



(Fig. 1)

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## **DOES THE HOARD FROM VELESTINO IN THESSALY BELONG TO THE PAGAN-SLAVIC OR CHRISTIAN-BYZANTINE CULTURE?**

Discussion on the occasion of the book by F. Curta and B. S. Szmoniewski,  
The Velestino Hoard. Casting Light on the Byzantine 'Dark Ages'  
(palgrave macmillan, 2019. pp. 237).

In the year 1924, in the antiquity shops in Athens came about a larger number of metal plaques on whose front side depicted in relief were various anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and hybrid figures, some of them with an apparent mythical character. Shortly afterwards, Frank Jewett Mather, director of the Princeton University Art Museum, managed to buy 19 specimens of them that up to the present day are being kept in the same institution. According to the seller's information, these objects were discovered in Thessaly, in the vicinity of Velestino (17 km northwest of Volos), while according to some of the first

publications - more specifically - in the area of the hill Kara-Dagh/Mavro-Vouni (today known as Chalkodion). As early as the following year, Charles Vignier, a Swiss poet and collector of Asian art, presented his collection of 36 such items, from which he only put forward photographs for the bronze ones that numbered 21 specimens (Vignier 1925). Although it is not known how he acquired these objects, there is no doubt that they belonged to the same group as those from Princeton, since they are almost identical to them. Ever since then, the finds from both collections have been continuously followed by doubt

regarding their authenticity i.e. a suspicion of being falsified artifacts. In the following decades, some of them were published in several articles that made an attempt to define the place and context of their discovery and determine their chronological and cultural background. The group of twenty-one bronze plaques published by Vignier in his article, was incorporated in the study of Joachim Werner - a prominent specialist in Early Medieval archeology, who dated the objects to the 7th century AD, also linking them to the Slavs and specifically to the Slavic tribe of the Belegezites which in the given period, judging by written sources, was settled in Thessaly (Werner 1953). The same year, Carlo Cecchelli published an article presenting photographs of some of the plaques obtained in 1924 by Roberto Paribeni, director of the National Roman Museum, who was in fact the first informant to disclose the presence of the Velestino finds in the antiquities market (Cecchelli 1953). Among them were specimens that were not recorded in either of the two previously mentioned collections. It is not known what happened to Vignier's collection after his death in 1934. It is clear that at the end of the last and the beginning of this century, a part of it, alongside several other up till then unknown plaques, resurfaced on the antiquities market. With that, some of the objects were bought by major world museums, while others were sold to unidentified private collectors. Meanwhile, objects close in form and style, were also discovered in other sites on the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, Central and Eastern Europe, which further increased the professional public's interest in the subject. During the 2010s, on the website of the Princeton Museum and on Wikimedia Commons were published photographs and basic catalogue data on the Princeton collection (*Princeton* 2019; *Velestino* 2019). In one of his articles from 2013, Florin Curta published several photographs of the plaques from this collection, apparently taken during his research work in the mentioned institution (Curta 2013, Fig. 6 – Fig. 9).<sup>1</sup>

In such a historic constellation, this spring came about the first monograph on the Velestino hoard which is the occasion and subject of this article. It is signed by authors Florin Curta and Bartłomiej Szymon Szmoniewski, who today are regarded as prominent archaeologists - researchers of the Late Antique and Early Medieval period.

The motive for a detailed presentation of this book comes as a necessity for me, first because the finds from the Velestino hoard have been a subject of

research literally during my whole professional career (bibliography: Čausidis 2005, 454). The second reason is that my articles i.e. the interpretations presented within them take on a prominent place in this publication, with the authors repeatedly mentioning them, discussing them and giving their own thoughts and opinions. In this article I will try to express my thought and remarks on this book and the insights presented within it, which, given the breadth and importance of the topic, will certainly not be the last. I hope that my research so far on the specific objects from this hoard, presented in different separate publications, will soon be rounded up in one monograph, directed primarily towards their mythological-religious aspects. An important part of it will certainly be the new and very valuable information and thoughts by Curta and Szmoniewski presented in this book. The remarks I direct towards them will also be explained and argued in more detail within it, but also my own interpretations on the content and meaning of the objects that comprise the Velestino hoard.

I decided to organize the observations on this publication not by their order within it, but according to the aspects and topics which they relate to.

### Appearance and technical solutions

The monograph “The Velestino Hoard. Casting Light on the Byzantine ‘Dark Ages’” has a volume of 237 pages, organized in 10 chapters each ending with footnotes and a list of used literature. The text is accompanied by about fifty black and white and color photographs, several drawings and maps, while its closing pages include a catalogue of the plaques, the index and two documents relating to the chemical analysis of some of them.

I think that the form i.e. the appearance and different technical aspects of a monographic publication, though seemingly peripheral, often know to reflect the most essential and subtle features of the professional profile of the authors, but also their scientific and cultural sensibility, as well as the motives, goals and priorities set by them in relation to the particular publication. And this is why I start my presentations on this level of the book.

From the first glance at its cover (**Fig. 1**) and the superficial leafing of the pages, the first ambiguities and disappointments in regards to it start appearing. The Velestino hoard is comprised of several dozen relief figures that are still fascinating today for their striking archaic appearance. Almost any of them could serve as an emblem or logo of a company, institution or event. That is why it remains a mystery to why the authors did not decide, on the cover page of the monograph dedicated to this hoard, place any of its objects, but a sub-average photograph showing

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<sup>1</sup> The facts stated are mainly based on the information contained in the article by Cecchelli (Cecchelli 1953) and the second chapter of the monograph that we present here (Curta and Szmoniewski 2019, 14-38).

the hands of some modern caster in the process of creating wax models for casting metal objects. Judging by its cover, one would think that it is a book dedicated to casting technologies, which, by the way, are really present in the book, but just with one chapter that has a volume of about twenty pages which does not even comprise 10 percent of the book's contents.

The situation is not even better inside the book in which the hoard is presented through extremely poor quality amateur photographs, pale, without contrast and inadequate lighting of the plaques. This kind of quality of theirs reduces the ability to follow and verify the information and interpretations undertaken in the text, as well as to experience the specific aesthetics, style and technique of modeling of their relief surfaces. Much better photographs of part of the Velestino hoard, collected in the Princeton Museum, are available today on the institution's website (*Princeton* 2019). Even more problematic is the location of the illustrations in the book, that is, their absence exactly in the places where they are really needed. Here we primarily have in mind the catalogue placed at the end of the publication where, besides the basic data on the objects, there is no photography so that the visual identification of the described plaques and the verification of the description and other facts become difficult wanderings through the pages in search of the appropriate illustration. An even bigger problem is that the book only provides appropriate illustrations of the object which are to be found in the collection of the Princeton Museum, while the rest, mentioned in the works of Vignier and Cecchelli, are represented only by two or three photographs or are not present at all. This is a real handicap for the serious reader who is not given the opportunity to follow and verify the authors' facts and interpretations if they do not have these older publication in front of them, which in turn are not easy to come by today. The biggest problem are the objects that the authors of the monograph had the opportunity to get acquainted with when they were brought to the antiquities market. They include them in the catalogue and in their research on the basis of their personal insight, and without providing any additional information (about the seller, buyer, or even the date and place of the sale, the eventual title of the catalogue or the website). This leads to a rather "speculative situation" in which the reader is left to trust their word only.

Deserving of respect and recognition is Curta and Szmoniewski's attempt through this book to collect all the plaques from Velestino in one place and to identify the belonging of these objects to the aforementioned collections and their fate so far. This task is made more difficult by the fact that a significant number of them are represented by two or even three nearly identical specimens, ones cast in

bronze, while others in lead. The procedure is even further complicated by the fact that the differences between these "duplicates" often consist of barely noticeable inconsistencies in the contour or interior details, some of which are mirror-shaped in regards to each other. But, unfortunately, I have to state here that, from the perspective of a reader, the authors have failed to successfully complete this attempt, at the very least, because of the technical flaws in the publication. All of these complex and tangled details can not be followed and verified due to the absence in this monograph of adequate illustrative material. We think that for such a publication that strives for comprehensiveness, comparative tables had to be attached at all costs, which would show the different variants of each particular type of plaque, albeit being represented by old photographs taken from existing publications. If the obstacle to this was the purchase of rights to these photographs, the defect could be compensated by drawings or at least sketches of those objects. This wandering through the book is additionally complicated with the several incorrect signatures (p. 161: Fig. 3.4. instead of Fig. 3.2 and Fig. 3.6 instead of Fig. 3.4; on p. 166: Fig. 4.7-4.8 instead of Fig. 3.7-3.11, Fig. 4.13-4.14 instead of Fig. 4.8-4.10 and Fig. 4.3-4.4 instead of Fig. 2.8-2.10).

