

BUCKLES WITH IMAGES OF ANIMALS AND MYTHOLOGICAL CREATURES FROM MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

Stella DONČHEVA*
Ivajlo BUNZELOV

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Abstract: *This work aims to present a fairly large collection of new and previously unpublished artifacts. They belong to the group of bronze buckles with images of animals and mythological creatures and represent almost all the popular and common types - with representations of lions, griffins, winged horses, fighting animals ("agonies") and one previously unknown type in our land - birds to Eucharistic vessel. Created in the area of the Byzantine culture and influenced by the new style, which is imposed in Byzantine art until the end of 10th century, buckles with mythological images are a work of various workshops. This type of bronze buckles is part of a varied repertoire in the production of metal art in our country, as evidenced by present objects. The final product is mainly determined by the model that the craftsman holds, by customer preferences and not least by the available raw material. Buckles have broad chronological range - from the end of the 8th to the end of the 12th-13th centuries. Basically, however, they are popular in the 10th century. Buckles that are made in Bulgaria are dated mostly to the end of the 10th and the early 11th century. Such is the dating of most of similar artifacts found outside the country. The combination of the practical role, of purely utilitarian functions, of apotropaic and protective equipment are the basis of their widespread popularity.*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea își propune să prezinte o colecție destul de mare de piese noi și nepublicate anterior. Acestea aparțin grupului cataramelor din bronz cu reprezentări de animale și creaturi mitologice și reprezintă aproape toate tipurile populare și comune – cu reprezentări de lei, grifoni, cai înaripați, animale în luptă ("agonii") și un tip necunoscut până acum în această zonă, păsări lângă vasul euharistic. Create în aria culturii bizantine și influențate de noul stil, care a fost impus în arta bizantină până la sfârșitul secolului*

* Stella DONČHEVA: National Institute of Archaeology and Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Middle Age Archaeology, 2 Saborna Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; e-mail: donchevastela@yahoo.com.

X, cataramele cu reprezentări mitologice sunt produsul unor ateliere diferite. Acest tip de catarama din bronz face parte din gama variată a producției de piese din metal de pe teritoriul Bulgariei. Forma finală este condiționată de modelul utilizat de meșter, de preferințele clienților și, nu în ultimul rând, de materia brută avută la dispoziție. Cataramele acoperă o perioadă cronologică largă – de la sfârșitul secolului VIII până la sfârșitul secolelor XII-XIII. Totuși, sunt populare mai ales în secolul X. Cataramele produse în Bulgaria se datează în general între sfârșitul secolului X și începutul secolului XI. Aceeași datare este atribuită și pieselor descoperite în afara granițelor. Popularitatea acestui tip de catarama, într-un spațiu atât de întins, se datorează faptului că îmbină rolul practic (funcționalitatea pur utilitară), cu cel apotropaic sau de protecție

This work aims to present a fairly big collection of newly-found bronze buckles decorated with images of animals and mythical creatures that has become known to the wide public in the recent years as a result of archaeological excavations or accidental findings¹. The total number of found buckles has increased substantially to reach 70 with the pieces discussed herein. Most of them are kept in museum collections. Some of them come from unidentified sites, but there are a sufficient number of buckles that come from sites which allow precise dating². Buckles with mythological images appear to be products of various craftsmen falling within the scope of the Byzantine culture who were influenced by the new style which became typical for the Byzantine art in the last decades of the 10th century AD. As it will become clear from the artifacts discussed in this work, bronze buckles were just a fraction of the great variety of metal art pieces produced in the Bulgarian lands.

The buckles found on the territory of Bulgaria belong to almost all known types. They depict lions, griffins, winged horses and fighting animals. There is also a type which has not been found so far in our lands: birds standing next to Eucharist vessel (*Table I-II*). These types of buckles are widely spread in the lands along the East Mediterranean coast, the Northern Black Sea coast and Central Europe (*Table III-V*), but are less frequently found in Western Europe. Several classifications of the buckles decorated with animals or scenes have been suggested so far. In every one of them the shape and type of image play a leading role³. Generally, these buckles are made of two parts: a trapezoid or rectangular plate with a rectangular opening for the belt strap and an elliptic support frame with a tongue. According to some authors, these buckles are late versions of the hinged buckles with oval plate and animal images depicted on them which were influenced by the Christian culture and widely spread in the Byzantine Empire from the 6th to the 9th c. AD⁴. Probably one can find certain influences, but as a

¹ PLETN'OV 1997, p. 71-88; DONČEVA 2005, p. 52-53; DONČEVA 2007, p. 213-223; DONČEVA 2010, p. 241-249 and literature; BONEV 2014, forthcoming.

² DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1980, p. 38-42; MOMČILOV 1991, p. 27-49; INKOVA 1974, p. 104, оѡр. 3, ѡ; MAVRODINOV 1959, p. 232, оѡр. 277; STANČEV 1960, p. 29-30, оѡр. 3в; MIHAJLOV 1963, p. 9, оѡр. 6; DJINGOV 1968, p. 227-278, оѡр. 13; V'JAROVA 1965, p. 157; MANOVA 1963, p. 78, оѡр. 5; STANČEV 1955, p. 4-5.

³ ČALANÁ 1954, p. 311-344; KOVALEVSKAJA 1979, p. 22, табл. VII, 4-5; PLETN'OV 1997, p. 71-88; MESTERHÁZY 1990, p. 87-113; LANGÓ & TÜRК 2004, p. 365-457.

⁴ KOVALEVSKAJA 1979; SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 2002, p. 335; WERNER 1955, p. 39,

whole, these buckles have an entirely different structure and demonstrate specific features and iconography which make them differ from all the remaining earlier types. Therefore, they should be considered as a separate trend in the Byzantine metal art, as well as in the metal art of the peoples inhabiting the territories falling under the Byzantine cultural influence. The metal art in medieval Bulgaria falls in the same sphere of influence. Its decorative elements and shapes were borrowed from the leading capital in the region, so the presently available artifacts can be considered as a small fraction of the art pieces produced then.

The belt buckles described herein are divided in accordance with the type of image depicted on them. The first type of buckles (Type I) depicts lion figures. There are altogether 8 such buckles, all made of bronze. Only the trapezoid plates with lion images on them have survived (*see figures 1-8*). The lion images enclosed in the field between the belt strip opening and the hinges bear different features. Lions are portrayed in various ways. On the first buckle, the lion looks more or less like a cat (*Fig. 1*). The lines are soft, and the image is embossed. Such buckles have been found in the regions of Varna and Dobrich⁵. Outside Bulgaria, such buckles have been found in Ukraine, Serbia, Corinth and Constantinople⁶. An unfinished buckle from Northeastern Bulgaria bears the same features (*Fig. 19*)⁷.

The second buckle is to a certain extent similar to the first one, but features some differences. The lion is distinguished for his square-shaped head, bounded onto the top by a couple of ears. Some details, such as the eyes, nose and the thick mustaches, are very schematically drawn up (*Fig. 2*). The level of craftsmanship makes us believe that this buckle was left unfinished and scrapped for some reason, without being used. Similar features demonstrate a scrapped buckle from Varna⁸ and another one from Constantinople (Tzarigrad)⁹.

The image on the third buckle differs from these on the previous two buckles by its schematics and contrastive features (*Fig. 3*). In spite of the fact that the lion is portrayed as moving to the left by lifting one of its hind legs, the figure seems static and frozen. Similar buckles have been found in the regions of Preslav, Varna and Shumen¹⁰. Outside Bulgaria, such a buckle has been found during the excavations made in a necropolis at Tiszajenoe (Hungary) and was dated back to the 970s or 980s AD¹¹.

The next couple of buckles decorated with lions can be viewed together (*Fig. 4 and 5*). Their features sharply contrast to the features of the buckles described so far. They have shallow embossment and uneven background. Such buckles have been found in Pliska, at the Kaleto fortress

Abb. 4, 6, 42.

⁵ PLETN'OV 1997, p. 84, Табл. I, 3; DONČEVA 2005, p. 54, обр. 5; PLETN'OV 2005, p. 124-130, обр. 1.

⁶ ORLOV 1973, обр. 1-2; VINSKI 1974, p. 61-62, Tab. II, 1, 3, 4.

⁷ DONČEVA 2005, p. 54, обр. 7.

⁸ PLETN'OV 1997, Табл. I, 2.

⁹ VINSKI 1974, p. 62, Tab. II, 4.

¹⁰ PLETN'OV 1997, Табл. I, 1, 3, 5, 9; DONČEVA 2005, p. 52-54, фиг. 2, 4, 5; DONČEVA 2007, p. 215, обр. 3.

