

# **The Vrap hoard and the elite culture of Danubian Bulgarians**

(Abstract)

**Boyan Totev, Olga Pelevina**

The interest to the hoard from Vrap is triggered by the stylistic links between some of the deposited artefacts made in the Late Avarian 'Griffin and Tendril' style and some examples of Old Bulgarian decorated metalwork, as well as by the influence of Byzantine traditions over the neighbouring 'barbarians'. Very often, only selected elements of the hoard are discussed in different studies instead of the hoard as a whole. The same is true about the artefacts from Erseke, only more so. Recent studies that identified the belts of the Bulgarian aristocracy have shown the link between the elite Old Bulgarian metalwork and the probable reconstruction of the belt applications from Vrap, not only with the decoration of some of the artefacts. This article discusses some of these links through a general, not so detailed presentation of the hoard from Vrap (Figs. 1, 2). The paper also argues for the originality of at least some artefacts from Erseke, of the manufacturing technique, the affixing, and the ornamental compositions. It also maintains that the originals from both hoards have a common origin (Fig. 5).

The brief analysis of the finds divides them into vessels and belt elements. Most of the vessels are Byzantine with an initial ritual function, while the rest, mainly large plates with horizontal handles, have a secular character (Figs. 2, 3). They are obviously made in a workshop that was serving a nomadic ruler who had specific requirements and a sufficient wealth for the period. The belt elements were made in the same workshop. The main hypotheses for the origin of the hoard are discussed. The opinion of J. Werner is presented – he supports the so-called 'Kuber hypothesis', according to which the Vrap hoard was made in the court workshop of the Avar

Khagan. Under a very strong Byzantine influence, elite decoration was manufactured in this workshop and later became the base for the 'Griffin and Tendril' style. The workshop was captured by the Bulgarians at the time of the Kuber rebellion, almost a decade earlier than the mass popularity of this belt style across the Khaganate. During the migration in Keramisia, the objects from the hoard were captured and hidden in the Albanian mountains by people of the Komani-Kruja Culture. Werner's hypothesis is supported and further developed by S. Stanilov, who relates the production of the 'Griffin and Tendril' style in Bulgaria to immigrants from Kuber's Macedonia. There is historical, epigraphic and sphragistic evidence for the presence of Bulgarian tribes in the region of Thessaloniki, as it is well known from a series of medieval studies. However, the content of the hoard speaks against its creation in an Avar milieu.

The other main hypothesis for the origin of the hoard from Vrap relates it to Byzantium. Particularly relevant for the current debate are F. Daim's studies of the Byzantine belt that put forward the idea of the Byzantine origin of the belt elements from the hoard. Some of Daim's main arguments concern the decorative motifs that are typical for the Byzantine culture and the place of discovery of the hoard deep inside the Empire's territory. However, he does not take into account a number of other traits, among which the most important are the technological specifics of the manufacture. The belt elements from Vrap are cast and thus very different from Byzantine composite welded sheet elements. The technique of fastening is also very specific – rivets and prongs are cast together with the appliques,

as it is typical for Bulgarian objects, rather than the use of characteristic Byzantine tabs. Fastening with tacks is characteristic for the Danube basin, rather than for the core of the Empire. Solid strap-ends are also part of the Avar, not the Byzantine arsenal. F. Daim's analysis overlooks several decorative particularities, such as the absence, in the hoard, of a dot-and-line or gem inlays, and filigree and granulation that are typical for Byzantine belt decoration. On the contrary, floral, zoomorphic and geometric motifs are used in the decoration that is very different from the Mediterranean style. The construction elements are also important: almost all belt elements from Vrap, such as buckles with rectangular shields and trapezoidal frames, mounts with a loop, hinged and open-work applications, horseshoe-shaped hole-guards, hinged strap-retainers and strap-ends (Fig. 4) are unknown in the Byzantine cultural circle. F. Daim overlooks the utilitarian functions: the large number of the applications on the belt is designed for the suspension of personal objects and typical nomadic weapons; as such, they replace the known Byzantine sword belts. Moreover, the distribution of belts with similar decoration is not in the Byzantine Empire, but in the Danube basin, in the East European steppe and its adjacent areas, while belts identical in terms of shape, function, material and manufacture are found only in the aristocratic graves of the Danubian Bulgarians (Figs. 6, 7).

The 'Byzantine hypothesis' would be partially valid only if one accepts that the belts were made in an imperial workshop as a gift set for nomadic allies. Such a scenario, however, is impossible for the Vrap hoard. The presence of numerous worn, damaged and unused elements, low-quality casts and golden ingots (Figs. 1 2, 3) suggests local manufacture in a workshop of a local ruler. A main argument in our hypothesis for the origin of the Vrap hoard is the link between the artefacts from Vrap and the belts of the Bulgarian aristocracy. In order to

demonstrate this link, status-related belts are identified that are characteristic for both the Danubian Bulgarians and the Kuber Bulgarians. The main features of these belts are as follows. Belt structure: multiple elements attached to the strap in approximately the following way: a buckle turned to the right; in the centre, a loop for the strap-end; mounts with loops; rectangular appliqués; horseshoe-shaped hole-guards or narrow vertical plaques with rivets and finally the strap-end. Function: related to status – to demonstrate particular rank, and utilitarian – so far unclear but most probably a sword and a bow were hanging to the left side on both (?) straps, while a knife and a bag with flint and steel were in the centre, and a quiver was attached to the right. Construction specifics: straight, with no additional straps hanging from the main belt. Technological specifics: cast belt elements that are attached to the strap with rivets, prongs and tacks. Decorative elements: zoomorphic decoration: predators, birds, griffins, dragons, herbivores; floral decoration: various compositions of palmettes, interlaced designs, garlands, S-like ornaments; geometric decoration: geometric forms, combination between smooth surface and rivets, slits, etc.

The identification of the Bulgarian type of belts makes it possible to suggest a new interpretation for the Vrap hoard. We do not accept the idea of 'Macedonian' refugees bringing these belts to the court in Pliska. It is much more probable that they were made in Danubian Bulgaria and were popularized among the Keramisians through contacts between Tervel and his 'uncles' from Thessaloniki. The Vrap hoard was accumulated in a Byzantine milieu, outside the Khaganate, but immediately before its deposition there is evidence for activity of a local workshop. Probably, this workshop served a nomadic court and manufactured numerous belts that were given to high aristocrats according to their rank, or to close relatives

(heirs). Such an event must have taken place in a formal context, perhaps accompanied by rituals and feasts. As far as the origin of the specific Bulgarian style of belts is concerned, we share the view of B. Marshak and N. Skalon that there is a link between the palmettes from Vrap and those of „the craftsman from M. Pereshchepina”. The element from a disturbed grave (?) in the region of Burgas supports such a claim (Fig. 8 3). Perhaps Kubrat’s heirs have continued to develop, as a sign and symbol of succession, elements of the Turkic-Sogdian decoration, known from the craftsman of M. Pereshchepina, in their own workshops (Fig. 9). This influence is visible mainly in the decoration, while the manufacture,

structure and many of the shapes of the Bulgarian aristocratic belt show traces of a new Balkan production centre serving the Pliska court. Therefore, the reasons for the specific style of the Vrap hoard should be sought in the contacts between Tervel and his ‘uncles’ from Thessaloniki at the time of the Byzantine civil wars, rather than in an Avar workshop that has functioned in the court of the Khaganate. The main factor for the popularity of this type of belts in „Kisiniya areas” is probably the common Dulo dynasty that was ruling in both “Kuber” and Pliska courts, as well as the ruler’s ideology and mythology expressed in a stylistics that is typical for Kubrat’s workshop.