible example is a *pyxis* that contained remains of coriander and cloves.⁵³ The third group of *pyxides* was used for keeping small items and jewellery, both in the Empire and in the Barbaricum.⁵⁴

Béal and Feugère interpreted sets of stacked *pyxides*—found, for example, in the Kerch Peninsula, Cyprus, and Caromb (France)—as toys (Fig. 14).⁵⁵ This may be accepted in the lack of a better theory, although conclusive evidence has yet to be found. *Pyxis* finds of only the base or the lid are often interpreted as toys.

Another frequent mistake regarding *pyxides* or their parts, whether depicted or the actual objects, is identifying them as inkwells or dice boxes. There are two arguments against that: first, all known inkwells have a completely different shape, are much shallower (Fig. 15); and second, no ink stain has ever been observed on any wooden or bone *pyxis*.

Pyxides in representations

Different types of representation function as independent media of communication, and the depictions of *pyxides* vary accordingly. Most depictions are known from stone monuments, but even those differ significantly, influenced by material: most limestone variants are soft and easy to work with but also erode easily, whereas marble is more durable, often more homogeneous, enabling precise carving, and more resistant to erosion, which means clear and discernible shapes and details.

Unlike, for example, fibulae—which are often portrayed as a general disc or crossbow brooch without details characteristic of any exact type—*pyxides* are rarely depicted without clearly recognisable formal features. There are, of course, poorer-quality depictions that emphasise only the outline, such as one on the sarcophagus of a married couple from present-day France (Fig. 16).⁵⁶ By contrast, the small *pyxis* in the hand of the *maenad* and its lid in her other hand on the sarcophagus of Thiasos from Rome (Fig. 17)⁵⁷ are portrayed with clear details.



Fig. 19. Depiction of a *pyxis* on the sarcophagus of Titus Aelius, Tatabánya (photo by the author).



Fig. 20. Depiction of a box on a terracotta statue (Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection).

53 BEREZ et al. 2022, 359.

54 BŐR 2022, 170, 174; BEREZ et al. 2022, 359; BAÚ 2004, 58; Kerch Peninsula: BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116; MÁRTON 2019, 196.

55 BÉAL – FEUGÈRE 1983, 116.

56 Lupa Nr. 27319 (<https://lupa.at/27319>).

57 Lupa Nr. 31959 (<https://lupa.at/31959>).

Pyxides rarely appear in mosaics and murals. A perfume vial set similar to the one from Aquincum is depicted on a mural in the Roman tomb of Silistra (Bulgaria) (Fig. 18). Based on this illustration, several *pyxides* were kept on a chain with a hook attached.

Pyxides are little known due to the small number of extant specimens. Consequently, they may be difficult to identify in representations and are often misidentified as other objects of similar shape, size, or function, as in the example depicted on the sarcophagus of Titus Aelius (Fig. 19).⁵⁸ In the following, this example is used to rule out possible interpretations.

Representation	Similarities	Differences
Box or chest	Similar functions – holding beauty items and equipment	Rectangular instead of cylindrical
Cup	Similar shape	<i>Pyxides</i> are cylindrical, cups are conical
Perfume box	Same shape	Bigger, does not contain perfume but holds perfume vials instead

Depictions of *pyxides* are most commonly interpreted as boxes (Fig. 20)—understandable since they often served a similar function (storing jewellery and small objects). However, a closer look at their designs reveals differences in shape. The chest is one of the most commonly depicted storage objects on gravestones, appearing in many variants. Most are relatively large, about 20–25 cm high, but smaller, *pyxis*-sized depictions are also known. However, all depictions clearly portray a square object with corners and edges. By contrast, the cylindrical shape of the object depicted on the sarcophagus of Titus Aelius is clearly visible, even though it is carved in limestone and is poorly preserved.

The second most common object type in *pyxis* depictions is mistakenly identified as glass beakers (Fig. 21). While these are difficult to distinguish on the basis of shape alone because of their similarity, there are nevertheless fundamental differences that can be observed both in representations and on the objects themselves. While the bodies of *pyxides*—except for the biconical (Type 3) variant (Fig. 8)—are always straight, cups have concave bottoms (Fig. 22).⁵⁹ In addition, *pyxides* seem to be always depicted with their lids, either a conical one with a knob or a flat one. By contrast, the tops of the cups are simply cut in depictions, almost allowing a glimpse at their interior.