¹¹ MESTERHÁZY 1990, p. 89, fig. 1, 6; FODOR 1996, p. 292, fig. 1.

near Sredets¹², in the ruins near Starmen, Ruse District¹³ and in the region of Shumen¹⁴. A similar buckle has been found in the Byzantine Kersonesos¹⁵. The next buckles to discuss are smaller than the others (*Fig. 6 and 7*). They have a decoration combining features from all preceding pieces. Such buckles have been found in Hungary (Szentloerincpuszta, Budapest) and Syria (the Kiev Museum)¹⁶. The image is highly schematic, with low embossment on a flat background. Similar but not identical buckles have been found at the Markeli fortress near Karnobat¹⁷ and in Syria (the Kiev Museum)¹⁸.

Finding buckles decorated with lions in the lands of Lower Danube, Asia Minor, Corinth, Kersonesos and many other places demonstrated that these buckles were widely spread in all territories influenced by the Byzantine culture. Their popularity in the separate regions varies to a greater extent and depends more or less on the intensity of their use. For example, the lion-decorated buckles form just a small group among the pieces of plastic arts found on the territory of Hungary¹⁹.

What unites all currently available lion-decorated buckles is the composition: it portrays the lion walking to the left, with a body in half-face and head in full face. The main difference comes from the used craftsman techniques. The image can be smooth, embossed and more realistic, or rough and stylized. Regardless of the used crafting method, the image of lion is preferred for the symbolism it carries. And symbolism of lion in Christian culture is rich and multidirectional. The lion is a symbol of spiritual vigilance and rigor and is associated with Christ's power.

The second group (Type II) comprises buckles depicting griffins and includes four pieces (*Fig. 9-12*). Only one of them is fully preserved. The eagle's head griffin is portrayed with protruding ears, moving to the left, with his head turned backwards (*Fig. 9*). Other two buckles, fully identical to that one, have been found in Greece and Cyprus²⁰. The next buckle resembles the first one as far as the griffin's body position is concerned, i.e. half-faced, with his head turned backwards (*Fig. 10*). Its figure however is not embossed. The third buckle has only partially preserved integrity but the griffin's figure is in a good shape. It portrays the rarest type of griffins – those with snake head (*Fig. 11*). The last griffin buckle is also partially preserved. It has an oval frame and iron tongue. Its plate bears the shallowly embossed image of a lion's head griffin.

The griffin is a mythological creature which gained popularity in Iran and was frequently used in the art of the Achaemenid Empire. From there it infiltrated

¹² BALBOLOVA-IVANOVA 2005, p. 98, обр. 7.

¹³ MIHAJLOV 1963, p. 9, обр. 6.

¹⁴ STANČEV 1960, p. 29-30, обр. 3-10, 18-4; DONČEVA 2007, p. 214, обр. 2; PLETN'OV 2005, p. 130, обр. 2.

¹⁵ ČIČUROV 1991, p. 99, обр. 98; ZALESKAJA, JAŠAEVA, RABINOVIC 2011, p. 249, 224.

¹⁶ MESTERHÁZY 1990, p. 89, fig. 1, 2; PLETN'OV 1997, Табл. II, 21.

¹⁷ MOMČILOV 1995, p. 35, обр. 1.

¹⁸ PLETN'OV 1997, Табл. II, 20.

¹⁹ BÁLINT 1991, S. 109, Abb. 29, Taf. XXXIII-29.

²⁰ PARANIKOLA-BAKIRTZI 2002, p. 485, fig. 486.

the Middle East art as a symbol of the deified ruler²¹. In Byzantine art griffins were used in the royal emblems as benevolent and patronizing creatures. Thus they became symbols of Christ's dual nature: divine and human.

The third group of buckles (Type III) portrays animal fight scenes known as "tormenting". It is represented by two newly found samples (*Fig. 13 and 14*). Six buckles of this type have been found so far on the territory of Bulgaria²². The same scenes can be seen on buckles originating from Asia Minor²³, Corinth and Crete dated back to the 10th c. AD²⁴. The composition depicted on the first buckle represents two animals: a lion lying on the back of another predator (*Fig. 13*). The lion's body is turned to the left with his head facing front. Thus it resembles very much the lion's body position on the buckles with a single lion image. Such an impressive "tormenting" scene however has not been observed so far amongst the buckles found on the territory of Bulgaria. We were not able to find similar images outside the country as well. The second belt buckle portrays a very interesting scene: a lion stepping on his pray (*Fig. 14*). In spite of its schematics, the composition is very picturesque and boasts details that add movement and expressiveness to the image. Another, fully identical image can be seen on a buckle found near Karnobat and dated back to the mid-10th c. AD²⁵.

