

## EARLY MEDIEVAL LEAD ICONS FROM THE BULGARIAN LAND

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**Abstract:** The word “icon” (εἰκών) originates from Greek and means “image”, “portrait”. In the period of forming of the Christian Arts in Byzantium, this word meant any image of the Savior, Lord’s Mother, angel, saint or event, connected with the Holy history, no matter if this had been a sculptured image, monumental painting or miniature and no matter what the technique of implementation had been. That is why, speaking about icons, we will have in mind the church image in general, because its essence is in the Christian worldview and the doctrine of Salvation. In this relation here there are represented some lead icons from the territory of Mediaeval Bulgaria, and more precisely - from its northeastern part. The icons belong to that group of monuments of small plastics, which are not so often seen in this period. They differ in form, but all of them are unified by the style of the pictorial motifs, which represent individual characters or whole scenes from Christian arts. Some of them are earlier and date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, while others are later and belong to the arts of the First Bulgarian Kingdom – 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

**Keywords:** iconography, coins, christians.

The word “icon” (εἰκών) is of Greek extraction and means “image”, “portrait”. During the period of Christian art formation in Byzantium this word signifies every effigy of Christ, Virgin Mary, an angel, a saint or an event connected with biblical history, although it may be a sculptural work, a monumental fresco or a miniature created in different ways. Therefore, when dealing with icons, we shall consider the church image in general because its meaning lies in the Christian world view and the doctrine of salvation. Such are the objects represented here – several lead icons from the territory of medieval Bulgaria and particularly from its north-eastern part. These icons belong to the group of monuments of small plastics which are comparatively rare from this period. They differ in their form but they are united by the features of the pictorial motives which represent various personages or entire scenes. Some of them are early and can be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century while others were created later and are part of the art of the First Bulgarian Kingdom of the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.

The joint consideration of all these monuments stems from our willingness to underline the development of some more typical iconographic types from the time of early Christianity until the establishment of the new faith in this country. Attention is paid not only to the specifics of the depicted scenes but also to the

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stylistic particularities of their interpretation and the manner of their technical execution. The issues of production are also important because they serve to enhance orientation regarding the use of these objects and contribute to the more detailed study of the particular iconographic types.

The first specimen is a rectangular icon whose two sides were damaged during the casting of the object (ill. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Not only this fact but the irregularities on the upper curved part of the icon and the unremoved metal along its frame are clear evidence that it was never in use. In spite of that, the frontal image is of a high quality and presents the composition “Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” (ill. 1a). The intention of the artist was to give all details of the scene. The illusion of movement is provided by the situation of the ass and the hands of Christ. In front of the image there is an equal-arm cross whose arms’ ends are extended and under it the earth’s surface is represented by a horizontal line. On the reverse are depicted geometric ornaments (ill. 1b). There are only two amulets similar to this one, but they have any differences<sup>2</sup>.

As a composition and conception the Entry into Jerusalem scene develops the images of the imperial *Adventus* from the pagan period<sup>3</sup>. While in the amulets in question which belong to the earlier period of the 4<sup>th</sup> century emphasis is laid on the expression of humility and gratitude to Christ, here the festivities surrounding the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem are brought to the forefront. These scenes of larger dimensions demand more space which is provided by embossed plastics. Examples of this are a wooden cornice from the Virgin Mary church in Egypt from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century (ill. 2) and a detail from the limestone sarcophagus from the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the Istanbul Museum (ill. 3)<sup>4</sup>. A version of this subject is the meeting of Christ by angels which symbolizes the holy liturgy<sup>5</sup>. The choice of this composition and the peculiarities of its interpretation clearly point to the time of creation and use of this lead icon which is the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century. It was the time when biblical scenes created in the East started to become popular owing to the numerous amulets and eulogia brought by returning pilgrims to the Holy Land (ill. 3)<sup>6</sup>. Christ is depicted in a similar manner in the Entry into Jerusalem scene on other two sarcophagi from the National Museum in Rome – the first one from the *termae* of Diocletian (ill. 4) and Iunius Bassus (ill. 5)<sup>7</sup>.

An early Christian monument is also the round bilateral embossed icon featuring the prophet Daniel in his classical posture – a tall, beardless young man

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<sup>1</sup> Dimensions: length – 3,0 cm, width – 1,7 cm, thickness – 0,15 cm. North-East Bulgaria..