It is unknown to us why the catalogue of this monograph does not include one of the plaques, published by Vignier and then by Werner, shaped as a vertically elongated anthropomorphic figure in a drapery and with pronounced eyes (Vignier 1925; Werner 1953, Taf. 3: 5).

#### **- Methodology and attitude towards the findings of previous researchers**

Curta and Szmoniewski in their book often point out their disagreement, but also the lack of professional respect in regards to the assumptions and interpretations of past researchers regarding the iconography and purpose of the objects from Velestino. Their criticism of these interpretations is often reduced to just one or two sentences, without any argumentation of their denial or a more detailed analysis of the methodological and other components that would support it. The expression of their disagreement is usually followed by the presentation of their solution which consists only of a superficial statement of the proposition, often reduced to a simple witty comment, sometimes without absolutely any argument. In the best case, it is supported by a selective listing of references which, in the authors' opinion, are in favor of it. There is no indication of any principal of doubt as to their proposal or of some hesitation, the existence of several possible options, conditionality or weighing of arguments and counterarguments.

Within this same framework is also Curta and Szmoniewski's attitude towards my studies regarding the plaques from the Velestino hoard. Most of their remarks can be brought down to a few basic disagreements that are most explicitly presented in the introductory chapter of the book (pp. 3, 4). In doing so, they are mainly reduced to criticizing my comparisons of the iconography of these objects with other archaeological finds and with other types of information pertaining to or attributed to the Slavs from other parts of Europe, and are several centuries younger than the Thessalian finds.

The first example relates to my mention of the figurural decorations from the wooden temple of the god Triglav in Szczecin, with the aim to point out that also in the following periods, multifigural pictorial representations of a cult character were characteristic for the Slavs. Here, the authors make a remark that I have compared phenomena which are not of the same time and space: "For example, Chausidis links the Velestino hoard to the Slavic tribe of the Belezites, mentioned in the late seventh-century Book II of the *Miracles of St. Demetrius*. Nonetheless, his semantic and iconographic interpretation of the Velestino plaques is based on the description of a sacred place in Szczecin (the so-called *kacina*) in Helmold of Bosau's twelfth-century *Chronicle of the Slavs*." (pp. 8, 9 – footnote 22). In doing so, as support of the claim, they cite the wrong source - **Helmold** instead of **Herbordus** (The Life of Bishop Otto, II, 31) which I refer to in the mentioned study (Чаусидис 2012, 538). Here, as in many other places, is manifested the authors' ignorance on topics which relate to the pagan religion of the Slavs and the spheres of myth and religion in general, their understanding and methodology of researching these phenomena. On this occasion I would like to remind them that the essence of the comparative method lies within the research of cultural (in this case religious) phenomena by comparing examples **from different geographical regions** (synchronous method) and **different periods** (diachronic method) to indicate the prevalence of a particular phenomenon in time and space and its possible belonging to some broader system. It seems that Curta and Szmoniewski understand this method only in its narrow subject and morphological context, as comparing archaeological finds because of their typological and chronological classification.

My conjecture about the possible identification of the Slavic thunderer, perhaps even more precisely the god Perun (Čausidis 1999, 294; Чаусидис 1994, 421) on one of the plaques from Velestino, present in the catalogue with three examples (**T.I: 1**, in the book: Cat. 46-48, Fig. 3.7; Fig. 7.8) is denied by them through questioning the famous citation by Procopius (Gothic war, *Bella VII* 14, 23) on the veneration by

the Slavs and Antes of the "creator god" and "maker of lightning": "...Procopius' account is in fact an attempt to present Slavic paganism as comparable, if not similar to Greek pagan mythology." (p. 9 – footnote 23). As an argument in favor of this they refer the article of A. Loma (Loma 2004). This reference, as with some others in the book, shows that its authors do not read enough (I would not like to believe that they do not understand) the works they cite. So, in this case, they point out a study which not only does not support their position, but exactly the opposite - it denies it in a radical way. The analyzes carried out in the above mentioned article indicate the possibility that in the passage by Procopius in fact "... would be the existence, among the southern Slavs, of the word *\*perin* both in its theonymic and its appellative usage at a date as early as the sixth century A. D. i.e. some two hundred fifty years before it is for the first time explicitly attested ..." (Loma 2004, 69, 70). In contrast to this, they take their misunderstanding of this article as an argument for the conclusion that „Perun was unknown to the Slavs before the tenth century, when Thor of the Norse mythology was introduced by Varangians to Rus’." They further "argument" this view by referencing two monographs that deal with Slavic mythology (pp. 3, 9 – footnote 23 and 24). As this is not the place for more detailed discussions on this subject, in response we provide two other extensive monographs that are, this time, devoted directly to the aforementioned Slavic god (Клейн 2004; Lajoje 2015).

The Slavic Perun belongs to the category of Indo-European thunderers, analogous in his theonym and functions to the Vedic Parjanya, the Baltic Perkūnas/Pērkonas, and the Hittite female counterpart Pirwa/Peruwa. There are also indications of his presence in the Balkans, independently of the Slavs, through Ἡρος Περκωνισ/Περκυσ recorded on an inscription from Roman times and through the contemporary Albanian *Perendi* (Lajoje 2015; Чаусидис 1994, 403, 404). It is very indicative that this name is not present exactly among the Germanic i.e. Nordic peoples, from whom the Varyags probably originate. In Germanic i.e. Nordic culture the theonyms with this root refer to other figures which are indirectly connected to the thunderer: Fjörgyn or Jörð (Earth Goddess - mother of Thor) and Fjörgynn (father of Frigg – the consort of Odin, father of Thor). Therefore, the Varyags could have in no way been able to hand over Perun to the Slavs because they themselves did not have him. Besides, throughout the Slavic world, toponyms containing the theonym Perun have been recorded, at which locations there have been detected cultic and mythological traditions associated with this figure (examples: Чаусидис 1994, 426-445). This could not have happened if the Russians

had received Perun from the Varyags to then disperse him to all other Slavic populations spread throughout the eastern half of the European continent.

Curta and Szmoniewski take on another completely unfounded action in denying the possibility that the displayed figure on the mentioned plaque can be that of the Slavic thunderer (**T.I: 1**). It is about identifying the shield in one of its hands as a drum, while the raised ax in the other - with another percussive musical instrument. It is presented through two confusing sentences: „The object looks like an axe, but its blade is turned towards the man’s head, which it even overlaps a bit, as if shown in perspective. However, this may be not a weapon or a tool, but a percussion instrument, known as *crotales*. This interpretation is supported by the analysis of the object in the right hand, the arm of which is bent from the elbow to the right.“ (p. 47). The introduction of the **crotales** in this interpretation is completely incomprehensible, because neither in the elongated object, nor in the circular one, the mentioned instrument can be recognized, which in fact looks like a pair of miniature metal cymbals that are held in the palms and, with the fingers to which they are bound, are struck with one another similarly to the castanets (**T.I: 2**). But, this identification of the ax applies only to this plaque. In another figure (**T.I: 3**) the identical object, this time with the blade down, is identified by the authors as a club and even, as a second option (finally!) an ax: „The left hand holds a club or an axe with the blade downwards ...“ (p. 57, plaque with cat. no. 67, 68).

All of this effort to problematize the identification of a very clearly depicted object can be sought in the authors’ desire, by eliminating it from these plaques, to deny the presence of the Slavic thunderer on them, whose attribute was precisely the ax as a symbol of the striking power of thunder. Besides, the axes on these objects are represented so clearly that one could even identify the basic type to which they belong - axes with a long handle and thin blade (probably a battle ax). Also, the authors carefully avoid, even in the catalogue, to mention the elongated segment between the legs of the first figure (almost certainly a phallus) which persistently appears on all three plaques of this type (**T.I: 3**), most likely in order to not be further tormented in seeking its Christian excuse (see further).

