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ON THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF A FEW TYPES OF MEDIEVAL RINGS

Keywords: rings, medieval, pentagram, blessing, scorpion.

Abstract: *As a part of the rich collection of medieval jewelry from R. of Macedonia, there are few types of medieval rings with an interesting, and only partially explained symbolic representations. With this article, we shall overview three examples: rings with decoration in form of a pentagram, rings with the so-called „blessing“ motive, and the newly discovered ring with scorpion representation from Vodoca. We will elaborate already published theories of their symbolic meaning, and try to give a new view of it, based mostly on the written sources, as well as on representative byzantine examples.*

Seeking the protection of the God, but also, trying to acquire a safety – shell from every-day magical threats, medieval people uses lots of formulas – Christian's and pagan's, which should provide unworried and healthy life to them and their family. Despite the statutory significance of the rings, the apotropaic, (or sometimes even medical) function of the symbols represented on them is the main reason of their acceptance or rejection. One group of rings, bearing the “pentagram (pentalpha)” motive on their bezels are very good example of how the old pagan, magical beliefs and need of “other” protection, despite the one of God, can be incorporated into the world of medieval Christians.

As it is noticed¹, the band rings decorated with the “pentalpha” star appears already on the late antique horizon at Corinth (VI C.),² but it will be represented on the rings especially in the medieval period (fig. 1).³ It is, therefore, very enigmatic, why this sym-

bol has such a long - lasting appearance on the rings, and what is it's meaning and significance. Most of the scholars are convinced that the five-end star, or the pentalpha, should be connected with one of the evangelists – St. Luke.⁴ According to them, the star is symbolizing Virgin Mary, and Luke is the one who, as a painter, brought her image to the faithful. Noticing that the figures of lions, angels or eagles are appearing more often than any other on the medieval rings, Marjanović – Vujović surmised that they are referring to the images of the evangelists. Since all of those symbols are attested as presence of some of the evangelists, only the symbol of St. Luke – the calf, is missing, and therefore, the pentalpha should be connected with him and the cult of Virgin Mary.⁵ Another possible explanation is that the five ends of the star can be connected with the five wounds of Christ's body.⁶

However, the fact that the symbol of pentalpha can be seen on the object of personal piety in an almost one millennium period requires seeking some other explanation.⁷ One of the most popular magical

ниот век – прелиминарни истражувања врз основа на балканските примери, Studia Mithologica Slavica X, 2007, 51-82; V. Bikić, Vizantiski nakit u Srbiji. Modeli i nasleđe, Beograd 2010, 118; Ц. Крстевски et al. Резултати од заштитните истражувања 2012 година на локалитет „Градиште“ с. Опила, Слатишки Зборник 2, Крива Паланка 2013, 119.

⁴ Г. Марјановић – Вујовић, *Трњане. Српска некропола (крај XI – почетак XIII века)*, Београд 1984, 91; Е. Манева, loc. cit.

⁵ Г. Марјановић – Вујовић, loc. cit.

⁶ В. Григоров, *Метални накити от средновековна Бугария*, Софиа 2007, 54.

⁷ For the religious piety of ordinary people on the territory of Ohrid's Archbishopric, see P. Špehar - O. Zorova, *Christianity on the territory of the Archbishopric*

¹ Е. Манева, *Средновековен накит од Македонија*, Скопје 1992, 89.

² G.R. Davidson, *Corinth XII. The Minor Objects*, Princeton 1952, N. 1927-1929.