<sup>2</sup> **Марков, Н.** Поклоннически амулет от IV век. – Археология, 4, 2003, 51-53; **Марков, Н.** По следите на античната магия (55 късноантични амулета от няколко частни сбирки). С., 2005, с. 95, обр. С.11; с. 96, обр. С.12.

<sup>3</sup> **Grabar, A.** L’empereur dans l’art byzantin. Paris, 1936, p. 234.

<sup>4</sup> **Mathews, T.** The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art. New Jersey, 1993, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Obb. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> **Buckton, D.** Byzantium. Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture. London, 1994, p. 113, Abb. 128; p. 115, Abb. 130.

<sup>7</sup> **Ausstellungskatalog.** Imperator Caesar Flavius Konstantin Constantinus der Grosse. Trier-Luxemburg, 2007, Abb. II. 3.19; Abb. 8.

standing *en face* with arms lifted in a prayerful gesture, with a nimbus and long attire (ill. 6a). In his hands, open for prayer, there are depicted martyrs' wreaths, let down from the sky. The lions' figures are upright and their heads are turned to him. On the reverse a rider is depicted in low relief facing left and having a correctly drawn nimbus around his head (ill. 6b)<sup>8</sup>. The right hand of the rider holds a long patriarchal cross, and in his left hand there is a spear, with which he pierces a female daemon, thrown down under the legs of the horse. There is a small human figure behind the horseman, and an eight-rayed star in front of him. The images on the both sides are evenly proportioned and relatively volumetrically treated with proportions kept among the particular figures. On the periphery of both surfaces it passes a relief belt, which frames the compositions and creates an impression about their completeness.

The combination of both scenes on a single monument is not accidental. The spread of the Daniel in the lions' den composition on various monuments – ampullae, stone and metal plastics, gems and many others is particularly widespread during the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. Similar iconography is on an amulet from Aldomirovci, near Sofia<sup>10</sup>. It is supposed that this iconographic scene, along with the Sacrifice of Abraham and the Glorification of the Cross, came from the East and especially from Syria<sup>11</sup>. A special role for their formation is played by the book of the Prophet Daniel – a work written about 163 BC (Dan. 6:14)<sup>12</sup>. The first scene of Daniel with lions however becomes the most popular one and it is perceived by Christians as a symbol of Christ's personality, who had fully disarmed death. Some people insert into it apotropaic meaning, while others see in it a symbol of resurrection and salvation: "But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age." (Daniel 12:13). This scene with the relevant artistic transformations was ratified as early as 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century, but there had been disputes about its prime source – according to some authors it is Judaic, and according to other ones - Paleo-Christian<sup>13</sup>. This scene was interpreted by the Christians as a symbol of Christ who overcame death by His resurrection. In some of the earlier monuments He wears a short tunic and has a Phrygian hat on His head – the purpose is the time and place of the event to be underlined – Persia, during the times of Cyrus. He had been depicted this way

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<sup>8</sup> Dimensions: length – 2,2 cm, thickness – 0,2 cm. Razgrad vicinity.

<sup>9</sup> **Bank, A.** L'art byzantin dans les musées de l'Union Soviétique. Leningrad, 1977, p. 283, pl. 78; Early Christian and Byzantine Art. Baltimore, 1947, pl. LXVII, No 552; **Ross, M.** Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Vol. I, Washington, 1972, p. 99, No 119; **Dalton, O.** Byzantine Art and Archaeology. New York, 1961, p. 138, fig. 72; p. 623, fig. 396.

<sup>10</sup> **Марков, Н.** Бележки за раннохристиянски медалион с образа на пророк Даниил от една частна сбирка. – Археологически вести, (под печат).

<sup>11</sup> **Кондаков, Н.** Археологическое путешествие по Сирии и Палестине. СПб., 1904, с. 287-293; **Атанасов, Г.** Пос. съч., с. 51.

<sup>12</sup> **Марков, Н.** Християнската символика. С., 2006, с. 65.