Curta and Szmoniewski consider that my comparisons of the iconography of the Velestino plaques with the pagan traditions of the Western Slavs and the Russians (known from written sources) are inadmissible only because the latter are three or four centuries younger than them and because supposedly „... in the West Slavic lands, structured forms of cult (temples, cult images/idols and the prominent roles

of priests) appeared only in the late tenth century (and no earlier) as a reaction to Christianity.“ At the core of this view (promoted by older researchers) are two anachronistic stereotypes specific to the historical sciences of the 19th century - **evolutionism** and **Christianocentrism**. According to these two principles, closely intertwined with one another, religious traditions develop based on a predetermined pattern in which temples, idols and priests are characteristic of the advanced stage of human development that may not belong to *savage barbarians* but only to the ancient civilizations, whereas the pinnacle of this *evolutionary progress*, of course, belongs to Christianity with its *highly structured forms* of monotheism which are privileged in Europe only for this religion. Towards the end of their critical review in regards to the Slavic pagan religion and mythology, the authors add one more sentence in the spirit of these anachronistic approaches, this time specifically directed towards „the amorphous character of religious beliefs in the Slavic world before the adoption of Christianity“. According to it „The lack of any solid evidence of early Slavic religious organization or mythology makes it very hard to accept the interpretation of the Velestino plaques as directly associated with the early Slavs.“ (pp. 3, 9 – footnote 26).

Instead of arguing and discussing over this issue, I would recommend the authors to read any modern textbook on history, archaeology or anthropology which, I hope, they offer to their students. Temples, idols and priest are not an exclusive, but a normal and common phenomenon even in the early stages of prehistory, for which, as most illustrative, we can point out the most recent example - the cult buildings of Göbekli Tepe (around 10,000 BC).

The next point towards which the criticism of Curta and Szmoniewski is aimed is my “inadequate” comparisons of the Thessalian plaques with the famous idol discovered in the Zbruch River (the territory of present-day western Ukraine), this time around due to an extremely absurd reason - because this monument „... has been associated only with the Eastern Slavs, never with the Belegezites, or any other Slavs from the Balkans.“ (p. 3). By the way, although without comment, they do not fail to mention a reference „for the Zbruch idol as a forgery“ (p. 9 – footnote 25). Here I remind them again on the essence of the comparative method. Is there any sense for it to be reduced only to comparing elements of one cultural complex? One of its points is to compare elements of different systems in order to confirm or deny the existence of some kind of common context (mutual interactions, common genesis, their belonging to a unifying system). The theories that this idol is a 19th century forgery are a logical result of the above mentioned methodological stereotypes because, if

one find does not fit within them, the problem can be solved in two ways - either to abandon the stereotype or to deny the find. Since the first option cannot be accomplished within a dogmatic methodology that is closed within itself, only the second option remains possible. Here I would like to remind the authors that in the established scientific circles for almost a century the Velestino hoard was treated as a forgery, and behold, it was precisely they who received the role and honor to prove the contrary.

Even in these paragraphs there is one material error sneaking in i.e. the presentation of the Zbruch idol (the most famous find of Slavic paganism) as a „three-headed stone statue“ (p. 3). In this case we consider it unforgivable because it is made by researchers who tend to include Slavic pagan religion and its iconography in their studies. It is a pillar-like stone monument with four heads, more precisely with four sides whose upper part ends in an anthropomorphic head, each of which actually belongs to a separate relief figure of an anthropomorphic deity (detail: **T.VI: 2**). Three human heads are located in the bottom part of the monument and they most probably belong to the three-headed chthonic god depicted here in a kneeling posture holding the plate of the Earth with his hands (for our interpretations, with parallels and literature: Чаусидис 1994, 445-447).

#### - Christian and Byzantine interpretations of the plaques

We consider this to be the weakest aspect of the research presented in the book we exhibit here, despite the pompous announcements that „... unmistakable Christian symbolism of many representations and symbols, and the multiple parallels with Byzantine iconography show that the interpretation of the Velestino plaques has until now been on a wrong path.“ (p. 4). With all responsibility, I can conclude that the announced “unmistakable” insights do not derive from any in-depth iconographic and other analyses, elaborations and arguments carried out by the authors on the basis of a consistent and consequently implemented methodology. They are in fact the product of the goals and objectives set beforehand by Curta and Szmoniewski before the writing of this monograph, and presumably even before the beginning of the research that preceded it. In fact, these are two very clear components that must be promoted in this book at all costs, and in such a context, only those facts, sources, interpretations, parallels and references that are in favor of them are carefully selected.

The first component is the premise that the **Velestino hoard belongs to the Byzantine culture**, and the second - that **the iconography of the objects which comprise it is dominated by the Christian**

**symbolic and iconographic system**. These premises are put in direct opposition to the concepts according to which the hoard, globally, belongs to the culture of the Slavs and their pagan religion and mythology or more specifically - the culture of the Slavic Belegezites (also probably known as Belzetes) which at the time existed in Thessaly.

The first premise is not that problematic, given the breadth, complexity and ambivalence of the qualitative **Byzantine** or more precisely, **Roman**. Sources indicate that, shortly after the Slavs arrived on the territory of present-day Greece, they entered into close interaction with the Romanized and Christianized population there. The most direct and illustrative example of this is exactly the Belegezites who, during one of the sieges of Thessaloniki, did not stand by its Slavic invaders and instead (perhaps not so much for political and cultural reasons as for material reasons) supplied the Thessalonians with food products. In this context, though unlikely, it should not be excluded that the makers of the Velestino plaques were members of the Roman culture, but that they worked according to the taste and demands of their new Slavic neighbors. However, not only the iconography of these objects, but also the style of their performance reflects a “barbaric” sensibility, quite different from the Byzantine one, which goes much more in line with the Slavic origin of their makers (Čausidis 2005, 448-453).

But, when it comes to the second premise - the domination of **the Christian character in the iconography** of these plaques, there really aren't many arguments. Actually, its forced defense, in a methodological and conceptual sense, represents the lowest point of the monograph which, without fear of exaggeration, can be defined as dilettante. It speaks very illustratively on the poor knowledge and the absolute methodological unpreparedness of the authors in regards to this type of research. Blindness with this tendency leads to interpretations that often cannot withstand any basic logical and common sense criticism.

#### - Cross-shaped motifs

Every cruciform present on the plaques from Velestino, is considered by Curta and Szmoniewski to be a Christian cross, whether it may be a ‘normal’, oblique cross, swastika or Maltese cross, depicted besides the anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or hybrid figures, or on their body. In doing so, they do not take into account that the cross, both the vertical and oblique one, is a motif universal of all mankind and that it has been used as a religious symbol even in ancient Mesopotamia (among other also in the form of pendants worn on the chest), and with such function it was also present in Minoan culture, in the Iron Age

and Ancient cultures of Europe and the Mediterranean, and even in pre-Columbian America. There are serious theories that it was incorporated into Christianity precisely because of its strong reverence as a pagan symbol, and because of it some of the Church Fathers were strongly opposed to this action (summarized with examples and literature: Чаусидис 2017, 447-516). Hence, the Christian character of the cross-shaped motifs from the Velestino plaques cannot be regarded as an *a priori* fact that does not need to be proven.

The two almost identical plaques showing a pair of human figures (**T.I: 4**) are interpreted by the authors as „... saints, most likely teachers, such as the Church Fathers“, depicted with halos around their heads or as monks, covered with hoods („monastic hood /cowl“) and adorned with omophoria, holding sacred books in their hands (pp. 54, 57. Cat. 65, 66, Fig. 3.10; Fig. 3.11). In doing so, it seems that they layer these interpretations on top of the associations of some older interpretations (pp. 29, 31). What they call as “halo” actually looks a lot more like hair because of the parallel grooves and the pointed lower edge that forms a clear boundary between these segments and the face of the figures. In similar versions this detail is also present on other plaques from the hoard, but also on numerous similar and synchronous objects from Central and Eastern Europe that are represented in the book with appropriate illustrations or within the accompanying references (**T.III: 2**; Cat. 69; Fig. 3.14; Fig. 3.19: 9, 12, 13). It is not excluded that they can also be some kind of spherical caps divided by parallel ribs or ornaments. The “omophoria” of the two figures, on the other hand, resemble more some kind of long beaded necklaces that extend to the knees. At the very least it is debatable to call the square segments under the hands of the depicted figures as “a book, quite possibly the Gospels” (p. 54) because of the way they are held and because of the “Andrew’s Cross” which in Christianity never reached the status of the vertical cross in order for it to be shown on the covers of holy books. I agree that this pair of figures with their stance, clothing and especially the gesture of the right hand leave an impression as priests, even as Christian ones. But this impression must be checked and proven through a much more detailed and methodologically based elaboration, without the *a priori* ruling out of the possibility for the existence of pagan priests which certainly wore some specific clothing that set them apart from ordinary people.

