

CROSSES PRODUCTION IN THE 10th CENTURY MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

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Abstract: This article focuses on the metal crosses production in the 10th century medieval Bulgaria. The recent discovery of three production centres near Preslav revises previous ideas according to which these items were products of byzantine metalworkers and were brought there by pilgrims from the eastern Christian centres (Syria, Palestine). In the first half of the 10th century, they provided almost all the artefacts typical for the period in that region: belt metal art accessories (such as decorations, buckles and tips), rings, earrings, single and double crosses, pendants. The archaeological research in Novosel, Shumen Region, brought to light more than 800 artefacts, as well as in Zlatar, Preslav Region, where the researchers have discovered more than 1400 items so far. The above facts are strong evidence for the existence of a very well-developed and organized production process.

Rezumat: Articolul se concentrează asupra fenomenului producției de cruci din metal în secolul al X-lea, pe teritoriul Bulgariei de astăzi. Descoperirea recentă a trei centre de producție în apropiere de Preslav a contrazis opinia mai veche conform căreia obiectele de acest fel au fost produse de meșteri bizantini și aduse pe teritoriul amintit de pelerinii veniți din spațiile creștine din est (Syria, Palestina). Datele în prima jumătate a secolului al X-lea, acestea au furnizat aproape toate artefactele de acest gen specifice perioadei: accesorii pentru curea (limbi, cataramă, aplice), cercei, cruci simple sau duble, medalioane. Din complexul de la Novosel provin peste 800 de piese. În urma cercetărilor sistematice de la Zlatar, regiunea Preslav, au fost descoperite peste 1400 de artefacte aparținând acestor categorii. Toate acestea dovedesc existența unei activități bine organizate.

The accumulation of a large number of artefacts related to the Christian

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religion dated back to the Early Middle Ages inevitably poses the question of their production during that period. In fact, the researchers' interest has always been focused on the large variety of crosses, icons, pendants, etc. As a result, numerous classifications and typologies sprung up in an attempt to encompass and classify all artefacts kept in museum collections¹. Just a few years ago, archaeologists used to support the thesis that almost all metalwork items found so far, including the religious ones, were either made by Byzantine craftsmen, or brought to Bulgaria as a result of the pilgrimage to the Eastern Christianity centres (in Syria and Palestine)². The situation changed drastically after the discovery of the three metalwork centres located near Preslav dated back to the first half and the middle of the 10th c. A.D. It turned out that the workshops near the Bulgarian capital used to produce almost all known metal art items typical for that period. Along with the numerous group of belt metal art accessories (such as decorations, buckles and tips), these metalwork centres also produced rings, earrings, single and double crosses, pendants. The full investigations of the metalwork centre at Novosel, Shumen Region, discovered more than 800 artefacts, while the researchers have discovered more than 1400 items as a result of the still ongoing archaeological excavations at the metalwork centre near Zlatar, Preslav Region. The above facts are strong evidence for the existence of a very well-developed and organized production process.

All three metalwork centres were located at approximately equal distances from Preslav. That was not a pure coincidence, but a deliberate action, which can hardly be justified by only the natural resources available in the area³. Centres were placed there as a result of a planned and intentional governmental policy for the development of that kind of craft. The artefacts produced in the centres were not intended to only satisfy the needs of the population living in Preslav and the neighbouring settlements. A considerable part of the finished products was intended for more distant markets, which is confirmed by the intensive use of the metalwork centres and the huge production output. We should reconsider some outdated opinions, which used to question the existence of organized metalwork production in Bulgaria in the Early Middle Ages. It is now obvious that such production not only existed, but was also organized and regulated by the central authorities.

We would like to propose several interesting facts in support to the above thesis to the attention of those interested in the topic. They consider the production of symbols of the newly adopted faith – a problem that used to be very topical at the time when Christianity became an official religion of Bulgaria. The great variety of religious artefacts urged us to divide them into two general groups, depending on the artefacts type and intended use. This work will consider the crosses group only, while all the remaining types of religious artefacts (such as icons and pendants) will be subject of the second part of our study. All the items considered herein were scrapped and had never been in

¹ DONCHEVA - PETKOVA 2011; DONCHEVA 2007a.