<sup>13</sup> **Атанасов, Г.** Сребърен медалион с образите на пророк Даниил и Свети Георги от ранносредновековната крепост до село Цар Асен, Силистренско. – Археология, 3, 1990, с. 42.

over ivory paxides from 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>, as well as over a relief from the 6th century<sup>15</sup> (Fig.7). According to Eusebius of Caesarea, even Constantine the Great (306-337) wished this composition to be placed in front of the Palace in Constantinople<sup>16</sup>. The popularity of the scene had been strengthened by the convincing belief in the protective force of Divine manifestation<sup>17</sup>. The story about the prophet-wise man, survived by miracle in the pit with lions converts into an emblem of eternal life and emanation of Christ's resurrection. Thus, in small plastics this subject has been perceived as a symbol, defeating death.

The military soldier on another plate is the Jewish King Solomon who is canonized as a saint by the Eastern church<sup>18</sup>. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, he is considered to be lord of the demons and a saint who was endowed with power by God to chase away disease-inflicting demons. The female figure vanquished by Solomon is the demon Lilith who snatched newly born babies and was mother to demons according to Mesopotamian and Jewish folklore. One of the first researchers of Byzantine amulets sees in the scene a symbol of the victory of good over evil<sup>19</sup>. There is a similar iconographic scene over a lead medallion from Varna region<sup>20</sup>, as well as over other similar monuments from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, brought from the Holy Land (Fig.8), (ill. 9)<sup>21</sup>. During the reign of Emperor Justinian the Great the subjects of triumphant emperors and saintly riders acquired wide popularity<sup>22</sup>. Thus they gave additional support to the production of many apotropaic medallions which feature triumphant riders overpowering evil forces.

Thus, they become an additional reason for circulation of multiple medallions-apotropeics, representing triumphant riders above evil forces. This is the time of the pre-Iconoclastic epoch (5<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries), when there had been formed the basic iconographies of the military saints - "warrior-walker", "warrior-walker and dragon-fighter", "warrior-rider and dragon-fighter"<sup>23</sup>, which had inevitably been influenced by the representations of the Old Testament apocryphal subjects over different monuments. Moreover, the images of St.Solomon and St.Sisinius on horse with a deamon, thrown down under the horses' legs are one of the most distributed scenes.

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<sup>14</sup>Wetzmann, K. Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection. Vol. III, Washington, 1972, p. 31-36, No. 18, Pl. XVI, XVII.

<sup>15</sup>Matheus, T. The Clash..., p. 78, Abb. 55.

<sup>16</sup>Wessel, K. Daniel. – In: Reallexicon zur byzantinischen Kunst, I. Stuttgart, 1966, col. 1114.

<sup>17</sup>Даркевич, В. Прикладное искусство. – В: Культура Византии – вторая половина VII–XII в. М., 1989, с. 550; G. Majeska. A Medallion of the Prophet Daniel in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection. – DOP, 28, 1974, 361-366.

<sup>18</sup>Марков, Н. По следите на..., с. 55.

<sup>19</sup>Schlumberger, G. Amilletes byzantins anciens. Revue des etudes grecques. T. V. Paris, 1892, p. 74-75 et suiv.

<sup>20</sup>Марков, Н. Ранновизантийски амулет за предпазване от болест. – Нумизматика и сфрагистика, 1, 2000, 85-87.

<sup>21</sup>Matheus, T. The Clash..., p.

<sup>22</sup>Атанасов, Г. Християнският Дуросторум-Дръстър. Велико Търново, 2007, с. 121.

<sup>23</sup>Атанасов, Г. Воинските иконографии, въоръжението и снаряжението на Свети Георги през Ранното Средновековие (V–X в.). – В: Оръжие и снаряжение през Късната Античност и Средновековието IV–XV в. Варна, 2002, с. 41.