The authors are also trying to attach a Christian character to the cross-shaped motifs present on some of the plaques shaped as zoomorphic or hybrid figures. Thus, the cross carved on the thigh of the figure from the plaques with cat. no. 8 and 9 (**T.II: 1, 2**),

which according to them shows an animal from the family of felines (a lion or more likely tiger), seems to be treated by them as a Christian symbol with justification given only by the following sentence: “The ‘Christianization’ of the feline (lion or tiger) on Cat. 8–9 may refer to the taming of the beast, a symbol of destruction for the early Christians.” (pp. 102, 103 – Fig. 4.5; 4.6; on my interpretations: Чаусидис, 2005, 220-223). They also indirectly invoke this meaning in regards to the cross-shaped symbol located on the thigh of the animal from the plaque with cat. no. 25, which most probably depicts a wolf with an oversized snout (**T.II: 5**), without mentioning (or noticing) that it is in fact a swastika (109, 110 – Fig. 4.12). The presence of the mentioned motifs (vertical, oblique cross, swastika, rosette) on the thighs of zoomorphic or hybrid figures, can be traced for many centuries before the emergence of Christianity. In Egypt it occurs in the 14th century BC, from where it soon spreads towards the Middle East, from there to the Caucasus, and later also through Europe. Some researchers believe that, within this constellation, it functioned mainly as a solar symbol (Kantor 1947).

Among the plaques from Velestino there is only one object on which, with a significant dose of probability, a Christian cross can be identified. It is a crescent-shaped plaque from the Princeton Museum (**T.I: 6**) in whose center there is depiction of a Maltese cross flanked by animals (Cat. 75, 76 – Fig. 5.1; 5.2). Although in the poor quality photography, Curta and Szmoniewski identify only two animals (p. 135), the photography presented on the Princeton Museum’s website shows that besides it one could identify five more zoomorphic or hybrid figures (*Princeton* 2019). Regarding this object we could propose three options. According to the first one it could be a genuine pagan symbol, which would be supported by the numerous examples of prehistoric Maltese crosses from the Neolithic, the later prehistoric periods, Mesopotamia and following epochs (Чаусидис 2017, 527-532). The second assumption would allow for it to be a Christian composition, which would mean that the same manufacturer (in his distinctive manner i.e. style) also served Christian clients. According to the third option, this scene could be the result of interaction between the pagan and Christian symbolic representations i.e. the adoption of Christian symbols by the pagan Belegezites in their authentic meaning or in relation to some of their pagan symbols. In the latter case this process would be followed by adapting that meaning to the pagan system, for example the introduction of the cross as a substitute for the representations of a centrally placed tree, some kind of pillar motif, or a stylized figure flanked by symmetrical animals (examples: Чаусидис 1994, T.XXXVIII; T.LXXX).

### - Other Christian interpretations

The intention of Curta and Szmoniewski for the recognition at every cost of Christian contents on the Velestino plaques has resulted in extremely problematic interpretations of some of the most interesting specimens from this hoard.

The first is the plaque (represented by two copies **T.III: 1, 3**) which depicts a naked woman covered with a scarf, with a child in her lap, and with a stringed musical instrument in her left hand (Cat. 42, 43, Fig. 3.3; Fig. 3.4). The authors themselves agree that at the joint of her semi-spread legs there is a depicted vagina surrounded by pubic hair. In this figure they recognize **St. Elizabeth with John the Baptist as a child**, believing that the child is not actually sitting on her lap but is in her womb („Instead, the child is most likely shown as still being in the womb.“). The authors also propose a justification for the presence of a musical instrument in the hands of the naked Elizabeth: „If so, the scene may be an illustration of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, who told the former, ‘For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy’ (Luke 1:44).” (p. 42). This would be the first or one of the earliest Christian scenes where a female saint is presented completely naked, even with a fully naked (and open) vagina (“... clearly marked vagina, with a number of radically arranged lines to represent the pubic hair.”) (p. 42). But not unique!

On another plaque mentioned above (**T.III: 2**) the authors identify the same female saint, this time in the moment as she, also without any clothes on her body, gives birth to her son (by the way, with a clearly shown *labia majora* of the vagina from which his head comes out) (Cat. 69, 70, Fig. 3.14). Therefore, it is no wonder that the very clearly depicted hair of the not-yet-born John the Baptist is treated as a halo: „It is unlikely that this is meant to indicate the hair. It may rather be a conventional way to represent a halo, not unlike that around the heads of the two saints at Cat. 65–66.“ (p. 60). In doing so, as an analogy they point to an illustration from an 11th century Christian manuscript (**T.III: 4**) which depicts the birth of Jacob from the womb of his mother Rebecca (p. 80 – footnote 19, without the illustration). But, in doing so they don't take into account one essential difference - the birthgiver in that illustration wears a shirt that fully covers her torso, along with her breasts, hip and genital area (**T.III: 4 compare with 2**). The authors do not comment at all (and perhaps do not notice) the pointed segment under the mouth of the Velestino figure. Is that the beard of Saint Elizabeth or maybe her tongue sticking out?

The cycle of Christian scenes devoted to fertility and birthing is rounded up by Curta and Szmoniewski with one more representation. It is found on the plaque depicting a winged figure in frontal view whose hands are raised in the orans position (**T.IV: 2, 4**; in the book: Cat. 44, 45, Fig. 3.5; Fig. 3.6). In it they recognize an angel, who would then be wearing a skirt that covers only the lower part of his body. The interpretation goes on even further, so that the angel is identified specifically with **Archangel Gabriel** within the scene of the **Annunciation** in which he informs the Virgin that the Son of God has been conceived inside of her. Despite Mary's evident absence, the authors try to justify the frightening face of the angel by a suitable quotation from the Bible: “But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God’ (Luke 1: 29).“ (p. 47). In doing so, they do not mind at all that their archangel has breasts which, in fact, they also identify themselves: „In the middle of the chest, two circles are meant to represent the breasts, but without nipples.“ (p. 47). Perhaps, highlighting the absence of nipples should be treated as a justification for this incompatible combination?

Among the plaques from Thessaly the authors identify another angel, this time a **seraphim** (**T.IV: 1, 3**) represented by three almost identical plaques (Cat. 52-54, Fig. 3.9) to which they are led by the absence of hands on the depicted figure and the presence of wings complemented by two pairs of rosettes interpreted by them as eyes (p. 50) which indeed, in some cases, are scattered on the wings of the said Christian characters. But, in doing so, they also disregard the facts that do not support such an interpretation, namely the absence of four more wings (or two more for these figures to become at least cherubims) and the presence of a striking beard and moustache which are not at all characteristic of the Christian characters of this kind. I believe that it is one of the most important plaques from the hoard of which, among other things, speaks their size. I have written about this object multiple times and have tried to argument my interpretations with numerous pictorial analogies and written sources which the authors do not mention at all, nor do they present an articulate critique and counterarguments in regards to them. Therefore, referring to these papers, here I will only reiterate my view that it is a representation of a hermaphroditic deity with a bearded head and a vulva in the genital area. The sumptuous garments that the deity wears, complemented by wings, represent the celestial vault with which this god is equated, while the four rosettes mark the movement of the sun across him (Чаусидис 2005, 390-402; Čausidis 2005, 440; Чаусидис 2017,



112). The relations of this character with the cherubim and seraphim do indeed exist, but in the opposite direction. It is a character which in the Middle East can be traced back to the 2nd millennium BC, from where it later entered Christianity, making its hybrid appearance deviate from the usual concepts of Christian iconography (four faces, absence of body and hands, eyes scattered on the wings) (Подосинов 2000).

The next plaque with “Christian iconography” was already mentioned in the previous paragraphs. It shows a hybrid figure with a human body and the head of an animal with a large toothed snout and an ax in its left hand (**T.I: 3**), while on its torso there is also depicted another smaller anthropomorphic figure (Cat. 67, 68, Fig. 3.12; Fig. 3.13). According to the interpretation of Curta and Szmoniewski, the larger figure depicts **St. Christopher** at the moment when, in the role of a ferryman (Reprebus), he carries the Christ Child across the river. As a key argument in this interpretation they take the depiction of the same saint from the collection of Early Christian relief plaques from Vinica (Republic of North Macedonia), without mentioning the inconsistencies between these representations (**T.I: 5 comapre with 3**). Unlike the previous ones, this interpretation is worth discussing (pp. 57, 60). It is possible that the authors, at least to some extent, are right with this interpretation, but the lowered club or ax in the hand of the larger figure should be appropriately explained, which does not correspond to the presented depictions of St. Christopher, as well as the absence of the figure of the “Christ Child” as part of them. Perhaps the solution should be sought in the genesis of the, for Christianity unusual hybrid character of this saint, which, like some other similar motifs, may have arisen as a result of the Christianization of the old pagan mythical characters who had to be incorporated into the Christian system because of their wide popularity. It is possible that in this case we have another reversible repetition of this process where the Slavs of Thessaly, in some Byzantine-Christian scene of St. Christopher recognized in him a similar figure from their mythology and religion (probably with a chthonic character) and therefore, in an adapted form, incorporated him into the repertoire of their pagan mythical images. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that among the same hills where the Velestino hoard was found, in antiquity there existed a toponym **Cynoscephale** (Κυνὸς Κεφαλαί = dog head), equivalent to the epithet of St. Christopher (κυνοκέφαλος). Curta and Szmoniewski mention it as the location of the battle between Philip V and the Romans (197 BC), but without the stated meaning (p. 32 - footnote 3).