The "lion against deer" and "lion against another predator" scenes are frequently met in the Middle East art²⁶. The artistic heritage of the Sassanid Empire preserved its influence to the Byzantine culture up to the late Middle Ages. The "tormenting" theme became very popular and was used to illustrate the dualistic struggle of Christian church with the devil's kingdom. The victory in the fight symbolizes the world creation and the participation in it.

The fourth group (Type IV) comprises three buckles with winged horses (*Fig. 15 – 17*). The plate of the first of them portrays an embossed image of a winged horse in half-face moving to the left. The horse is depicted in movement, with raised front legs. The embossment was preset and achieved through the casting mold. The second buckle has a slightly coarser design, while the third one is fully preserved and bears the best image of all three (*Fig. 17*). It portrays an embossed winged horse marching ceremonially. Above the hooves there are details called "cornipetes" which are typical for the portraits of winged unicorns. Such winged horses were described by Claudius Claudianus as "flying" and "Centaur-like"²⁷. Several buckles with similar embossed images have been found so far on the territory of Bulgaria²⁸. Outside Bulgaria, buckles with embossed images of winged horses have been found in Solin-Salona, Tzarigrad, Syria²⁹.

²¹ PUGAČENKOVA 1959, p. 70-84.

²² PLETN'OV 1997, p. 86, Табл. III, 22-25; MOMČILOV 1991, p. 48, обр. 2; PLETN'OV 2005, p. 130, обр. 3.

²³ SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 1985, p. 732, Abb. 44, 7.

²⁴ DAVIDSON 1952, p. 268, pl. 115-2213, 2214; VINSKI 1974, p. 61, Tab. II, 10-11.

²⁵ MOMČILOV 1991, p. 48, обр. 2.

²⁶ JAKOBSON 1959, p. 346; DARKEBIČ 1976, p. 78, рис. 9, p. 79, табл. 5, 2; KR'STEVA 2011.

²⁷ FLHB 1958, p. 193, 204.

²⁸ DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1980, p. 39, обр. 2; INKOVA 1974, p. 104, обр. 3; DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1996, p. 76, обр. 61; DONČEVA 2007, p. 219-220, фиг. 6.

²⁹ VINSKI 1974, p. 61, Tab. I, 1-3; ORLOV 1973, p. 87-88, рис. 2, 4-5.

The image of the winged horse appeared in the Iranian art at the end of the 2nd millennium BC and spread among the peoples of Central Asia to reach Asia Minor and Greece (the Pegasus)³⁰. The image came to Byzantine art from the East and Sassanidian arts, which were based on the solar symbolism. The winged horse became symbol of the angels – the God's messengers who spread the God's will among people.

The fifth group of buckles (Type V) consists of a single buckle with a plate portraying two birds (peacocks) next to a liturgical vessel (*Fig. 18*). This is the first buckle of the kind found on our territory. There are only two other similar buckles found in Taormina (Sicily) and in Asia Minor³¹. The scene depicted on all of them is the same: two peacocks standing next to a vessel with living water. Such a scene of birds drinking from a chalice (the holy cup of life) symbolizes the spiritual raising of Christian art³². A version of this scene originating from the East places the peacocks on both sides of the Tree of Life.

When compared with each other, some of the buckles look coarse and rather schematic while others are embossed and realistic. We can find parallels in the antique artistic culture which in combination with the Eastern ornamental tradition lead to increased decoration of images. A new iconography emerged from the fusion of antique and eastern patterns with the local artistic interpretations. The fantastic creatures boast "realistic" features similarly to the polymorphic animals created by incompatible bodily parts which look quite live and convincing³³. This is achieved by a naturalistic portraying of any part of them followed by organic merger between the separate elements of the compositions. If the figures of animals and birds received additional decoration under the influence of Eastern artistic traditions, it was very moderate. The Eastern features become evident through the used decoration techniques (predominantly flat embossing and engraving), the vegetal and animal ornaments and iconography of scenes³⁴. As a matter of fact, we observe syncretism of ideas and decorations originating from different art schools. Therefore, the separate stylistic features cannot be used as absolute criteria in the art pieces identification process.