On one of the round icons is represented Virgin Mary Orans, where the body dressed in a tunic and the raised hands which denote a gesture of prayer are strongly modeled (ill. 10)<sup>24</sup>. The high relief and the use of a double relief line, as well as the emphasized sketchiness of the effigy of the round icon, betray its earlier provenance from the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century. One of the interesting example is the medallion on the gold bracelet (6<sup>th</sup> century), (ill. 11)<sup>25</sup>. It is known that one of the earliest images of Virgin Mary Orans or Blacherniotissa is a mosaic in the Blacherna church of Constantinople<sup>26</sup>. It should be noted that initially the orans gesture was a symbol illustrating piety (*pietas*) and as such it was familiar in the art of the Roman empire. The same gesture was later preserved in the portraits of the intercessor saints and especially of Virgin Mary. Initially, Orans was a symbol, representing piety (*pietas*) and in such a way it is known from the arts of the empire's times. This is the Orans which can be seen over many pagan and Christian sarcophagi from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Its parity is the shephard with a lamb in hands, and later – the Christian Good Shephard. The personification of belief fast gets transformed into a typological image of the dead man with underlined individual features. The custom of raising the hands in prayer passes from the Old Testament to the New one. In this relation, St.apostle Paul wrote to his friend Timothy (I, 2, 8): "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands..." Later on this prayer gesture of open hands started to be interpreted as a symbol of the Holy Cross<sup>27</sup>. In the later stage of the same development in the Orans pose, it had been reproduced neither alive, nor dead person and the iconographic image had been saved among the portraits of the saints – protectors and most of all – in the representation of God's Mother<sup>28</sup>.

The next lead icon is unilateral, has a round form and a lug for hanging it (ill. 12). On its obverse side is featured a frontal bust effigy of a saintly bishop which is proven by the crosses on both sides and the loros thrown across his shoulders. The lack of an inscription does not enable one to determine who is the depicted saint but his specific iconographic features – a long face, a short beard and ears pricked up, are typical of St. Nicholas. This attribution is also supported by the bishop's attire which he wears, particularly the loros. In the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century, to which the lead icon is dated, St. Nicholas became the most accessible saint and the church rightly calls him "a rule of faith and an example of meekness"<sup>29</sup>. The two crosses aside of the figure are confirmation of the chronology, because as it is known, they are

<sup>24</sup> Dimensions: length – 2,4 cm, thickness – 0,3 cm. Shumen vicinity.

<sup>25</sup> **В. Buckton**. Byzantium. Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture. London, 1994, P. 95, Abb. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Влахернският храм в Константинопол се намирал до морето при Златния Рог, построен бил от Пулхерия Августа през 451г., а по-късно възстановен и разширен от Юстиниан I. Неговата слава се свързвала със съхраняването на мафория на Богородица.

<sup>27</sup> **Жебелев, С.** Оранта (К вопросу о возникновении типа). – В: Seminarium Kondakovianum, III, 1927, с. 5.

<sup>28</sup> **Грабар, А.** Портретът в старохристиянската иконография. – В: Избрани съчинения. Т. 2, С., 1983, с. 248.

<sup>29</sup> **Дончева, С.** Кръгла иконка с релефно изображение на "Св. Никола" от Североизточна България. – Сборник "IV есенни четения Сборяново 2004", Т. 3, 2005, 80-89.

typical for the molivdovuls between the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Bigger accuracy we can see at the lead medallion with an image of St. Tecla with crosses on both sides and St. George, which originates from Syria and dates back from the 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> century, (ill. 13)<sup>30</sup>. The style of make and the availability of similar monuments are an exemplary landmark for the time of creation of this icon – namely the 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from the iconography which forms the basis of the present study one should also consider the time of production of the particular specimens. Two of the three discussed icons from the 6<sup>th</sup> century definitely carry the spirit of the classical tradition. The strong influence of this era is felt not so much in monumental painting but in icons, miniatures and applied art. It is expressed in the classical proportions of the figures, the almost three-dimensional rendering of the volume, the easiness which depicts their movement, the quality of painting the dress. What strikes in the artistic policy of Justinian, is its universal character, as far as it embraces not only the large constructions – the secular and cult buildings, the mosaics, but also the small-form works, made from different materials – ivory, marble, limestone, metal. together with the statics and the strictness of the images, the interest has been directed into the rhythmic and inner movement, which become typical for the Byzantine arts<sup>31</sup>. The choice of subjects in the artistic processing of the metal has been oriented to mythological and biblical themes and their practical execution by the jeweller-masters has been expressed in the separation of images from the free space on the background and emphasis over their silhouette. The created expressive and ornamentalized style of representation started developing in details the iconography of the narrative cycles and on first place – the gospel ones. The religious objects – crosses, ampoules, icons – made from lead, bronze and different precious materials, whose production Syria was famous for, had been distributing these iconographic principles of representation all over the Christian world. A reflection of this specific individuality and prominent volume treatment is present in the images of Christ in the Entry into Jerusalem composition, of Daniel with the lions and the rider Solomon who overcomes the evil forces<sup>32</sup>.