³ Е. Манева, loc. cit.; О. Зорова, *Пентаграм во сред-*



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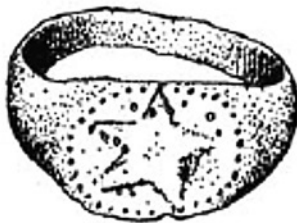
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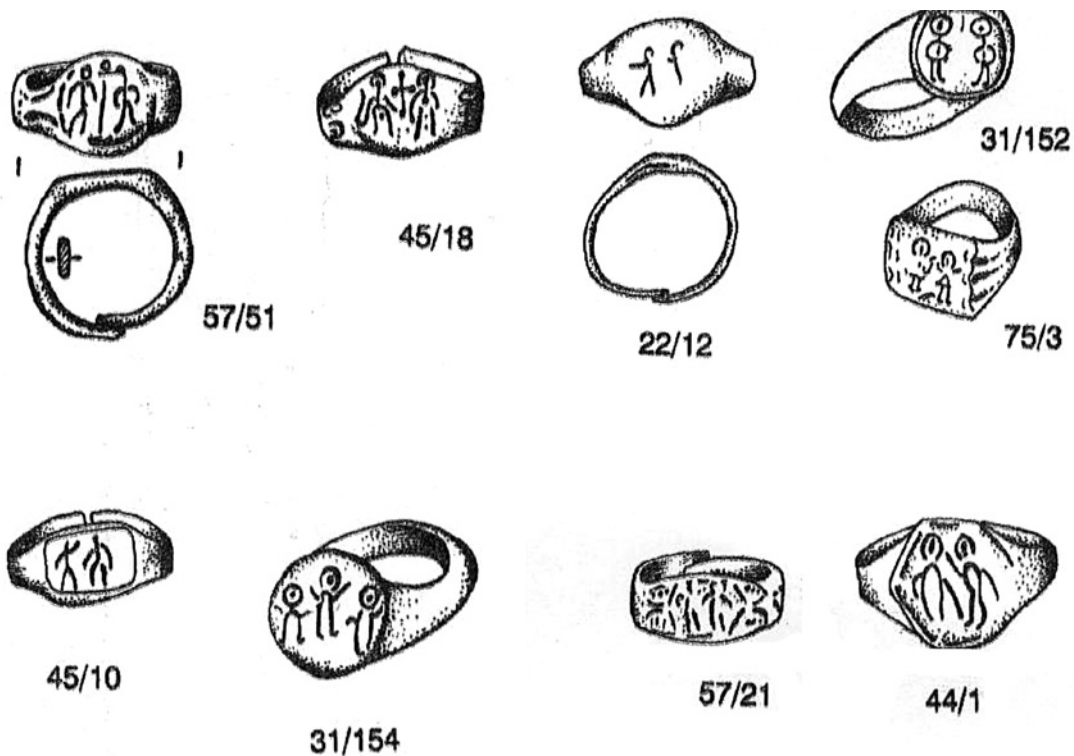
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1. Rings with pentagram symbol (according to O. Zorova)
1. Прстени со претстава на пентаграм од Балканот (според О. Зорова)



2. Rings with motive of "blessing" (according to E. Maneva)
 2. Прстени со претстава на мотивот на „благослов“ (според Е. Манева)

treatises of the late antique period is surely the so-called "Testament of Solomon".⁸ It describes how Solomon was enabled to command demons by means of a magical ring entrusted to him by the Archangel Michael. What is more interesting in the story is that, in some versions, the ring, or the Solomon's seal is described as a simple pentagram (pentalpha) motive.⁹ We believe that exactly this passage of the legend is the crucial one for explaining the long-lasting life of this symbol. The need to seek power strong enough to distract demons and help preventing deceases resulted in adopting this simple motive on the medieval rings, as an insurance for the help of the supernatural forces. One of the most obvious meaning of this sign is Dolger's late antique doctors stamp, with inscribed "Hygieia" (Health) and Theta for "Thanatos" (Death)

of Ohrid, 11th to the 13th century: archaeological evidence from burial sites, M. Salamon et al. (ed.) Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence, Warszawa 2012, 429-446; П. Шпехар, Лична побожност на подручју Охридске архиепископије у светлу археолошких налаза од XI до XIII века, В. Krsmanović et al. (ed.), Византијски свет на Балкану, Београд 2012, 205-220

⁸ C. C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon*, Leipzig, 1922.

