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Bronze dog-shaped padlocks. Two new specimens from Pliska and Veliki Preslav (Abstract)

Valeri Grigorov, Petar Dimitrov

This paper presents two small dog-shaped padlocks, found during regular archaeological excavations in Pliska and Veliki Preslav. The authors also systemize the available evidence of such finds from Bulgaria and neighboring areas.

The padlock from Veliki Preslav was found in 2010 during regular archaeological excavation to the southwest of the 'Ruler's church'. The artifact is a stylized, three-dimensional dog figurine to the left, with a small bird perched on its head (fig. 1). On the front side, there is engraved decoration of dots and X-like motives. The padlock was found in a layer that could be stratigraphically dated to the late 10th – the first half of the 11th c.

The padlock from Pliska was found in 2014 during regular archaeological excavation of the Palatial Complex – East. The find consists of two parts: the body of the padlock and the locking mechanism, found assembled together (fig. 2). The body of the padlock is a dog figurine to the left, with a 'songbird' perched on its head (fig. 3). On the front side, there is engraved decoration of dots in linear combinations. The second element of the padlock

is the locking piece (bolt). It is decorated on both sides. At the base of the bolt, a bird is depicted. The locking brace is shaped as a long 'lion's' tail. The padlock was found in a layer that could be stratigraphically dated to the mid-11th c.

Dr. Petya Penkova of the Laboratory for Analyses, Conservation, and Restoration at NIAM-BAS carried out the analyses of the chemical composition of the two artifacts, revealing that the padlocks were made of a bronze alloy of copper (Cu), tin (Sn), and lead (Pb). The two specimens under consideration are not isolated. During earlier excavations at Veliki Preslav and Pliska, other such finds were unearthed (fig. 5 1-2). Similar finds are known from Valnari (fig. 5 5), Dinogetia (fig. 5 7), Morești (fig. 5 8), Chersonesos (fig. 5 3-4, 10), Velikiy Novgorod (fig. 5 6), and Moscow (fig. 5 12-13).

The review of the known specimens outlines the Pontic-Danubian region as a core area in the distribution of the bronze dog-shaped padlocks (fig. 6). The greatest concentration of finds is along the line Dinogetia - Valnari - Pliska - Veliki Pre-

slav. The discovery of identical specimens at sites at great distances from one another reveals the high mobility of the owners of these padlocks.

The artistic appearance of the artifacts is defining for the social milieu of the owners of such padlocks. Except for being a social marker, the choice of this particular decorative scheme reveals a preference for a certain stylistics that points towards a specific cultural and historical setting.

In the mythology of the Eurasian peoples, the dog is regarded as guardian of property, herds, home and/or settlement. On the head of the dog, a 'songbird' is shaped that is meant to symbolically suggest the watchfulness of these birds. The second bird that is modeled on the bolt is larger and resembles hen. The posture of the sitting bird suggests a brood-hen that is incubating or guarding its eggs. Following this line of semantic analysis, the bird symbolizes a 'guardian' of the locked valuables. The last zoomorphic element of the padlock is the locking brace. It is shaped to resemble a lion's tail. Taken separately, each one of the zoomorphic figures and elements carries a symbolic meaning, directly corresponding with the padlock's function. As a composition they probably shaped the narrative of a longer mythological tale.

The zoomorphic stylistics points to fashion preferences and traditions that are strongly manifested among peoples that inhabited the Eastern European region between Ural and the Carpathians. The geographical distribution of the dog-shaped padlocks and the period of their use create the impression that these items were used by population that inhabited or migrated to the Pontic-Danubian region and partly in the Carpathian area in the second half of the 10th and the 11th c. Written sources mention Pechenegs as a major ethno-cultural agent in the region in the period under consideration.

Pliska and Veliki Preslav, where many of the specimens were discovered, were the two most intensively developing urban centers in the Lower Danube area in the 10th and the first half of the 11th c. They were occupied by large population of diverse social and ethnic origins (Bulgarians, Byzantines, Pechenegs). It was precisely in this multi-ethnic, multicultural, and socially divided setting that numerous new artifacts appeared, including the zoomorphic dog-shaped padlocks.

The above-presented reasoning about the ethnic and social interpretation of the padlocks should not be regarded as final. It is just an attempt to systemize and explain a group of artifacts that became widespread in Eastern Europe in the late 10th-11th c.