² MIJATEV 1922, p. 59-86.

³ The third metalwork centre is located near the village of Nadarevo, Targovishte Region. To date, the centre is only partially investigated.

actual use. This fact makes them even more significant, as they can help us get a clear idea of the techniques used by the local artisans, as well as to determine the separate stages of the production process. In addition to the castings found in the metalwork centres, we also included some artefacts found at early medieval settlements and fortresses belonging to the same period.

The Medieval Department at the Regional Historical Museum of Shumen keeps an encolpion cross made of bronze and consisting of two hinged halves, depicting a Crucifix on the one half and Our Lady Praying (Oranta) on the other⁴. When both parts of the cross were cast in the two-sectional mould, the molten metal spilled out thus misshaping the otherwise well-designed outlines of the cross (Fig. 1). But here, the images depicted on the encolpion visible parts also deserve our attention. At a first glance, it seems that the cross represents a traditional combination of Crucifix cast on one half and of Our Lady Praying (Oranta) cast on the other. A closer look at the encolpion shows that the outlines of both images are all the same. Though rarely met in practice, such images can be found elsewhere as well, however some specific features are seen for the first time in this type of iconography. For example, the upper parts of both halves depict a highly stylized image of Our Lady Praying. And here comes the question, why does the Virgin Mary's chiton not cover the whole body, as it covers her limbs down to the knees only. The lower part of the image is more typical for the Savior as He is frequently depicted with shorter tunic (*perizoma*)⁵, which is definitely not typical for the Our Lady Praying's iconography (Fig. 1b). It certainly cannot be considered a new type of iconography, but rather a mistake made by the engraver. If the item was crafted in a capital workshop or by a travelling craftsman, such a mistake wouldn't be made. That mistake is yet another evidence that the artefact was made in some of the local metalwork centres near Novosel, Zlatar or Nadarevo, or at the metalwork shop near some medieval Bulgarian settlement or fortress.

Another cross of the same group was recently discovered near Todor Ikonomovo, Shumen Region⁶. It represents the front part of an encolpion, which did not undergo polishing after casting (Fig. 2a). The upper and lower hinge holes were not cleaned of the extra metal (Fig. 2b). The central part of the encolpion front part depicts a Crucifix figure with the four Evangelists around it. The missing half of the encolpion would have depicted Our Lady Praying surrounded by the four Evangelists in a similar manner to the found front part.

The art pieces started depicting Jesus Christ in *perizoma* more frequently in the second half of the 10th c. A.D., and since the beginning of the 11th c. A.D. on Jesus Christ had been depicted in such a way in almost any art piece. This fact

⁴ The artefact's dimensions are: length: 6.4 cm, width: 4.0 cm, thickness: 0.3 cm. The encolpion dimensions are: length: 4.0 cm, width: 2.3 cm, Artefact Ref. No. 24216, Medieval Department of the Regional Historical Museum of Shumen.

⁵ The iconography of Jesus Christ dressed in *colobium* as a noble person, instead in *perizoma* as a punished criminal first appeared in the 6th c. A.D. and remained in use by the 10th c. A.D., see V'LEVA 1981, p. 79.

⁶ Dimensions: length: 6.4 cm (without hinges), width: 4 cm, thickness: 0.25-0.3 m. Regional Historical Museum of Shumen, Ref. No. 24478.

and the similar crosses found in Preslav, Vetren, Krivina, Tsar Asen, Ruyno and other places help us date the cross back to the second half of the 10th c. A.D. or the beginning of the 11th c. A.D.⁷ The number of this type of crosses is not large, especially outside the Bulgarian borders (there are single pieces in the museums of Belgrade, Nish and in Greece). However, in order to be able to determine the exact cross type, we shall need to find its missing half as well, as the reverse can refer the cross to several crosses groups⁸. The found front half of the cross bears traces of casting, such as sprues and hinges filled with metal, which is an obvious evidence for the production of this type of crosses in medieval Bulgaria.