The belt buckles found in Bulgaria belong to different types, which however does not give us sufficient reasons to conclude that some of them were imported and others were produced by local craftsmen. The crafting method would depend most on the model available with the craftsman, the customer preferences, and last but not least, the availability of raw materials. The common stylistic features of the artifacts found on the territory of Bulgaria give us good reasons to believe that they were made by local craftsmen. This is confirmed by the scrapped casting of a lion-decorated buckle found. (*Fig. 19*)³⁵. Therefore, we may conclude that some of the bronze belt buckles with animal images were imported, while others

³⁰ DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1980, p. 40.

³¹ SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 1985, p. 732, fig. 44, 36; VINSKI 1974, p. 63-64, Tab. II, 12; PLETN'OV 1997, p. 88, Таб. V, 48.

³² ŠEVALIE & GEERBRANT 1996, p. 167-168;

³³ DARKEBIČ 1975, p. 188.

³⁴ DARKEBIČ 1975, p. 167.

³⁵ PLETN'OV 1997, p. 80, 84, Таб. I, 2; DONČEVA 2005, p. 54, фиг. 7.

were produced by the local craftsmen.

The buckles portraying mythological scenes can be dated back to a wide period of time: from the end of the 8th c. AD to the end of the 12th c. and the beginning of the 13th c. AD³⁶. However, the peak of their popularity was in the 10th c. The buckles produced in Bulgaria in this period can be extended from the end of the 10th c. to the beginning of the 11th c. AD (Tables I-II). The samples found outside Bulgaria are also dated within the same period (Tables III-V). A basis for their widespread use was the combination of their practical functions with apotropaic purely utilitarian features.

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³⁶ PLETN'OV 1997, p. 80.

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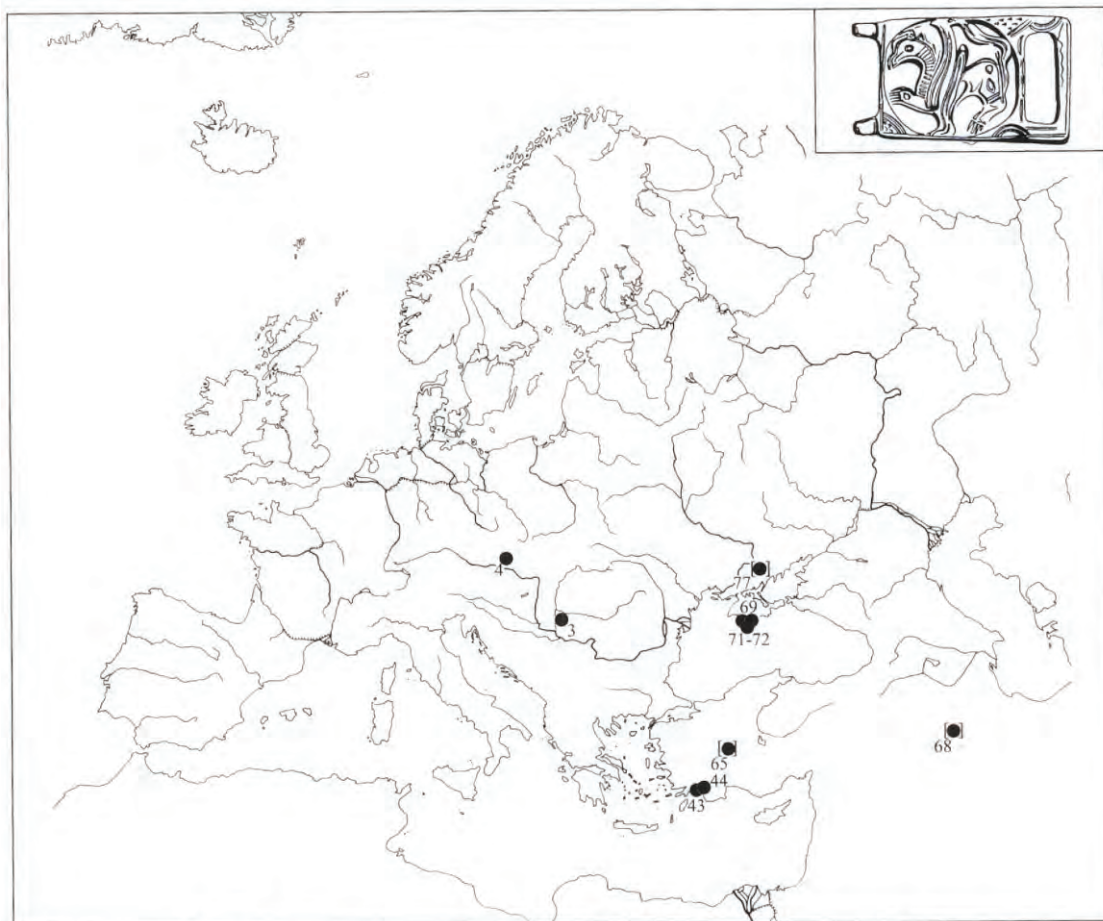
Table. I. Bronze buckles from the territory of Bulgaria.