Here we must pay attention also to the material, from which there had been made the very icons. It is well known that the lead is perceived as a protective symbol and has a symbolic and sign character in the cultural history in the course of ages<sup>33</sup>. According to Paracelsus, the lead is the water of all metals and symbolizes the smallest possible base, from where it could start an ascending development<sup>34</sup>. In the biblical text, the lead is a one-meaning symbol of sin, which is identified with the weight of this material, and in contrast to the gold and silver (symbols of the spiritual life in God), the lead cannot resist to the purifying force of

<sup>30</sup> **Атанасов, Г.** Войнските иконографии..., с. 58, обр. 25.

<sup>31</sup> **Райс, Т.** Искусство Византии. М., 2002, с. 46.

<sup>32</sup> **Тяжелов, В.** Малая история искусств. М., 1975, с. 40.

<sup>33</sup> **Влайков, С.** Книга на символите. В. Търново, 2003, с. 171; **Шиваров, Н.** Речник на библейските символи. С., 1992, 134 – 135.

<sup>34</sup> **Залеская, В.** Ампулы – эвлогии из Малой Азии (IV – VI вв.). – ВВр. 47, 1986, 130.

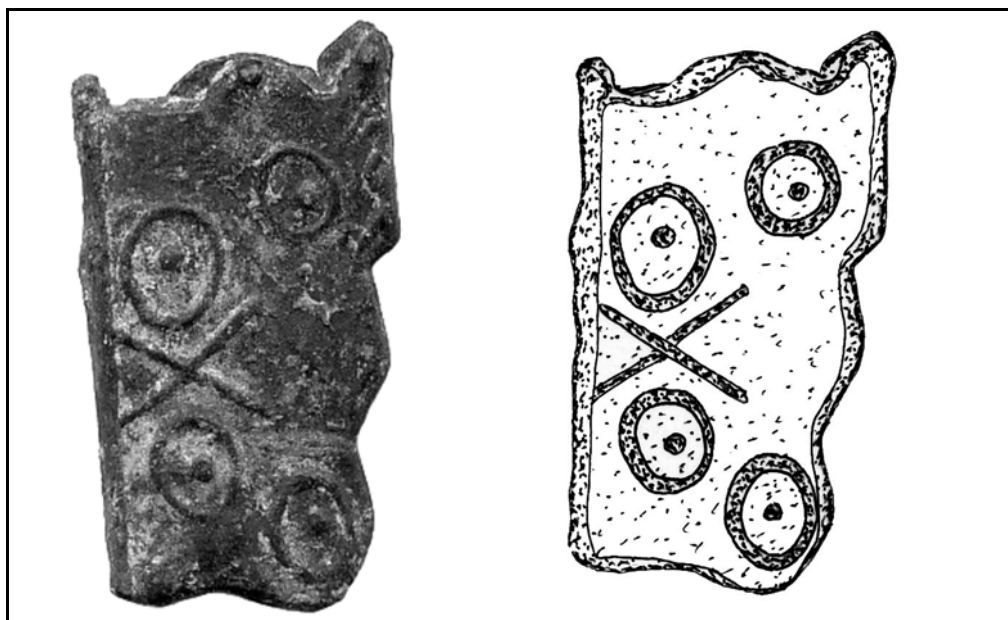
the Divine Fire and melts into it. The holders of these pendants (icons, medallions) had definitely believed in the protective and guarding function of the lead, which strengthened its influence with the images of characters and scenes over them.

From the monuments, survived till our times, it becomes clear, that it does not exist a precise separation in the production and popularization of these objects. There are not enough reasons either, to think that all the products had been imported from outside. It should be rather supposed that in many of the cases they had been created on the place and according to a sample. The very technology of casting also provides opportunities for multiple production of works of this kind, which indicates the way of distribution of the Byzantine artistic culture in the countries, connected to it. In these cases there was no need of foreign masters, because this is a direct copying of imported originals by local jewellers, in which there had been inserted a lot of local features.

This epoch saw the widespread distribution of the new compositions as well. The monuments in question confirm this practice and at the same time they provide an idea of the combination of elements which appeared at different times in new works created far from the capital city.



**Fig.1a:** Lead icon-medallion. Front side - “Entry of Christ into Jerusalem”, IV<sup>th</sup> – V<sup>th</sup> century.



