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Sgraffito plate with human figures from the medieval town of Trapezitsa (Abstract)

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This paper considers a completely restored plate with sgraffito decoration (figs. 2-5). It was discovered during archaeological excavations, directed by this author, in the Southern Sector of Trapezitsa, the second citadel of Tarnovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. It was found in a garbage pit dated by its stratigraphic position and 13 coins in the fill from 1260s to 1290s (fig. 1). Possibly, the pit was related to two massive buildings nearby.

The plate has a low, wide body, shaped as an inverted truncated cone, and a hollow conical foot (fig. 2 2). It is 7 cm high and has a mouth diameter of 35 cm. The plate is covered with cream-beige

slip and semitransparent light yellow glaze. The outer surface is bathed in olive-green glaze (figs. 3, 4). The plate is remarkable for its multicolored engraved decoration (figs. 2 1, 3, 5). In the entire field, a standing woman is depicted, dressed in a long dress with wide skirts that cover her legs. The sleeves reach down to her wrists and have widening ends, pointed downwards. Palmetto motifs descend from her breasts, marked with circles. In her raised hands, the woman holds castanets and an item with long handle: a mirror or more probably a musical instrument. On her head, there is a two-horned hat or crown, with propendula hanging from the ends. A girl's figure emerges from the

right sleeve, and another one, with raised hands, is depicted to the left of the woman.

Human images occur only exceptionally on sgraffito pottery from Tarnovo. These are warrior saints in the tradition of Byzantine sgraffito, or cruder scenes of battles or everyday life. It is hardly surprising that the discussed plate has almost no parallels (fig. 6). There are only two identical sherds from the Momina Krepост suburb of Tarnovo (fig. 6 3, 4), probably made by the same artisan. The composition of the clay, the colors of the glaze and the style of the figures leave no doubt that these artifacts are of local manufacture and not imported. However, the depicted scene could be explained precisely within the Byzantine cultural sphere.

Studies on Byzantine costume leave no doubt that a noble woman is depicted on the plate, dressed in the formal attire typical of the early Palaeologan period (figs. 8, 9). The festive context of the scene is emphasized by the poses of joy and dance.

Although the plate from Trapezitsa belongs to the sphere of Byzantine artifacts depicting festivities and banquets, it is possible that it does not represent an idealized festive scene. It is rather a transfer of scenes from popular works of literature to the applied arts.

The plate from Trapezitsa is among the most spectacular examples of sgraffito pottery from Tarnovo. Dating from the 1280s, it illustrates the influence of Byzantine art on the decorative patterns used in Bulgarian sgraffito pottery.

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