The crosses found at the metalwork centres near the capital of Preslav are the surest evidence that such items were produced on the territory of Bulgaria. A total of 21 crosses and 6 encolpion hinges were found during the excavations of the metalwork centre in Novosel⁹.

We shall focus our attention on several samples bearing the specific features of that type of crosses produced in these centres.

The first artefact is a portion of a tracery bronze cross with embossed geometric decoration on both sides (**Fig. 3a-b**). In the casting process, part of the molten metal spilled out of the double-sided mould thus leaving it almost empty, so only a small part of the cross was cast. The cross is the type with short straight arms and round medallions decorated with geometric motifs. Similar crosses were found in Preslav, Provadia and Osenovo, Varna Region, as well as in Thessaloniki, Isaccea and Nish outside the country. They were usually dated to the end of the 10th c. A.D. or mostly to the 11th c. This scrapped artefact however proves that such crosses were already widespread in the first half and the middle of 10th c. A.D.

Another group of items produced in the same period encompasses the single fully encircled crosses with a single or double-sided engraving. Such crosses were found in the metalwork centre near Nadarevo, Targovishte Region. These crosses feature engraved or embossed images, straight or wide arms, round decoration in the middle, etc. (**Fig. 4-6**). Most of the crosses were discovered in the known medieval settlements and fortresses of North-Eastern Bulgaria and can be chronologically dated to the 10th c. A.D., up to the 1030s A.D.¹⁰. The group also includes lead crosses having the same decoration as the copper ones. Part of the lead crosses were used as patterns, but another part was intended for direct use. A considerable number of lead crosses was found in North-Eastern Bulgaria, which is proof that they were widespread in the 10th – 11th c. A.D. period¹¹. (**Fig. 7-8**).

Single pieces of lead and bronze crosses were produced, which can be typologically united by the embossed images of the Christ Crucifixion or Our Lady Praying on the obverse side. About 60 crosses of this type have been discovered so far on the territory of Bulgaria, which makes us believe that these

⁷ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA & TIHOV 2009, p. 228; DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2011, p. 140-141.

⁸ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA & TIHOV 2009, p. 227 of the work in (7) above.

⁹ BONEV & DONCHEVA 2011, p. 294, Table LII, 603-615, p. 295, Table LIII, 616-628.

¹⁰ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2011, p. 200-202, Exhibit 54, p.208-209, Exhibit 57.

¹¹ DONCHEVA 2007b, p. 46, Exhibits 8-11 (42-55).

crosses were among the most widely spread types at the end of the 9th c. and during the 10th c. A.D. All these crosses demonstrate similar iconographic features and crafting methods. A schematic image of the Crucifix can be observed on a lead pattern found near the kiln of one of the workshops near Novosel (**Fig. 9**). The lack of traces of a bail on the upper end makes us believe that the pattern was used for the bronze castings production. Similar single crosses depicting Jesus Christ were found at the metalwork centres near Nadarevo, Targovishte Region¹² and Novosel, Shumen Region¹³. Such crosses were also found in Pliska, Preslav, the fortresses of Ruyno, Tsar Asen, in the Silistra Region, and elsewhere¹⁴. Regarding the time of all these crosses' production, we can presume that they were most widely spread in the 10th c. A.D.

Some bronze crosses feature similar embossed images of Our Lady Praying (Oranta) (**Fig. 10**). Images are very schematic and present an upright figure with hands raised for prayer. It is assumed that the image of Our Lady Praying on single crosses can be seen less frequently than the image of the Savior, but the large number of crosses depicting Our Lady is on the way to refute this assumption. Crosses of similar sizes and manner of depicting the Holy Mother have been found at the fortresses of Skala and Ruyno, Păcuiul lui Soare¹⁵ and Isaccea¹⁶. They all can be dated back to the 10th – 11th c. A.D. Their production in Nadarevo and Novosel proves that this type of art was popular even in the first half of the 10th c. A.D.¹⁷.