**Fig.1b:** Lead icon-medallion. Reverse side – geometric motifs, IV<sup>th</sup> – V<sup>th</sup> century. North-East Bulgaria.



**Fig. 2:** “Entry of Christ” – wooden epistyle of Virgin Merry church, IV<sup>th</sup> century. Cairo.

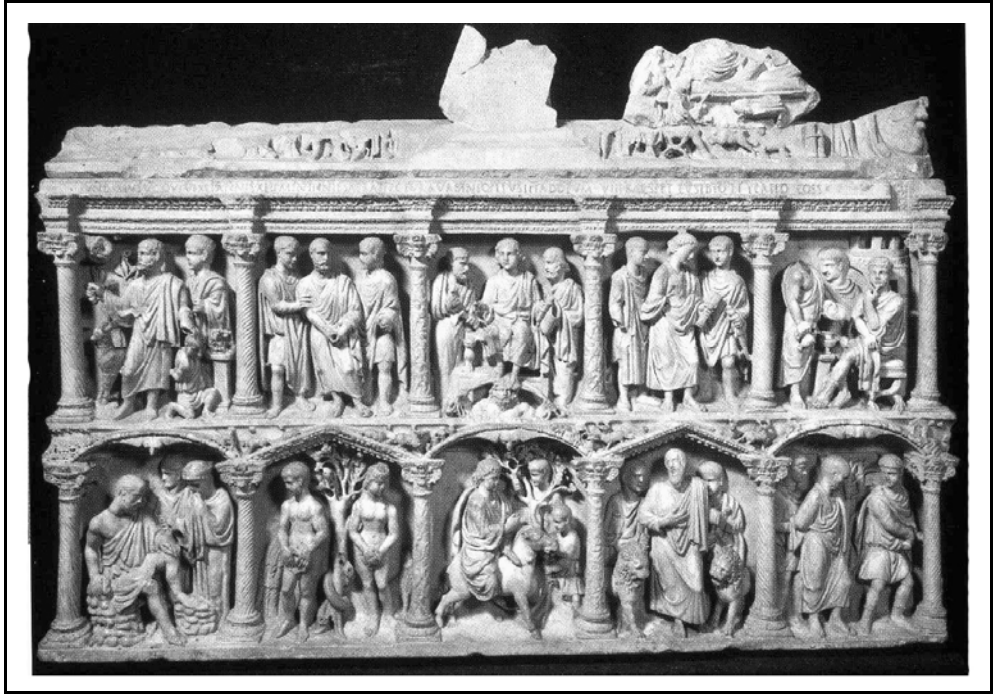




**Fig. 3:** “Entry of Christ” – limestone sarcophagus, V<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological museum in Istanbul.



**Fig. 4:** “Entry of Christ” – marmor sarcophagus, IV<sup>th</sup> – V<sup>th</sup> century. The baths of Diocletian, Roma.



**Fig. 5:** “Entry of Christ” – marmor sarcophagus of Junins Bassil, V<sup>th</sup> century.



**Fig. 6a:** Lead icon-medallion. Front side – “Daniel in the lions”.



**Fig. 6b:** Lead icon-medallion. Reverse side – “King Solomon on the demon Lilith”, V<sup>th</sup> – VI<sup>th</sup> century. Near Razdrad.



**Fig. 7:** “Daniel in the lions” – marmor relief, VI<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological museum, Istanbul.



**Fig. 8:** “King Solomon on the demon Lilith” – lead ampullae , VI<sup>th</sup> century. Dumbarton Oaks.



**Fig. 9:** “King Solomon on the demon Lilith” – lead ampullae , VI<sup>th</sup> century. Dumbarton Oaks.



**Fig. 10:** Lead icon-medallion. Frontal side with Virgin Oranta, VI<sup>th</sup> century. North-East Bulgaria.



**Fig. 11:** Silver bracelet with Virgin Oranta. VI<sup>th</sup> century. Dumbarton Oaks.



**Fig. 12:** Lead icon-medallion. Front side with saint (St. Nicolaos). VI<sup>th</sup> – VII<sup>th</sup> century. North-East Bulgaria.



**Fig. 13:** Lead icon-medallion with St. Thekla and St. George. VI<sup>th</sup> – VII<sup>th</sup> century. Syria. (G. Atanasov)