

# **Constantinopolitan processional bronze crosses from Bulgaria.**

## **Part I (Abstract)**

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In the studies on Byzantine processional crosses, there are possibilities to classify the crosses following some basic criteria, among which the shape, the size, the material, the figural decoration and the inscriptions. The origin, i.e. the Byzantine manufacture of all these crosses, is rarely questioned. The possibilities to clearly distinguish the metropolitan Constantinopolitan production from that of other larger and smaller Byzantine centres are not categorically fixed, as there are no securely established criteria for such a classification. Usually, the attribution depends on inscription, similarities in the decoration, or the identification of high technological skills of the decoration's execution, for instance achieved through one of the Byzantine luxury decorative techniques, such as cloisonné enamel, niello, expensive revetments, or inlaid gemstones. Constantinopolitan pieces stand out for the expensive material they are made of, indicating a prestigious commission. The names of the commissioners are sometimes inscribed on the crosses and clearly testify for the level of literacy and the quality of execution. These are names of people from the secular and military elite of the capital and the immediate entourage of the Imperial court, or of representatives of Constantinopolitan high clergy who also placed individual orders.

The manufacture of processional crosses was widespread in the Byzantine world, and their decoration that is extremely diverse, sometimes along with the inscriptions, is a positive sign for distinguishing the Constantinopolitan production. Without any doubt, there were workshops for such crosses also in the Empire's second city, Thessaloniki, and probably in other Byzantine cities in Southern Italy, Macedonia, and Asia Minor. With some reservations, it could be

claimed that the reproduction of the models of cheaper materials, with simpler techniques and decoration, is of provincial character. However, it should be remembered that the numerous fragments of crosses, discovered during archaeological investigations, could create a misleading image of the distribution and the manufacture of this highly demanded production. This is the case of the finds from Bulgaria that are in the focus of our attention here.

In recent years, on the occasion of international exhibitions on the Byzantine culture, a series of new finds were shown, belonging to various private collections or acquired by the most famous museums and galleries in the world. In the published catalogues, careful and thorough analyses are offered for both the newly discovered and the already known processional crosses. Considerably rarer are publications concerning intact or fragmentary crosses, unearthed during archaeological investigations. However, the issue of the problematic identification of the manufacturing centres remains difficult to solve. At present, in all specific or more general studies, the authors only rarely and very prudently offer speculations on the localization of the manufacturing centre.

The archaeological investigations in the old Bulgarian capitals Pliska, Preslav and Veliko Tarnovo, as well in other cities, fortresses and settlements in Southern and Northern Bulgaria, led to considerable increase in the number of the bronze processional crosses. Most of them are of Byzantine origin and most often date from the period 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c., rarely from 13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> c.; only isolated examples could be dated to the Early Byzantine Period of 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. Most crosses are fragmentary – there are only parts of their arms or central pieces – and this fact does not allow for obtaining a

sufficiently precise idea about their initial appearance, respectively about their reconstruction, essential for the classification. Nonetheless, the restoration provides extremely valuable observations on the material, the technique of manufacture, the additional decoration and reuse, allowing for distinguishing some interesting stages in their decoration.

In the present paper, I focus on the processional crosses from Bulgaria and especially on those, the manufacture of which could be more securely attributed to workshops in Constantinople. These are some 30 intact and fragmentary bronze crosses, discovered in Pliska, Preslav, Silistra, Vidin, Veliko Tarnovo, Sliven, Karnobat, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, and Kardzhali. For some of these crosses, there are additional data about the context of discovery (pottery, coins and other archaeological finds), but they could be misleading, as many of the crosses were used for a long time. Another situation is presented by the crosses that were bought off or acquired in another way and are kept in the museums in the country. Certainly, there are specimens that were discovered in a stratigraphic position, dated with other materials, as grave goods, at important places in the churches or for example in a collective find.

The first group of Constantinopolitan crosses comprises four specimens, more or less fragmentary, that come from the excavations at Pliska, Preslav, and the fortress at Balik near Silistra. Without any doubt, these finds arrived here after Bulgarians' official conversion in 865 AD, i.e. in the Christian period of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (Fig. 1 1-4). They are identical to several intact crosses from Kanellopoulos Museum in Athens, late 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c., from Sadberk Hanim Museum, Istanbul, 10<sup>th</sup> c., and two specimens from Roper Collection in the British Museum, London, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. (Fig. 1 5-8).

An attempted typology of the crosses under consideration allows for emphasizing the following important

issues. The first essential specific of these crosses are the elongated proportions, with a horizontal arm that is considerably shorter than the vertical. The ratio of the horizontal to the vertical arm is 1:1.5. The arms are thin and widen considerably only at their ends.

The second observation is that the decoration placed mostly on the arms and around the central piece. Of particular importance is the decorative composition on the lower arm that sometimes includes depictions of processional crosses.

The third main specific of this group are the inscriptions, set laterally on the upper arm. They are in uncial lettering and have votive character.

Normally, in the centre of all crosses, there is an inlaid medallion of cloisonné enamel, gemstone, smalt, or metal, with relief or engraved decoration. In fact, this is the fourth main specific of these crosses.

The date of some of the crosses under consideration here is set by the researchers in the broader limits between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c., and almost all authors suggest they were manufactured in the Byzantine capital, without offering specific arguments. Only the cross from Kanellopoulos Collection (Fig. 1 5) is securely dated and identified as Constantinopolitan. In fact, this is the best known cross of this type. It is published in a series of catalogues and several authors categorically or with some doubt place its manufacture in the Byzantine capital in the 10<sup>th</sup> c. The processional crosses from the old Bulgarian capitals Pliska and Preslav could be dated in the period from the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. The date of the cross from Pliska and the one from Gebe Klise basilica at Preslav could be narrowed to late 9<sup>th</sup> or the very beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. (Fig. 2 2, Fig. 10). The secondary luxury decoration of cross from The Palaces at Preslav also bears the signature of Constantinopolitan craftsmen. To the body of the bronze cross, on the places with engraved decoration on the medallions at the ends, relief silver rosettes were

soldered, as well as rectangular relief plates in the widened parts of the arms (Fig. 2 3; Fig. 9). It seems that this decoration was made in mid-10<sup>th</sup> c., before the cross arrived in Great Preslav (Fig. 2 3

*b*). The cross from the fortress at Balik near Silistra has the same chronology, i.e. its date could be placed more or less certainly between the late 9<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. (Fig. 1 4).