

On the theriac lids from Bulgaria (Abstract)

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This article was provoked by the discovery of a lid in the course of the excavations of the Holy Virgin Pantanassa monastery in Melnik in 2010. It was meant to cover a small vessel or a capsule that was probably made of fine clay and contained the famous medicine theriac. The lid is made of lead, with dimensions 33 mm by 35 mm and with side band that is 5 mm wide. It is slightly deformed and at present its shape is not an ideal circle but rather an ellipsoid. On the edge of the upper surface runs the following inscription: THERIACA FINA ALL DUE MORI VEN. The emblem of the pharmacyproducer is represented in the area surrounded by the inscription - two busts of Moors facing each other. They have curly hair, wide open eyes, fat lips and long earrings. The inscription is correctly written, the images are realistic and carefully engraved and they suggest that we are dealing with pure theriac that was produced in the pharmacy The Two Moors (Due mori) in Venice. This is the second lid with the initials of this pharmacy that is found in Bulgaria.

Theriac was invented in the 2nd c. BC, in the time of Mithridates VI, as a universal antidote to be taken daily as a prophylactic in order to create immunity. Thus, it could be considered an ancestor of homeopathy. Various indispositions and poisonings were treated with theriac, that was used as remedy and panacea for everything and.

Due to its effect on the organism, it became very popular in the ancient world. However, it was not recommended for children, but only for adults. It was distributed in the shape of grains, liquids and ointments that were kept in porcelain vessels (capsules).

The wide distribution and the high price of theriac led to malpractice in its production and to forgery. This forced the

manufacturers of the medicine to unite, which became a fact in AD 1606 in Montpellier. The organization included all competitors that were manufacturing the medicine and was considered to be an effective countermeasure against falsifications.

The lid from Melnik is among the few that were found in the course of archaeological excavations, a fact that gives some credibility to its historic interpretation. The ongoing investigations of the Holy Virgin Pantanassa monastery in Melnik started in 2005. The evidence suggests that it was founded in early 13th c. AD and existed until the end of the 19th c. AD. There are two building periods - from early 13th c. AD and from the late 16th - early 17th c. AD. The monastery was known for the hospital that it hosted and that was used by the inhabitants of Melnik. The significance of this medical institution is highlighted in the charter of Konstantin Dragash from 1393, in which the monastery is put under the guardianship of Vatoped Monastery in Athos: „I granted this property, so that the income of this monastery to be used for the management of the hospital and its patients”. There is no evidence for the termination of the activities of the hospital, but the monastery is marked on an Austrian military map of 1832. In this context, the lid for the theriac pot could be related to the activity of the monastery hospital that was located in the currently investigated area. Moreover, it serves as evidence for the functioning of the medical institution in 18th - 19th c. AD.

There are data for more than 22 lids for theriac pots found in Bulgaria. Their inscriptions indicate they come from the following pharmacies in Venice: Cedro Imperiale (Imperial Cedar) - 1; Due Mori (The Two Moors) - 2; Testa d'Oro (Golden Head) - 3; and two without a name. Two

lids have just the name of the town, Trieste, but no pharmacy name.

The largest group (11 specimens) contains the lids that were covering capsules containing fake medicine. They are roughly made, their inscriptions have many mistakes or imitate different letters, and the images are schematic and carelessly engraved. All 11 examples imitate the emblem and the inscription of the same pharmacy, Testa d'Oro, and bear the same year, to AD 1603.

As far as imitations are concerned, attention should be paid to the above-mentioned lids from Trieste, presently regarded as fake. However, they differ from the coarser examples described above and they are of high quality, with correct inscriptions and realistic images. It is exactly these characteristics that give me grounds to suggest that these are not imitations. As far as the origin of the fake theriac is concerned, opinions have been voiced that it was imported from Istanbul,

or manufactured locally in Varna, where it was distributed. The first hypothesis, suggesting almost 'centralised' supply of the imitation from a pharmacy in Istanbul, has been countered by the finds from Bulgaria and the neighbouring countries. The published lids for theriac vessels from Romania are from the Venetian pharmacies Testa d'Oro (known also in Bulgaria); Struzzo d'Oro; Cedro Imperiale (known also in Bulgaria), and Aquila Nera. Fake lids from the latter were also found. The lids from the excavations in Corinth are from the pharmacies Due Mori and Struzzo d'Oro, and some imitations are known from the former. These two examples demonstrate that, in certain areas, imitations were distributed of the product of already known pharmacies. There is no instance an imitation lid to have been discovered in a region, where the original product was not distributed. An explanation could be sought in terms of a local manufacture of the medicine.