⁹ Ibidem, 10*.

between which the pentalpha is represented (fig. 4).¹⁰ These way, pentalpha is closing (preventing) death to reach to the health of man. The depiction of five-end star can be seen on other objects with clearly visible magical connotation, often represented with other mystical symbols and figures. For example, it is present on the silver amulets from Ashmolean Museum (fig. 5) and Menil collection (fig.6),¹¹ rings from Sicilia (fig.7) and Menil collection (fig.8),¹² amuletic armbands from Fouquet collection and the Cairo Museum,¹³ combined with other magical images – Hystera, Chnoubis and Magical rider, often named Solomon.¹⁴ The pentagram was recognized as

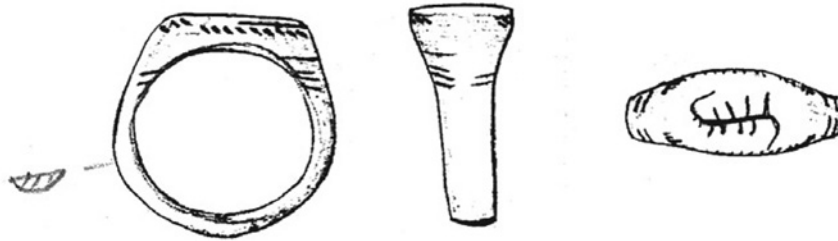
¹⁰ F. J. Dolger, *Antike und Christentum*, I (Münster, 1929), 47 ff; G. Vikan, *Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 38, Washington D.C. 1984, 69, fig. 4.

¹¹ J. Spier, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition*, JWC 56, 1933, 55, pl. 3a-3b.

¹² Ibidem, 57, pl. 4a-4b.

¹³ J. Maspero, *Bracelets-Amulettes d'epoque byzantine*, Annales du service des antiquites de l'Egypte IX, Cairo 1908, 246-58; G. Vikan, op. cit., 74-75, fig. 8-9; idem, *Two Byzantine Amuletic Armbands and the Group to Which they Belong*, Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 49/50, 1991-1992, 33-51.

¹⁴ On the magical signs on amulets, see C. Bonner,



3. Ring with scorpion from Vodoča (according to E. Maneva)
 3. Прстен со претстава на скорпион (според Е. Манева)



4. Stamp with pentagram symbol and inscription
 (according to Dolger)
 4. Печат со претстава на пентаграм и натпис
 (според Долгер)



5. Amulet with pentagram and other magical symbols –
 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (according to Spier)
 5. Амulet со претстава на пентаграм и други магиски
 симболи – Ашмолеан Музеј,
 Оксфорд (според Снаер)

the symbol of health among the Pythagoricians,¹⁵ and the powers that possesses as the Seal of Solomon, marked his appearance as one of the most useful prophylactic and apotropaic devices in the late antique and medieval period.

Another group of band rings, with the variations in depicting two figures in the act of blessing (sometimes identified as baptizing), or with cross or the Christ's figure between them, is another example of seeking protection and health of the ordinary people (fig. 2).¹⁶ Although those specimen are taken individually and thus identified as: warrior saints; St. Constantine and Helen; baptism or imperial couple blessed by Christ,¹⁷ we believe that all of them are

part of one iconographical scheme, that can be identified as marriage couple, and that the rings with this kind of ornamentation have role to secure marital peace, health and successive childbearing. Studies on the byzantine marriage rings can clearly distinguish the evolution path of their iconography.¹⁸ The oldest ones, those from fourth to fifth century are showing the bust portraits of husband and wife, facing one another. Sometimes, small cross can be represented between their faces (fig. 9).¹⁹ On the marriage rings from sixth – seventh century, a more “Christianized” depiction appears – the bride and the groom are represented frontal, with the large cross between them (fig.10). In the same period, another type of marriage rings appears – the ones that are depicting the actual event of marriage ceremony in symbolic way, in

Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian, Ann Arbor, 1950.

¹⁵ P. Pedrizet, *Negotium perambulans in tenebris : études de démonologie gréco-orientale*, Strasbourg 1922, 35-38.

¹⁶ E. Манева, op. cit., 89, T. 84;

¹⁷ Ibidem, 89; V. Bikić, op. cit., 121, sl. 92.

¹⁸ G. Vikan, *Early Christian and Byzantine rings in the Zucker family collection*, Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 45, 1987, 33-39, fig. 7- 11.