The Christian character of the plaques depicting a **rooster** (**T.II: 3**) is argued by the authors with

two episodes - the first about **St. Peter’s denial of Christ** among the crowing of the roosters and the second (preserved in apocryphal works) about **the roasted rooster that was resurrected by Christ** to oversee the sinful Judas (pp. 100, 102, Cat. 6, 7). In doing so they do not mention which specific iconographic element of these plaques gave them reason for these connections. The rooster is a universal symbol that upon arrival in the Old World from the Far East has taken on the role as a symbol of the sun and light, as the authors themselves point out, but narrowly directing this phenomenon within Christian traditions: “In early Christian art, the symbolism of the rooster was frequently associated with the sun, for the crowing rooster chased away the darkness.” (p. 100).

In a similar way, Curta and Szmoniewski introduce the plaques with depictions of deer into the Christian system (**T.II: 7**), connecting them to the Christian metaphorical stories about the deer attacking a snake as a symbol of Christ in the role of a fighter against evil. In this action they also include the Early Christian Eucharistic scenes depicting deer drinking from the sacred spring (pp. 108, 109, Cat. 22, 23). In this case also, the deer from the mentioned plaques is not accompanied by any additional element whose at least potentially Christian meaning would give cause and justify these comparisons.

#### - Aesopian and Byzantine interpretations

Where there is no occasion or opportunity for any Christian insinuation, Curta and Szmoniewski turn to **Aesop** in order to, by connecting the figure or scene of the given plaque to one of his fables, prove at least its Byzantine character. In doing so, they count on the fact that Aesop’s fables, by surviving antiquity, also retained their popularity in the Christian world.

Thus, they connect the plaques that show **a wolf with a smaller animal in its mouth** (**T.II: 8**) with the **fable of the “Wolf and the Lamb”**, although the small animal, with its short legs and elongated snout, resembles more a pig (pp. 109, 111, Cat. 27-29; Fig. 4.13; Fig. 4.14). Another pair of plaques with a depiction of a bird (**T.II: 4**) are identified with the **partridge** that also appears in a few fables of this ancient author, although the depicted bird, with its large, sharp and downward beak, resembles more some bird of prey that a partridge whose beak is quite small and flat (p. 106, Cat. 16, 17). The plaques depicting a **dog** (**T.II: 6**) are connected to the fable **“The Two Dogs”**, just only because of two symmetrically oriented specimens of them preserved (p. 113, Cat. 32, 33; Fig. 4.15; Fig. 4.16). We are convinced that, using this methodology, the authors would have no problem in proving the “Aesopian origin” of sim-

ilar zoomorphic scenes from the traditions of some tribe in Sub-Saharan Africa or Oceania.

The pair of plaques depicting a large animal (according to them a wolf) oriented with its open toothed mouth towards the boy that it holds with its front paws (**T.V: 1**) is put into relation with the fable “**The Wolf and the Boy**” without even mentioning the other published interpretations of this object (p. 39, 40, 42, Cat. 13 – 15, Fig. 3.1; Fig. 3.2). In our articles we have already pointed to the resemblance of this zoomorphic figure to the fantastic horses from the Martinovka hoard which also have open toothed mouths and claws on their legs, although depicted in a different manner (**T.V: 4, 5 compare with 1**). In doing so we have in mind the generally accepted view that the pair of such symmetrical figures, combined with the central anthropomorphic character, constituted a single composition that overlaps with the previous ones which also depict a male character, this time attacked by a pair of enraged monstrous horses (Čausidis 2005, 444-447, TI: 9, 11). In support of these relations points another plaque from Velestino (Cat. 1 – 3; Fig. 4.1; Fig. 4.2) which is even closer to the mentioned plaques from Martinovka, also discovered in other locations from the wider region (**T.V: 3 compare with the other**).

**The man with a horn in his hands**, shown on one of the plaques (**T.VI: 1**) is treated by the authors as a trumpeter, for which they point to Byzantine parallels (without presenting illustrations) that really depict people trumpeting by blowing into large horns (pp. 60, 62, Cat. 71; Fig. 3.15). But, on the depiction from Velestino the horn is placed in a completely different context - touching the mouth of the depicted figure with its wider part (and not with the sharp end, as in the presented analogies) which clearly shows that in this example it is put in the function as a rhyton. In this case, completely new possibilities for comparing the plaque have been opened up, including numerous Slavic parallels with a clear symbolic and religious character. Here we have in mind: the descriptions of the annual divination ritual according to the sacred rhyton that the priest of Svantevit performed in the temple of this god in Arkona; the sculptures and relief that show a deity with a rhyton in its hands from Zbruch, Leżno and Altenkirchen (**T.VI: 2, 4, 5**); the medieval amulets from the territory of Russia that show a figure of a man with a rhyton in his outstretched hand (**T.VI: 3**) (Čausidis 1994, 94-100). Of course, this scene could not be considered exclusively Slavic as it is also present in other cultures from Europe, and even wider. By the way, in the Republic of North Macedonia we even have one such Christian example which would come in handy to our authors in their tense Christian-Byzantine interpretations. It is the ktetor portrait of King Marko

in Marko's Monastery near Skopje (14th century) where he is depicted with a rhyton in his hand (**T.VI: 6**) (Čausidis 1997).

#### - Plaques in the shape of a hand

As we have said, while presenting their interpretations of the iconography and meaning of the specific plaques from the Velestino hoard, Curta and Szmoniewski generally do not comment on, and most often do not even mention, my interpretations and arguments put forward for most of them. One of those exceptions is the pair of plaques shaped in the form of a hand (**T.VII: 4, 5**; Cat. 73, 74, Fig. 5.4; Fig. 5.5; Fig. 5.6), maybe because I have dedicated a special article about it with a detailed analysis of its iconography and semiotics (Čausidis 2003; Čausidis 2005, 437-439). Their statement is correct that in this article I present only the bronze specimen, with broken off fingers, but not the lead one, from the Princeton Museum collection, which has the same shape and a completely identical iconography, but is preserved in its entirety (**T.VII: 4**). In the introductory chapters of the monograph they express the view that the first specimen does not originate from Romania, as I call it, but from Velestino, which I am inclined to believe, although the book does not provide explicit facts in support of these opinions (p. 35 – footnote 32, p. 136, p. 145 – footnote 6).<sup>2</sup> Instead of that, they point out that for these reasons „... Čausidis's interpretation must be treated with great caution“ (p. 137). My linking of the bronze specimen with Romania and not mentioning of the lead specimen from Princeton is due to the facts presented in the publications which at the given time were available to me. Within them it was stated that the first object originates from the mentioned country, while the second one was mentioned with reservations about its authenticity which I was not in the possibility to verify at the time (*Messrs Sotheby's* 1989; Kidd 1992). The second remark by the authors is completely unjustified because the iconography of both hands is almost identical, so the non-inclusion of the lead specimen in my analyses could not have played a decisive role in its interpretation (**T.VII: 5 compare with 4**).

But, when it comes to suggestions for caution, they should apply not only to this one, but also to

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<sup>2</sup> In this context it could be indicative that in the group photograph of the Princeton collection, published on Wikimedia Commons, the patina colour of the hand differs significantly from the patina of other lead items (*Velestino* 2019). Curta and Szmoniewski do not pay attention to this detail i.e. do not give an explanation whether it is a different kind of patina or a consequence of the specific conservation treatment to which this plaque has been subjected.

my other interpretations of the Velestino plaques. In doing so, Curta and Szmoniewski should first reflect these suggestions towards themselves because they either do not refer to them in their analyses or do it quite superficially and carelessly. In this case, it applies to the interwoven animals shown on the outer side of the palm of the represented hands. The authors first correctly state that I divide them into 4 groups, but while listing these groups they mention only two - one covered with small imprinted rhombuses (for which I suggest that may have had a chthonic character due to the frequent functioning of the rhombus as an ideogram of the earth), and another with small circles (with an assumption about their celestial character based on the possible solar meaning of the circles) (Чаусидис 2003, 54 – 56; detailed about the meaning of the rhombus: Чаусидис 2005, 93-130). Then, without presenting any counterarguments, they declare that „There is absolutely no basis for such an interpretation“ and that „... Chausidis neglected (or conveniently ignored) the presence among the twelve animals shown on the hand of four bodies covered with C-shaped motifs. In other words, there are three, not two, stylistical options for the decoration of animal bodies“. In doing so they forget that, just a few lines above, they themselves said that „He even divided the animals into four groups ...“ (p. 144). In this apparently confusing passage they do not mention the other two groups of animals that I have noted, covered by the “C-motif”, which are clearly indicated on the same page that they had previously quoted. About one of these remaining two groups, comprised of smaller animals with a beak, I suggest treating this motif as stylized feathers, by which the aforementioned zomorphic figures are given the meaning of birds or ornithomorphic mythical beings. In regards to the other group, comprised of larger animals, I assume that the same motif could possibly be interpreted as bodies covered in scales, followed by their categorization into the group of reptiles or similar fantastic beings (Чаусидис 2003, 55, 56).