In addition to the single crosses, the metalwork centres near Preslav also produced double crosses – reliquaries, depicting the Crucifix on one side and Our Lady Praying (Oranta) on the other side. They repeat to a certain extent the images of the single crosses, but differ in the image size (**Fig. 11**). Among the double crosses found at the metalwork centre near Novosel, there is a bronze half of a reliquary with embossed Crucifix image, which differs from the images described above (**Fig. 12**). That artefact was obviously scrapped. Complete encolpion crosses with similar Jesus Christ image on one side and of Our Lady Praying (Oranta) on the other side were found in the necropolis at the Great Basilica of Pliska (the end of the 9th c. – the beginning of the 10th c. A.D.) and at the Skala fortress, Teteven Region. A considerably large number of such crosses were found in Bulgaria and the neighbouring countries, such as Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, up to Hungary in Central Europe. They can be chronologically dated back to the 10th - 11th c. A.D.¹⁸. The finding from Novosel proves that this type of cross was locally produced and widely spread in the first half of the 10th c. A.D.

Among the artefacts found at the metalwork centre near Zlatar, there are about a dozen of crosses generally repeating the already described types. On some of them, the traces from the casting process can still be clearly seen (**Fig. 13**).

¹² DONCHEVA 2010, Tables III/106, VI/106.

¹³ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA & ATANASOV 1997, p. 293, Exhibit 5c.

¹⁴ BONEV & DONCHEVA 2011, p. 134.

¹⁵ DIACONU & BARASCHI 1977, p. 126, fig. 99, 4.

¹⁶ MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 1984, p. 244, pl. III/26.

¹⁷ DONCHEVA 2010, Tab. III/107, VI/107.

¹⁸ BONEV & DONCHEVA 2011, p. 137.

One of the single-sided crosses depicting Our Lady Praying (Oranta) is bent and has irregular proportions (**Fig. 14**). The above examples prove once again the fact that such crosses were produced in the Bulgarian lands during that period. Two artefacts represent the double-sided encolpion crosses. The first is a half-encolpion with the embossed image of Our Lady Praying (Oranta) (**Fig. 15**). This artefact was never used either. It was set aside for scrapping. It becomes evident from its bent hinge pieces, distorted and clogged with metal. The second encolpion is a fully preserved double reliquary (**Fig. 16**). In spite of its completeness, this cross was also never used as it becomes evident from its displaced upper part and wire-fastened hinge. When fully finished, the hinges should protrude above the cross halves, but here one of them is missing and therefore both halves of the encolpion had to be wire-fastened.

All artefacts discussed above come to prove that a considerable part of the single and double crosses found in the Early Middle Age settlements and fortresses of the 9th – 11th c. A.D. were produced in the local metalwork centres. They were neither imported from the Byzantine Empire, nor brought by pilgrims who visited the Holy Land, but rather made at the workshops of the Bulgarian metalwork craftsmen. It is clear that some of the found artefacts served as patterns for casting other artefacts. They bear the signs of the individual vision and personal skills of the artisan who made them. If we add the purely technical intervention of the jeweller, we have a final product too far away from the initial pattern. Actually, it is an entirely new piece of art - a product of the local artisans. The numerous and diverse artefacts found during the archaeological excavations of the metalwork centres near Preslav are a confirmation for the intentional policy of the central authorities to develop this type of craft and form “industrial zones” near the second Bulgarian capital. The future research in this area would help archaeologists determine the magnitude of finished products’ production and distribution not only on the territory of early mediaeval Bulgaria, but also far beyond its borders.

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10





Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig.16



PL. II – FIG. 11-16