¹⁹ C.H. Read, *British Museum. A guide to the early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities*, Oxford 1921, 54, fig.31.



6. Amulet with pentagram and other magical symbols – Menil Collection, Houston (according to Spier)

6. Амulet со претстава на пентаграм и други магиски симболи – Колекција Менил, Хјустон (според Спаер)



7. Ring with “hystera” and pentagram with other magical symbols – Sicily (according to Spier)

7. Прстен со престава на „хистера“ и пентаграм со други магиски симболи – Сицилија (според Спаер)



8. Ring with “hystera” and pentagram with other magical symbols - Menil Collection, Houston (according to Spier)

8. Прстен со престава на „хистера“ и пентаграм со други магиски симболи - Колекција Менил, Хјустон (според Спаер)



9. Marriage Ring – British Museum (according to Read)

9. Венчален прстен – Британски Музеј (според Рид)

which the Christ himself is the priest who is performing the rite. There are two variants of it – the first one is representing Christ holding their hand (fig. 11, 12), and the second one is representing him while places the wedding crowns on their heads (fig.13) .²⁰

²⁰ G. Vikan, loc.cit; for the numismatic influence on creating the scene, see O. Зорова, *Нумизматички предлошки во декорацијата на средновековните прстени – сцени на „благословување“*, Paper presented on XXth symposium of MAND, 2008 (unpublished); A. Walker, *Numismatic and Metrological Parallels for the Iconography of Early Byzantine Marriage Jewelry. The Question of the Crowned Bride*, *Travaux et mémoires* 16

Therefore, the illustrated examples from catalogue of medieval rings from Republic of Macedonia, (fig. 2), although very simplified, can be identified as follows: 22/12, 75/3, 57/21, 44/1, 44/10 are depicting Christ blessing or crowning the bride or groom; 31/152, 57/51, 45/18 are depicting the couple with cross between them; 31/154 is representing both bride and groom crowned by Christ the High Priest.

The representative examples of marriage rings from the byzantine oecumena, sometimes with eight sided hoop, or with the inscription of Psalm 5 and the words like “Harmony” and “Health” testifies for a

- Mélanges Cécile Morrisson, 2010, 849-863. I wish to thanks to O. Zorova for allowing me to study her paper before it is published.



10. Marriage Ring – Dumbarton Oaks Collection
(according to Vikan)

10. Венчalen прстен – Дамбертон Оукс
колекција (според Викан)



12. Marriage Ring – Walters Art Gallery
(according to Vikan)

12. Венчalen прстен – Волтерс Арт Галерија
(според Викан)



11. Marriage Belt – Dumbarton Oaks Collection
(according to Vikan)

11. Венчalen појас - Дамбертон Оукс колекција
(според Викан)

magical invocations and level of intentionality in representations of those rings and speaks in favor of marital goal for healthy life and successful childbirth.²¹

²¹ E. H. Kantorowicz, *On the Golden Marriage Belt and the Marriage Rings of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 14, 1960, 1 – 16; G. Vikan, op. cit., 39; idem, *Art and marriage in early Byzantium*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 44, 1990, 145-163; A. Walker, *A Reconsideration of early Byzantine Marriage Rings*, R. Asirvatham et al. (ed.), *Between Magic and Religion. Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society*, New York, Oxford 2001, 149-164;

The newly found ring from the medieval necropolis at Vodoča has an unique depiction of scorpion on its bezel (fig. 3).²² Further interest of this subject revealed that this ring was part of a deposition of a relatively rich grave (N. 369), containing four more rings (one of them can be identified as “archery” ring) and iron parts of boots, identified the deceased as a descendant of a traditional warrior family and a member of a special military siege unit - scorpida.²³ Here, we would like to bring attention to another possible explanation of the representation of scorpion on the ring from Vodoča. The scorpida as a siege weapon is well attested in the antique period,²⁴ but still, even knowing that this weapon existed in the byzantine era, it was probably named with a different name, since none of the historical sources are referring to any siege weapon as scorpion.²⁵ Therefore, it his more plausible that the scorpion was a sign of an-