BUCKLES IMAGES	TYPOLOGY	MATERIAL	PIECES	LOCATION
<i>LION</i>	<i>I type</i>	<i>bronze</i>	2	Pliska
			3	Preslav
			1	Starmen, near Russe
			1	Popina, near Silistra
			1	Constancia fortress, near Haskovo
			2	Markeli fortress, near Karnobat
			1	Sredec, near Burgass
			1	Kurzdaly region
			2	Dobrich region
			2	Varna region
			1	collection „Alianc“-Bulgaria
			13	North-East Bulgaria
<i>GRIFFIN</i>	<i>II type</i>	<i>bronze</i>	1	Carevec fortress, near Tarnovo
			1	Ovcharovo, near Haskovo
			1	Gigen, near Pleven
			1	Dalgopol region
			2	Shumen region
			1	Varna region
			1	collection „Alianc“-Bulgaria
			4	North-East Bulgaria
		12 <i>(total)</i>		
<i>“COMBAT”</i>	<i>III type</i>	<i>bronze</i>	1	Kameno, near Dobrich
			3	Varna region
			1	Karnobat region
			1	collection „Alianc“-Bulgaria
			2	North-East Bulgaria
		8 <i>(total)</i>		
<i>WINGED HORSE</i>	<i>IV type</i>	<i>bronze</i>	1	Sedlare, near Kurdzaly
			1	Odarci, near Dobrich
			1	Konstancia fortress, near Haskovo
			1	Karnobat region
			2	Shumen region
			1	Varna region
			2	North-East Bulgaria
			1	Targovishte region
			<i>model</i>	<i>lead</i>
			11 <i>(total)</i>	
<i>BURDS NEXT TO VESSEL</i>	<i>V type</i>	<i>bronze</i>	1	North-East Bulgaria
			1 <i>(total)</i>	
<i>A “SENMURF” (WINGED DOG)</i>	<i>VI typ</i>	<i>bronze</i>	1	Preslav
			1 <i>(total)</i>	
TOTAL	<i>I-VI types</i>	<i>bronze</i> <i>lead</i>	63	BULGARIA

Table II - Bronze buckles with animal images. Typology and location.



Table III – Bronze buckles with images of lions from Europe and Asia Minor.
(after P. Lango & A. Turk)



**Table IV – Bronze buckles with images of griffins from Europe and Asia Minor.
(after P. Lango & A. Turk)**



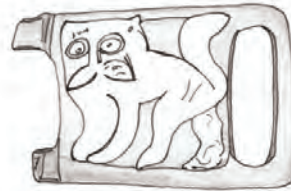
Table V – Bronze buckles with images of winged horses.
(after P. Lango & A. Turk)



Obr. 1



Obr. 2



Obr. 3



Obr. 4



Fig. 1-4: Buckles with lions.



Обр. 5



Обр. 6



Обр. 7



Обр. 8



Fig. 5-8: Buckles with lions.



Obr. 9



Obr. 10



Obr. 11



Obr. 12



Obr. 13



Fig. 9-12: Buckles with griffins, 13: Buckle with fight scenes.



Obr. 14



Obr. 15



Obr. 16



Obr. 17



Fig. 14: Buckle with fight scenes, 15-17: Buckles with flying horses.



Obr. 18



Obr. 19



Obr. 20



Fig.18: Buckle with birds next to vessel; 19: Buckle with lion; unfinished product.