The third type of object *pyxides* are sometimes mistaken for—and perhaps the most difficult to distinguish due to the close similarity of its shape to *pyxides* with conical lids—is perfume boxes, i.e. containers in which glass perfume vials were stored. In contrast to *pyxides* that held perfumed ointments, perfume boxes were used to keep oils in glass vials sealed with wooden stoppers. These boxes were almost identical in shape to *pyxides*,



Fig. 21. Glass cup (Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection).

⁵⁸ Lupa Nr. 663 (<https://lupa.at/663>).

⁵⁹ DÉVAI 2016, 111–112.

only considerably larger. The Seuso treasure contains such an object, the tall, straight body of which corresponds to Béal and Feugère's Type 1a, but its lid fits the exterior of the body, unlike any typological category. The object is 32 cm high and weighs over 2 kg.⁶⁰

A theory often put forward in the study of depictions is that, when portraying an object (particularly in stone), the original size is not maintained, depending on what the artist wanted to emphasise in the image. That might be the case often, but certainly not always. One of the most significant differences between a *pyxis* and a perfume box is size. To estimate the actual size of an object in a depiction, several illustrations were analysed.

The first example—depicting a perfume box held by a girl (Fig. 23)—is found on the perfume box itself from the Seuso treasure. The girl holds the object with both hands from below; although she is small in scale, the box is distinctly large. While this depiction forms only a small part of a highly detailed image executed on a metal surface, comparable representations also occur on stone monuments, such as the example from Kyzikos (Fig. 24). In that depiction as well, a sizeable perfume box is held the same way by a small girl.

In addition, a similar box—held in the same way as in the preceding representations—appears in the hands of an adult woman on a tombstone fragment from Aquileia. Although the proportions of the item and the hand holding it are different from those in the previous images, the object is still clearly large.

Is there an object that fully matches the representations?

In light of the evidence considered so far, a legitimate question arises: given the interpretative difficulties posed both by the objects themselves and by their representations, can any extant artefacts be identified that correspond to the object depicted on the sarcophagus?



Fig. 22. Silver perfume box, part of the Seuso treasure Hungarian National Museum (source: <https://seuso.mnm.hu>).



Fig. 23. Depiction of a perfume box, detail of the Fig. 22 (source: <https://seuso.mnm.hu>).

60 <https://seuso.mnm.hu/hu/a-seuso-kinacs/targyak/az-illatszeres-doboz#&sobj=11>; DÁGI – MRÁV 2019, 141.

The answer is yes. A terracotta *pyxis* in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 25)⁶¹ is described as a 12.1 cm high, elongated, undecorated object from between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD.⁶² Its conical lid fits the outside of the body. Altogether, its dimensions correspond almost exactly to those of the *pyxis* in the depiction. But this is not the best analogy.

The collection of the British Museum includes an 11.6 cm-high, cast-glass *pyxis* with a conical lid that slides into the body (Fig. 26), dating to the first half of the 1st century AD. Its proportions and dimensions correspond exactly to those of the object depicted on the sarcophagus of Titus Aelius. More importantly, the rim of the lid is a few millimetres wider than the body at the junction between the two, creating a cut-like profile—a detail that is likewise indicated in the depiction of the vessel on the sarcophagus. While the overall dimensions of the object permit the identification of the representation as a *pyxis*, this small detail allows it to be classified as an atypical variant.

Summary

By the time the sarcophagus was made—around AD 240–280—the *pyxis* was already falling out of use in Pannonia due to the deteriorating financial situation and broader political instability. Nevertheless, throughout the Roman period, sarcophagi remained prestige items associated with a wealthy elite. There is therefore no compelling reason to assume that an object type likewise associated with the Romanised upper strata would have been unknown or unused within those circles.

Typological considerations support this interpretation. Although the lid type does not fit into either Béal and Feugère's or Dreschler-Erb's typology, the body corresponds to the tall, straight-walled form (Béal and Feugère's Type 1a).



Fig. 24. Depiction of a perfume box, gravestone, Kyzikos, Musée du Louvre (<https://lupa.at/31796>).



Fig. 25. Terracotta *pyxis* (Metropolitan Museum, online catalogue).



Fig. 26. Glass *pyxis* (British Museum online catalogue).

61 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250095?when=A.D.+1-500&ft=pyxis&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=5> (accessed 15 September 2025).

62 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1976-1101-8 (accessed 15 September 2025).

In summary, a standardised typology that incorporates the most recently recovered pieces would likely enable, in the great majority of cases, the identification of the object depicted as a *pyxis* or a closely related container form.

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