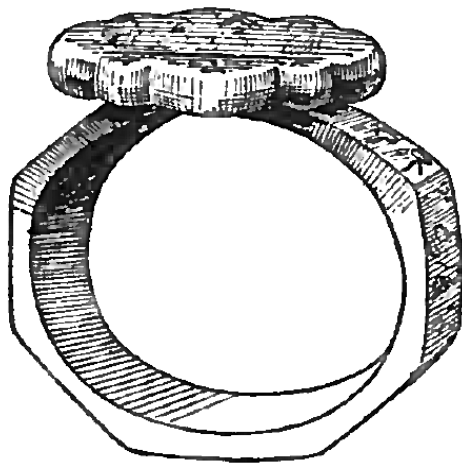
Eadem, *Myth and Magic in Early Byzantine Marriage Jewelry: the persistence of pre-Christian traditions*, A. McClanan - K. R. Encarnacion (ed.), *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe*, New York 2002, 59-78.

²² E. Манева, *Скорпион како амблем на војнички прстен од Водоча*, ГЗФФ 62, Скопје 2009, 319-326.

²³ Eadem, *Повторно за воином од посадата на скорпионите од Водоча*, МАА 19, Скопје 2010; Eadem, *Primjeri pečatnog prstenja iz Vodočke nekropole kod Strumice*, *Archaeologia Adriatica* 4, 2010, 339-356

²⁴ Г. А. Шкриванић, *Оружје у средњовековној Србији, Босни и Дубровнику*, Београд 1957, 119; E. W. Marsden, *Greek and Roman Artillery. Historical Development*, Oxford 1969, 53, 61, 79, 97 f.

²⁵ D. Sullivan, *Tenth Century Byzantine Offensive Siege Warfare: Instructional Prescriptions and Historical Prac-*



13. Marriage Ring – British Museum (according to Read)
13. Венчален прстен – Британски Музеј (според Рид)

other military unit. We were able to find another representation of scorpion as a military insignia, commissioned by the Venetian artist in byzantine manner (fig. 14). On the vita icon - The Life of St. Orsola, painted by Paolo Veneziano, the King of the Huns is represented guarded by warriors belonging to a unit of scorpions, represented on the shield of one of them.²⁶ Although we don't know the status of the unit within the army of that period, it is obvious that they are not connected with the siege weapons and that the scorpion could be a symbol of a different, well armed infantry unit.

The main scope of this research was to pointed out the mysterious world of the image and its meaning in byzantine art. It leaves enough space for a constant complements of the subject, and opens plenty of ways to look for the solution of the problems of symbolical significance in the medieval world.



14. King of the Huns from polyptich of Life of St. Orsola, detail, around 1321 (according to A. Babuin)
14. Кралот на Хуните од полиптихот од Св. Орсола, ок. 1321 (според А. Бабуин)

tice, Το Εμπόλεμο Βυζάντιο (9ος – 12ος αιώνας), Athens 1997, 179-200; idem, *Siegecraft : Two Tenth-century Instructional Manuals by Heron of Byzantium*, Washington D.C., 2000; A. Babuin, *Τα επιθετικά όπλα των Βυζαντινών κατά την ύστερη περίοδο: 1204 – 1453*, University of Ioannina 2009, 253-286 (Unpublished PhD Thesis).

²⁶ A. Babuin, op. cit., 1099.

Дејан ЃОРЃИЕВСКИ

**ЗА СИМБОЛИЧНИТЕ ПРЕТСТАВИ НА НЕКОЛКУ ТИПОВИ
СРЕДНОВЕКОВНИ ПРСТЕНИ**

Резиме

Во богатата колекција на средновековен накит од Македонија, постојат неколку групи на средновековни прстени со интересна, и само делумно објаснета симболика. Во трудот се разгледани три примера: прстени со декорација во вид на пентаграм, прстени со т.н. мотив на „благослов“ и но-

вооткриениот прстен со претстава на шкорпион од Водоча. Претставени се нивните можни толкувања, но и нови толкувања, засновани пред се на пишаните извори и репрезентативните византиски примероци.