

MEDIEVAL JEWELRY WITH COWRIE SHELL (CYPRAEA PANTHERINA) – ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL REALITIES

Aleksandra PETROVA*
Maria CHRISTOVA-PENKOVA*

Cuvinte-cheie: *Cypraea Pantherina, necropolă medievală, cruciade, rute comerciale și de pelerinaj, Orientul Mijlociu, Imperiul Otoman.*

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Rezumat: *Autoarele au în vedere contextul arheologic în care apar cochiliile Cypraea Pantherina pe teritoriul Bulgariei medievale. Se atrage atenția asupra faptului că acestea sunt specifice Mării Roșii, Arabiei și Golfului Aden, ceea ce ridică problema modalităților de răspândire a acestora în Balcani și, în special, pe teritoriul Bulgariei. Descoperirea lor în necropola păgână de lângă Balcic, datată în jurul secolelor VII - VIII și absența în necropolele mai târzii ale Primului Țarat Bulgar ridică problema aducerii lor din zonele de origine. Cochiliile Cypraea Pantherina au fost întâlnite în câteva necropole din nordul Mării Negre și din Caucaz, unde au ajuns prin intermediul rutelor comerciale transcaucaziene. Cele mai numeroase exemplare Cypraea Pantherina de pe teritoriul Bulgariei se găsesc ca parte a șiragurilor de mărgele de sticlă din necropole din secolele XI - XIII. Distribuția lor este probabil legată de stabilirea cruciaților în Orientul Mijlociu. S-ar putea presupune că au circulat ca obiecte de schimb între pelerinii întorși de la Sfântul Mormânt și populația locală. După pierderea controlului asupra Țării Sfinte de către cruciați, aceste ornamente nu mai apar pe teritoriul bulgar. Reapariția lor a fost observată în timpul cercetării necropolelor medievale târzii, date între secolele XV – XVII, și poate fi asociată cu restabilirea contactelor comerciale cu Orientul Mijlociu în cadrul Imperiului Otoman.*

Abstract: *The authors are considering the archeological context in which the cowrie shells appear on the territory of medieval Bulgaria. Their attention is drawn to the fact*

* Aleksandra PETROVA: Regional Museum of History, Vratza; e-mail: aleksandrapp@mail.bg

* Maria CHRISTOVA-PENKOVA: National Anthropological Museum of IEMPAM – BAS; e-mail: mariachristova@abv.bg.

that these shells are endemic to the Red Sea, Arabian and Gulf of Aden, which raises the question of the ways of their spread in the Balkans, and, in particular, the territory of Bulgaria. Their discovery in the pagan necropolis near Balchik, dated around the 7th – 8th centuries, and their absence in the later necropolises of the First Bulgarian Kingdom make us think that they have been brought from their original territories. Cowries have been witnessed in several necropolises on the Northern Black Sea and the Caucasus, where they come from the Transcaucasian trade routes. The most numerous samples of cowries from the territory of Bulgaria are found as part of glass bead beads in necropolises from the 11th – 13th centuries. Their distribution is probably related to the establishment of crusaders in the Middle East. One might assume they were traded between returning pilgrims from the Holy Sepulcher and the local population. After losing control over the Holy Land by the Crusaders, these ornaments stop appearing into Bulgarian territory. Their return was witnessed during the excavation of late middle ages necropolises dating from the 15th – 17th centuries and may be associated with the restoration of trade contacts with the Middle East within the Ottoman Empire.

The archaeological research of a medieval necropolis in the centre of the present-day city of Vratsa, NW Bulgaria (**Fig. 1**) revealed a grave of a woman buried with her adornments, including two bronze, one iron and three glass bracelets, a string of glass beads, a silver coin of Dyrrhachium and shells of molluscs (**Fig. 2 a,b**)¹. Stratigraphically, the grave refers to the earliest graves dating from the 12th century². What attracted our attention was the occurrence in the string of *Cypraea pantherina* sea snail shells, also known as *Cypraea moneta* or cowries (**Fig. 2 c**). They are usually associated either with the woman's fertility and the facilitation of childbearing functions and processes or with certain apotropaic functions. However, the fact that they are endemic species and their habitat is the Indian Ocean, and more specifically the East African littoral and the Gulf of Aden (**Fig. 3**), is poorly commented in the archaeological literature. It was not until the excavation of the Suez Canal that this mollusc entered the Mediterranean³. And this, in turn, raises the question of how these shells fell into the medieval settlement of Vratsa. In our search for an answer, we will look at the archaeological complexes in which they are discovered, as well as the historical processes reflected in them.