It should be mentioned that, besides these inconsistent critiques, the authors also present their “analysis” of the two hand-shaped plaques, which in effect amounts to a mere description (pp. 137-144), crowned by a random comment, presented without any cause or argument, according to which „...the most important decoration covered the back of the hand and consists of animal bodies in motion may have been a (visual) play on bulging veins.“ (p. 144).

Curta and Szmoniewski also deny one of my hypotheses in regards to the **purpose of this object**, which could eventually also apply to the other Velestino plaques. According to it, this and the other finds from the hoard could have had a **votive character** i.e. to serve as gifts in sanctuaries for the the healing of

their donors or the fulfillment of some of their other pleas (Чаусидис 2003, 41). In doing so the authors present one completely irrelevant argument that it „... is unlikely, because the lower side of the cuff is bent inwards: the plaque could not have been placed vertically and must have been conceived to be laid horizontally on a flat surface.“ (p. 144). Based on the presented bibliography it could be concluded that they are not acquainted with the article in which I argue this proposal with examples that until recently were present in folklorized Christian traditions. We are talking about customs in which believers, in churches, on icons, or at Christianized cult places in nature, left plaques similar to those from the Velestino hoard made of silver, cheap alloys or wax. It is especially significant that they also had only one relief surface that most often depicted some part of the human body (arm, leg, eye ...), but also figures of children, frogs and domestic animals (Чаусидис, 1992, 149-152, T.XII; Чаусидис 1994, 180, 181). Despite these criticisms, in the catalogue of objects presented at the end of the book, our authorial tandem nevertheless decides to name these plaques as “Votive hand” (p. 226 - Cat. 73, 74).

In denying the votive character of the plaques shaped as a hand, Curta and Szmoniewski also include my assumption on the possible contribution of ancient cult of Sabazios in their genesis (p. 137), taking into account the inclusion of similar bronze hands in the rituals associated with this old Balkan deity (**T.VI: 1, 2**), this time produced three-dimensionally and complemented by zomorphic and other symbols (Čausidis 2003, 86-90). It is indicative that in doing so, as a possible inspirer of my (pagan) interpretation, they impute me a study that treats similar bronze hands with a Christian character (**T.VII: 3**): „Chausidis may have been inspired by Marvin C. Ross, ‘Byzantine bronze hands holding crosses,’ *Archaeology* 17.2 (1964), 102–3.“ (145 – footnote 7). By the way, it is more than obvious that these Christian objects came about as a result of the Christianization of precisely the hands of Sabazios (**TVII: 1**) and especially those associated with the god Jupiter i.e. Dolichenus (**T.VII: 2** with a depiction of Victoria) with whom he was syncretized. In fact, Curta and Szmoniewski take this insinuation as an occasion to introduce into the topic of the mentioned Christian objects despite the fact that neither I, nor anyone else, have so far compared them to the Velestino hands. However, in the following sentences they also make a remark, aimed towards me (who has not used this objects at all), or more likely towards themselves (?) because, unlike the Christian hands, the sphere and the cross attached to it are not present on the Thessalian ones (pp. 137, 138).

This time also, in support of the mentioned unjustified denials and Christian interpretations, the au-

thors introduce some more subtle references to the cross motifs imprinted on the rings on the fingers of both the hands, which, by the way, are more reminiscent of rosettes than typical Christian crosses (p. 140). But, on the other hand, they do not pay much attention to the bracelet which in both specimens covers the root of the palm although it is clearly noted in the book: „... as well as of a bracelet, this may well be the left hand of a woman.“ (p. 144). Having in mind the profile and affinities of the authors regarding Early Medieval jewelry, I expected them to undertake a detailed typological identification of this bracelet, since it is a specific and highly characteristic type that could have important implications for the chronological and cultural determination of the metal hands, and thus of the whole Thessalian hoard. It is especially important that such bracelets were also found as part of the Martinovka hoard (**T.VIII: 4, examples from the wider region - 2, 3, compare with 1**), where there are also metal plaques which show a high level of similarity in style and iconography to those from Velestino (**T.V: 2, 4, 5 compare with 1, 3**) (Pekarskaja and Kidd 1994, Taf. 1: 33, 34, 39-42).

While we are on the topic of jewelry, it should be noted that the authors of this book are silent about another extremely interesting fact that has important implications for the study of the Velestino hoard and its connection to other archaeological finds of the same time. It is the bow fibula (class I B, according to J. Werner) discovered at Nea Anchialos, about twenty kilometers south of Velestino, crafted in an identical manner to most of the Velestino finds, recognizable after the filling in of the interior surfaces with interwoven ornaments divided in an identical manner (**T.VIII: 5**) (Werner 1953, 5, Taf. 6: 6; Werner 1960, 118, Taf. 29: 4). We have also given attention to this connection in our previous studies (Чаусидис 1993, 159-161), and it would be strange if F. Curta did not notice this resemblance, given its mention in the ninth chapter (p. 200) and his several studies specifically devoted to these fibulae (for example Curta 2005, Fig. 7: 13). This fibula shows that the same workshop, and even maybe the same craftsman, from which the Velestino plaques originated, also produced fibulae of the mentioned type. The combination of these two types of objects is also found in the Martinovka hoard (Pekarskaja and Kidd 1994, Taf. 1: 37, 38; Taf. 2: 65; Taf. 3 – Taf. 6), which gives another reason to assume that behind both hoards and the objects contained therein were two communities with very close ethno-cultural features (**T.VIII: 6**). Judging by the numerous studies to date, it seems very likely that they were Slavs or even more specifically the Antes, although the first-signed author of the book we present systematically works

on disputing the connection between these fibulae and the mentioned ethnicities.

### **Technology of production and purpose**

From the monograph we present here, two chapters stand out from the rest in their quality. The topics they cover are analyzed in detail and supported by extensive documentation and literature as well as appropriate comparative material, while the proposed hypotheses and interpretations are balanced and well-argued. These are the **second chapter** where, based on archival documents, the origins of the objects from the Velestino hoard and its complex history are traced, from its discovery to the present, as well as the **seventh chapter** whose contents we refer to in the following lines.

In this chapter Curta and Szmoniewski reaffirm the opinions of previous researchers that all of the objects in this hoard are made according to a wax model (the „**lost wax technique**“), which is in fact indicated by their form and details that bear clear characteristics of modeling in soft wax. The procedure consisted of the usual stages that make up this technological process: creation of the wax model; its covering with a layer of clay from which the final mold will be formed; drying and firing the clay model; pouring the molten metal into it; breaking the mold and removing the cast; mechanical finishing of the cast by removing and grinding the by-products of casting, smoothing, polishing, engraving, chasing and punctuation (the last three processes the authors allegedly did not ascertain when examining the plaques); repetition of all these procedures during the preparation of each new specimen of the given plaque (pp. 165, 166).

However, despite the detailed analysis, in the end some issues remain unclear or insufficiently presented, and without their further clarification it can not be expected that the insights presented are going to substantially outweigh the already known findings.

Judging by some details of the proposed reconstruction of the technological process (“casting funnels”, “venting tubes”, “... the bar is broken ...”) one can sense the authors’ conviction that the casting molds for the metal plaques of the hoard encompassed both their relief decorated front side and their back, which was flat and without any details (p. 161). However, it is not specified whether this technique was applied to the casting of all plaques, which in turn would mean a complete rejection of previous views that it was performed in one-sided molds that covered only their face (Werner 1953, 3).

On pp. 27, 161-163 the authors raise the question of the presence of **textile imprints** on the back unprocessed side of some plaques, both in bronze and

lead specimens, also present on similar items from the Biskupija hoard (Croatia). They note that on the Velestino specimens this imprint is positive which, in their view, indicates the application of a thick woven linen cloth to the back of the wax models based on which the metal objects were then cast. From their explanations it is not completely clear the role of this textile within the technological process and the reason why it was not removed from the wax matrix prior to its entry into the formation process of the final clay mold.

While elaborating on the technological aspects and the presence of plaques as **mirror pairs** within the hoard, they present a thesis that during the above-presented manufacturing process the orientation of the figures could be changed per se. Because of the complexity of the question, here we quote the whole passage from p. 185: “The careful examination of a pair of bronze plaques showing a horseman (Cat. 55–56) strongly suggests that the Velestino pieces made of copper alloy were used for casting, not pressing. On both plaques, the horseman holds the weapon in the left, and the shield in the right hand. If the two plaques were dies, then the resulting appliqué would also have the horseman carrying the weapons in the ‘wrong’ hands. Only casting could produce a mirror image of the model, in which the horseman would have the sword in the right, and the shield in the left hand. The model was impressed into the soft clay, which produced a mirror image. The mother-mould was then employed for the production of the wax model, on which the image was again reversed. But the resulting, final cast, was a mirror image of the wax model, and thus had the weapons in the ‘right’ hands.” We can partially agree with the first conclusion, but only in regards to the lead specimens which, due to the softness of the metal, could have not been used for pressing. However, such a function cannot be excluded when it comes to the bronze plaques. On the other hand, we find the second conclusion that a mirror version could be obtained from a positive model as completely wrong. This cannot be done neither in the casting nor pressing technique. In fact, it could have been done within both of the techniques, but in doing so the product would not have a protruding but a sunken relief (like those in ancient Egyptian temples), which does not apply to the Velestino plaques because neither of them has such a relief. By the way, the technique of sunken relief is not common for the more complex figural compositions present on cast metal objects, at least in this period, if not more broadly. Exceptions are minor motifs imprinted in negative, such as details or ornaments on jewelry and other metal objects.

*Why within the Velestino hoard, besides the bronze plaques of a certain type, there are also lead*

*ones, which in shape are almost identical to them, with insignificant deviation on the level of contour and in some minor interior details? At the end of the chapter, the authors offer a solution, but more in the form of a question than an answer (pp. 166, 167), with which I can generally agree, but with a remark that it should be clarified i.e. explained more simply their role in the casting process and precisely define what accounts for the said minor differences. We will try to do that here.*

The Velestino plaques are in fact part of the equipment of some craftsman or workshop that produced metal plaques with the casting technique. This production was quite massive i.e. it consisted of making numerous specimens (hundreds, if not more) of relief plaques of the types found in the hoard. During the casting process according to the “lost wax” technique, each plaque had to have an adequate wax matrix (in positive) which was destroyed during the process, because of which for every subsequent production of a plaque of the same type it had to be manually reworked in wax. Manual modeling is a long, arduous but also creative process that required both the appropriate skill and artistic talent that not every caster could possess. To avoid repeating this procedure when casting each specimen, the craftsman would equip himself with matrices for each type of plaque that were also cast in metal based on a hand-modeled wax model or imprint of an existing plaque. Within the Velestino hoard, these matrices are in fact the lead plaques, but the same function could have been performed by the bronze ones, and theoretically by those that could have been modeled in stone, wood or any solid material. Based on them the positive wax models were made, which were then covered with clay and entered the subsequent stages of the casting process. Therefore, the bronze plaques from the hoard must not only be treated as finished products of the workshop, but also as matrices that could perform this function no worse than the lead ones.

*Why are there small differences between the individual specimens that belong to one type (whether lead or bronze)? After the craftsman, based on the lead or some other solid matrix, cast the wax model, he was able to finish it manually, especially if the cast did not come out perfectly. This was enabled by the soft structure of the wax. Because of this, the “duplicates” have slight differences in the contour, the ornaments and some other details. In some cases it seems to me that the bronze specimens are more perfect than the lead ones, which may be due to the surface oxidation of lead, but also to the fact that the interior details of the lead matrices were more rigid, given that the created wax matrices would be anyways manually finished.*

After elaborating on all the details of the production, one gets the impression that the next aspect of the Velestino plaques, presented in the next (eighth) chapter, regarding their **purpose** is also within reach. However, it seems that things have come to a dead end there, with no significant progress in regards to previous findings. We know when, where and how the Velestino plaques were produced, but **we do not know what the purpose of the objects was that were cast with their help**. Deluded by their aspirations to put the Christian and Byzantine character of these objects first, not only do Curta and Szmoniewski offer no new arguments in favor of resolving these issues, they fail to even present and evaluate objectively all the previous theories to date regarding this question. In this context, they completely marginalize the theory of the cult (i.e. the “votive”) character of the final products derived from the Velestino matrices (pp. 182-186). At the expense of this, noticeable is the forcing of an assumption that the final products served as appliquéés for furniture (which they themselves propose) or for shields. Despite the tone of caution and conditionality present in their statements, we cannot help but understand this procedure as yet another subtle targeting of the interpretations towards the main premises set out at the outset of the book, about the Christian-Byzantine character of the hoard. This tendency is rounded up by the authors in the last sentences of the book (before the concluding observations), where they attempt to put these objects in direct relation to the **archon Tichomiros**, apostrophising him not as prince of the Slavic Belegezites, but primarily as a member of the Christian-Roman culture: “If, as it is highly probable, Tichomiros ruled over an area covering southern Thessaly, then he may well have been the person who commissioned one or more metalworkers to cast appliquéés using the models from the Velestino hoard. Whether those appliquéés decorated his furniture or his shield, Tichomiros – if he can truly be associated with the Velestino hoard – may have thus aspired to the lifestyle of prominent aristocrats, particularly that of other imperial spatharioi. At any rate, the collection in that hoard implies the understanding of and partaking in a complex of sophisticated cultural references ranging from the Bible and saints’ lives to Aesopic fables. Someone like Tichomiros must have regarded the Velestino plaques in the same way the aristocrats of Late Antiquity regarded mosaics – both images and cultural symbols.” (pp. 186, 200, 201).

With this quote we also open the last aspect of this monograph, presented in the ninth chapter, which deals with the cultural background of the Velestino plaques.

### - Cultural background

Although at the beginning of their book Curta and Szmoniewski express the view that it is „...very hard to accept the interpretation of the Velestino plaques as directly associated with the early Slavs.“ (p. 3), at its end, however, they must do so indirectly because the facts inevitably lead them towards that conclusion (pp. 200, 201, 213, 214). On one hand, their tendency to minimize and marginalize every possible Slavic component of the objects through the selective presentation of facts and references is evident, but on the other, through the material, the facts and some of the analyses presented within this book, they actually give new and very important arguments that go in favor of it.

Their book for the first time in one place presents precise facts according to which the Velestino hoard is authentic i.e. is not a forgery, that it originates from the 7th or early 8th century, that it was discovered in Thessaly, at a location in the wider surroundings of Velestino, that its closest analogies are from the region of Eastern Europe and that at the point of discovery it contained about a hundred metal plaques, a significant proportion of them with several similar specimens, which speaks of mass production from them of some sort of final metal objects.

According to the current knowledge, at the given place (Thessaly) and at the given time (7th - 8th centuries), only two cultures were permanently present to which these objects could belong - the Byzantine culture and the culture of the Slavic communities - specifically the Belegezites (i.e. the Belzetes) that settled here in the 6th or early 7th century.

The authors made a huge effort in trying to promote within this book the thesis about the Byzantine character of this hoard and in doing so encountered an unsolvable problem - to attach a Christian character to objects that not only have an evidently non-Christian iconography but, in some of their solutions, absolutely contradict the strict norms of Christian visual culture, such as the representation of the naked human body (especially the female one), with explicitly depicted sex organs. Feeling the inevitability of this conclusion, in the final pages of their monograph they make the last effort to eliminate it, or at least blur it, by connecting the Velestino hoard to Tichomiros and Akameros - the two archons of the Belegezites from that time. In doing so, with their tense interpretations of the sources and of the cited scientific studies, they lead the reader towards the conclusion that they were members of the Byzantine administration from which their crowning argument would follow - they were Christian and, consequently, that the Velestino plaques (which may have been ordered by them), were produced within the Chris-

tian symbolic and iconographic system: „Moreover, Tichomiros was a Christian, or, at the very least, he was familiar with the Christian symbolism of the cruciform invocative monogram (Θεοτόκε βοήθει, “Mother of God, help [me]”) on the obverse of his seal.“ (pp. 200, 201). But, this time also, in the following pages (pp. 213, 214 - footnote 6) they present a reference which indicates exactly the opposite: „La présence du monogramme cruciforme avec invocation de la Vierge sur l’avers du sceau n’est pas un indice sûr pour dire que son propriétaire avait embrassé le christianisme, car cette décoration pourrait aussi bien avoir été adoptée pour se conformer à une certaine mode constantinopolitaine.“ (Oikonomides 1994, 113, 116).