Among the earliest complexes in which shells of the *Cypraea pantherina* sea snail were found are four graves from the proto-Bulgarian necropolis near Balchik (**Fig. 4 a,b**)⁴. They are all cremations, and in the cases where it was possible to determine the sex of the buried, it turned out that they were men. The shells are not pierced, which suggests different use, not as adornments. The analogies of synchronous complexes are from: the North Caucasus – Chmi I⁵; catacomb 52 of Klin-Yar III⁶; Shapkin necropolis of Abkhazia⁷; from the Kuban region – Old

¹ PETROVA & HRISTOVA 2018, p. 258-259.

² PETROVA & HRISTOVA 2018, p. 261.

³ RODRIGEZ *et alii* 2013, p. 190.

⁴ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA *et alii* 2016, p. 145, Pl. XC.4; XCII.6; C.2; CXI.5.

⁵ ABRAMOVA 1997, fig. 62.31.

⁶ FLEROV 2000, p. 36-37, fig. 41.24,25.

Korsun necropolis⁸; as well as from Saltovo-Mayaki necropolis – Krasnaya Gorka⁹; Volokonovski¹⁰. The graves from the Balchik necropolis, in which these shells were found, are related to its late phase, and their appearance remains a mystery. L. Doncheva proposes two hypotheses - the first that they were brought from the original territories and kept for a long time by their owners, and the second that they were acquired later, in an unknown manner¹¹. The only thing she considers indisputable is their southern origin, which she assumes to be Mediterranean. The second hypothesis is difficult to defend, given the fact that *Cypraea pantherina* appeared in the Mediterranean after the 19th century. Therefore, the first hypothesis, namely that they came from the source territories, is more likely to be assumed. The spread of these shells in the Caucasus and the surrounding areas mark with great probability the place of their acquisition, and their arrival there along the trans-Caucasian trade routes that had been established for centuries.

Until now, the appearance of *Cypraea pantherina* in archaeological complexes dating from the 7th – 11th centuries (excluding the Balchik necropolis) on the territory of Bulgaria has not been registered. The picture is similar in the neighbouring countries (at least according to the available literature). The situation changed in the 11th – 12th centuries when strings of glass beads and *Cypraea pantherina* shells were found in a number of necropoleis. In addition to grave no. 27 from Vratsa referred to in the beginning, we should mention also the child's grave from the Gluhite Kamani complex near the village of Valche pole, municipality of Lyubimets (Fig. 4 c)¹²; the grave from necropolis no. 1 of the Krasen fortress near Panagyurishte¹³, dated to the 11th – 12th centuries, as well as a grave of Mound I near the village of Yantra¹⁴, dated between the 12th and 14th centuries. A similar string originates from necropolis 3 of the Patriarchal Complex in Tarnovo, researched in 1964¹⁵. Despite its vague description and controversial interpretation, it can be concluded that a "bracelet twisted of three copper wires" and a string of "28 small seashells each with one hole pierced and a large number of small glass beads" were found in a half-destroyed grave¹⁶. As the brief list of the find-spots shows, similar strings were also distributed in the neighbouring territories of Bulgaria. In Serbia, the shells of *Cypraea pantherina* were found in grave 37 of the Batajnica necropolis near Velika Humka, dating from the 11th century, as part of a multi-component necklace of 708 beads and a bronze pendant¹⁷. Again dated to the 11th century is the grave no. 1 from the necropolis of Karaburma, where a necklace was found composed of glass beads, amethyst and shells of three species of the sea snail - *Cypraea pantherina* and *Epitonum Scalare*, endemic to the East African coast of the

⁷ VORONOV & YUSHIN 1973, p. 180, fig. 9.26.

⁸ KAMINSKIY 1987, Fig. 6.11,79, 10.42.

⁹ AKSENEV 2004, p. 210.

¹⁰ PLETNEVA & NIKOLAENKO 1976, p. 296, fig. 9.3.

¹¹ DONCHEVA-PETKOVA *et alii* 2016, p. 145.

¹² NEHRIZOV *et alii* 2016, p. 197.

¹³ GRIGOROV 2010, p. 264, fig. 69.2, Pl. 7.

¹⁴ BACHVAROV 1993, p. 49, fig.39.

¹⁵ ANGELOV 1980, p. 212-213.

¹⁶ ANGELOV 1980, p. 207.

¹⁷ BAJALOVIC 1984, cat. 190.

Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, as well as a shell of the land snail *Melanoides tuberosa*, which is native to North Africa and South Asia¹⁸. Graves no. 20, 50, 76 and 87 of the Mirijevo necropolis, from which necklaces of glass beads and cowries originate, are also dated to the 12th century¹⁹. From the territory of Romania, similar adornments were found in graves no. 44 and 48 of the Gornea – Caunița de Sus necropolis, dating from the 12th – 13th centuries²⁰. In grave no. 137 of the necropolis at Trecere bac near Nufăru, Tulcea region (dated from the end of the 11th century to the beginning of the 13th century), a necklace of glass beads and cowries was also found²¹. In later 13th – 15th century complexes, such adornments are not known to us. The short period of distribution of these ornaments coincides with the Crusades. The conquest of Jerusalem (July 15th 1099) and the establishment of the Kingdom of Jerusalem put under the control of the Crusaders the trade and pilgrimage routes in the Middle East, the only place where the shells in question could be obtained²². The access to the Holy Sepulchre was facilitated and that undoubtedly led to the stir of more and larger pilgrimage groups. It is through their mediation that the appearance of these ornaments in the necropoleis of the 11th – 12th centuries can be explained. The conquest of Jerusalem in 1187 by Sallah ad-Din (Saladin)²³ halted their spread to the Balkan Peninsula. As a final touch to the distribution of the *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells, we can cite the Afrati find in Euboea, where the cowrie is found separately and not as an element of a necklace. It was discovered in a grave, dating from the 13th – 14th centuries²⁴.

After a pause of several centuries, *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells reappeared in archaeological complexes in Bulgaria and again as part of multi-component strings of glass beads and semi-precious stones (chalcedony, carnelian, amethyst, etc.). Such a necklace was found in a newly discovered necropolis near Sofia, dated to the 15th - 17th centuries (**Fig. 4 d**)²⁵. Similar strings were also found in the graves 11 and 17 of the necropolis near Nedelkovo village, Trân region, dated in the wide range of the 15th – 18th centuries, a dating based on the discovered coins (**Fig. 4 e**)²⁶. During that period the Bulgarian lands were part of the Ottoman Empire, which in the 15th – 16th centuries experienced its heyday. During that period, it controlled large parts of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. Bulgaria was part of the internal market of the empire, and that undoubtedly facilitated the acquisition of exotic articles such as the *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells under consideration.

¹⁸ BAJALOVIČ 1984, cat. 191.

¹⁹ BAJALOVIČ 1984, cat. 197-199.

²⁰ ŢEICU & LAZAROVICI 1996, p. 84-89, fig. 51.

²¹ DAMIAN *et alii* 2017, Pl. 23 (M.137).

²² GIULLEMAIN 2012, p. 124.

²³ GIULLEMAIN 2012, p. 126.

²⁴ *Everyday life in Byzantium* 2002, cat. 758.

²⁵ DASKALOV *et alii* 2019, cat. 197/ II (2016).

²⁶ PETRUNOVA 2006, p. 193, Pl. 8.

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Fig. 1 - Location of the city of Vratsa, NW Bulgaria.



Fig. 2 - a. Grave no. 27, medieval necropolis in Vratsa; b. Multi-component necklace; c. *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells.



Fig. 3 - Distribution of the *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells before the 19th century.

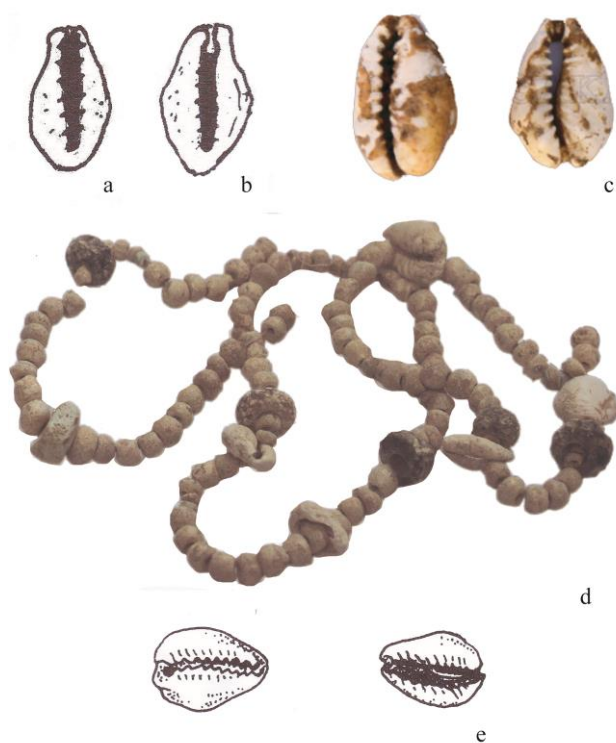


Fig. 4 - Finds of *Cypraea pantherina* snail shells from Bulgaria: a. Balchik necropolis, grave no. 133 (after Doncheva-Petkova *et alii* 2016); b. Balchik necropolis, grave no. 135 (after Doncheva-Petkova *et alii* 2016); c. Child's grave from the Gluhite Kamani complex (after <https://sakarnews.info/otnovounikalni-otkritiya-na-kultoviya-kompleks-gluhite-kamani/>); d. Late medieval necropolis on the Western arc of Sofia ring road (after Daskalov *et alii* 2019); e. Necropolis near Nedelkovo village, Trân region (after Petrunova 2006).