It cannot be considered that, in all cases, behind the name *archon* were members of the Byzantine administration because it also had the meaning of local leaders i.e. princes of the specific Slavic tribes. In fact, one does not exclude the other because when appointing these officials, Byzantium certainly chose local leaders who already had similar function and power within the specific Slavic communities. According to the article by Oikonomides, referenced by Curta and Szmonewski, this process actually played: „... un rôle primordial pour attirer les nouveaux venus à l’empire.“ (Oikonomides 1994, 115, 116). But as stated in the passage quoted above, this does not by itself mean that these archons in the 7th or 8th century were already Christianized, regardless that the presence of Christian motifs and inscriptions on their seals is treated by our authorial tandem as evidence thereof.

If we agree that these Slavic princes had accepted the administrative function given by Byzantium, this does not mean that they had to be baptized. One such example is Perbundos, the leader of the Slavic tribe of the Rhynchines who: „...vivait à l’intérieur de Thessalonique, s’habillait comme un Grec (refers to Roman - N.C.) et parlait le Grec, mais gardait ses sentiments antiimpériaux car il restait païen.“ (Oikonomides 1994, 116). But even if they were (formally) baptized, that does not mean that they immediately became true Christians and that in a few decades they managed to convert all their people to Christianity, erasing all the old pagan (in principle, hardly eradicable) traditions. If so, what would be the role of the Slavic enlighteners Ss. Cyril and Methodius (9th century) and especially Ss. Clement and Naum (end of 9th - beginning of the 10th century), during which time it is thought that the main campaign for the Christianization of the Slavs in the Southern Balkans had started? The hagiography of St. George the Hagiorite shows that this process was not completed even in the middle of the 11th century i.e. one hundred and fifty years later and in the

immediate surroundings of Thessaloniki - the second largest Byzantine metropolis in the Balkans. In one detailed episode of the hagiography it is told how this saint “with his own hands” crushed the marble idol of the “mute and deprived of a soul goddess” venerated by the “Bulgarians who call themselves Slavs” that lived near the place Livadia - “... people especially stupid, resembling lunatics, unworthy of respect, who eat filthy reptiles.” (Герасимов 1960; Чаусидис 1994, 27, 28).

\* \* \*

I am convinced that it is precisely because of the book presented here and its authors F. Curta and B. S. Szmonewski, and, of course, the other researchers who have previously dealt with the Velestino hoard, this find will begin to gradually change its status. From an archaeological find of dubious authenticity and dubious Slavic background, thanks to the precious Byzantine written sources, it evolves into a kind of “template” according to which the Slavic character of other archaeological finds directly or indirectly related to it can be traced. In addition to the dominant anthropomorphic and zoomorphic plaques, specific in their style and iconography, these are the synchronous fibulae (class I - B, and probably others similar to them) that were undoubtedly produced in the same “Velestino workshop” (**T.VIII: 5**), as well as the bracelets with widened ends found on the two hand-shaped plaques that are part of this hoard (**T.VII: 4, 5; T.VIII: 1 compare with 2-4**). The presence of all three elements in the Martinovka hoard and amidst other finds from the circle of the so-called “Antean antiquities” (**T.V; T.VIII**) are an additional argument for the existence of more direct relations between these two archaeological complexes, one located in the vast plains of Eastern Europe, and the other in the similar, albeit much smaller, flatland of Mediterranean Thessaly. Finally, based on the nearly hundred items from this hoard and several other similar finds discovered on the Balkans and in Central and Eastern Europe, one can already speak about the specific **style** of these items whose components, despite the announcement, the authors of this book have failed to determine (pp. 149-152) even though the basis for this process has already been laid out by their predecessors (Čausidis 2005, 448-453).

I want to believe that, after the publication of this monograph, Greek archaeologists will finally understand the enormous significance of this find because it once again puts their country at the very center of world archaeology, not just in terms of ancient Hellenic or Roman, but this time even of ancient Slavic culture. I hope that they, pushing aside the strategies

of daily politics, will start systematically surveying and excavating the archaeological sites surrounding Velestino, the hill Kara-Dagh/Mavro-Vouni and will begin to more thoroughly analyze the marginalized "barbarian" finds in the museum depots that will contribute in discovering the historical roots of their

Slavic countrymen with whom, for nearly a millennium and a half, share the same land and the same genes, and who, over the past centuries, have played a significant role in the history of modern Greece and in the constitution of its present-day culture.

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**T.I. 1, 3, 4, 6.** Relief plaques, lead, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece (*Princeton* 2019). **2.** Crotales, 3rd century AD, Musée Archéologique, Nice, France (*Cymbales* 2019). **5.** Relief plaque, terracotta, Early Christian period, Vinica, Republic of North Macedonia (Балабанов 2011, Сл. 32).



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**T.II.** Relief plaques, lead, bronze, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece: **1, 5, 6, 8.** (*Princeton* 2019); **2, 3, 4, 7.** Drawings: N. Chausidis (according to: Werner 1953).



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**T.III.** Relief plaques, lead, bronze, 7th-8th century, Velesino, Thessaly, Greece: **1, 2.** (*Princeton* 2019); **3.** Drawing: N. Chausidis (according to: Werner 1953). **4.** Illustration from a manuscript, 11th century, Vatican (*Vat.gr.747 0086 fa 0046* 2019).



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T.IV. Relief plaques, lead, bronze, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece: 1, 2. Drawings: N. Chausidis (according to: Werner 1953); 3, 4. (*Princeton* 2019).



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**T.V.** Relief plaques, lead, bronze, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece: **1, 3.** (*Princeton* 2019). Metal appliqués, 6th-7th century: **2.** Region of Cherkassy, Ukraine, Collection of S. Platonov (Akhmedov 2018, 514 – Fig. 7: 8). **4.** Martinovka, Ukraine (*Конь-лев* 2019); **5.** Martinovka, Ukraine (Akhmedov 2018, 514 – Fig.7: 1-3).



**T.VI. 1.** Relief plaque, lead, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece (*Princeton* 2019). **2.** Idol, stone, 10th century, course of the Zbruch River, Ukraine, Muzeum Archeologiczne w Krakowie, Poland (drawing: N. Chausidis). **3.** Bronze amulet, Middle Ages, Vyatka, Kirov, Russia (Алешковский 1980, 285 – Рис. 4). **4.** Relief in stone, Middle Ages, Leżno, Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk (Гейшор 1986, 211 – Рис. 26). **5.** Relief in stone, Middle Ages, Pfarrkirche Altenkirchen, Rügen, Germany (*Die Gardvogteien* 2019). **6.** Fresco-composition (detail), 14th century, church St. Demetrius, Marko's Monastery, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia (Коцо 1984, 168).



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**T.VII. 1.** Votive bronze hand, cult of Sabazios, 2nd-3rd century, St. Bernard, Switzerland (Милчев 1975, 59 – Обр. 3). **2.** Votive bronze hand, cult of Dolichenus, Roman period, Kavarna, Bulgaria (Милчев 1975, 60 – Обр. 4). **3.** Bronze hand, Byzantine culture, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Werner Abegg (Ross 1964, 102 – Fig. 1). **4.** Relief plaque, lead, 7th-8th century, Velestino, Thessaly, Greece (*Princeton* 2019). **5.** Relief plaque, bronze, 7th-8th century, Romania (?) (*Messrs Sotheby's* 1989).





**T.VIII 1.** Relief plaque, bronze, detail, 7th-8th century, Romania (?) (*Messrs Sotheby's* 1989). Bronze bracelets, Early Medieval period: **2.** Суджа-Замостя, Ukraine (*Ганощенко и Володарець-Урбанович* 2019, 138 – Рис. 10: 5, 6); **3.** Dănceni, Moldova (*Ганощенко и Володарець-Урбанович* 2019, 137 – Рис. 9: 9); **4.** Martinovka, Ukraine (*Pekars'ka and Kidd*, 1991, 348). Two-plated fibulae, 6th-7th century: **5.** Nea Anchialos, Thessaly Greece (*Werner* 1960, Taf. 29: 4); **6.** Martinovka, Ukraine (*Pekars'ka and Kidd*, 1991, 347).

