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## Belt sets with lateral straps south of the Danube in the 6th and 7th centuries (Abstract)

Metodi Daskalov

Metal ornaments for belts and military gear appeared in the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) in the sixth century. These were parts of sets that could be labeled as belt sets (cf. Gürtelgarnituren in German for a belt with metal fittings as a single unit in all aspects: functional, compositional, stylistic, and technological). Entire sets and parts of them were found in graves and in Early Byzantine layers at numerous settlement sites. Apparently, they were used in the costume of the population of the Byzantine provinces south of the Danube in the 6th and early 7th centuries. The graves that have yielded belt ornaments stand out in Christian cemeteries, which typically have poor grave goods.

Depending on the number of the elements and their functions, two types of sets could be distinguished: common (simplified) and multipartite. The ones of the former type had only a main strap with a buckle and strap-end. In some cases, instead of - or in addition to - the strap-end, there could be

a fitting mounted against the belt buckle.

This paper considers the multipartite sets in the territories south of the Lower Danube. They consisted of a main belt, hanging lateral straps and additional elements: fittings, gear for connecting the lateral straps to the main belt, and additional accessories as a waist bag for small items and coins, knife in a sheath, probably sword straps, etc.

Murals and mosaics in the Near East and North Africa depict men with specific costumes and belts with lateral straps (figs. 1-2). The same iconographic scheme could be seen on figural bronze candlesticks, again from the Eastern Mediterranean (figs. 5-7). M. Schmauder demonstrates that they are earlier than the Avarian campaigns in Central Europe and that the Avars adopted this fashion after they settled in the region.

Several relatively complete belt sets have been found in the study area. The first place, in terms of time of discovery and richness, is reserved for *the*

*find from Ak-Alan* (Çatalca, Turkey). According to the available information, it contained more than 400 solidi and precious gold ornaments for a belt (fig. 9 I).

Also expensive and sumptuous is *the find from grave 5*, Tumulus III at Madara, near Shumen (the so-called Second Madara Belt Set). The grave was dug into an earlier mound. There is no agreement among authors on the ethnicity of the deceased and the date of the complex.

*The set(s) from Sadovsko Kale* has been known since the 1930s. The items differ in terms of material, manufacturing technique and manner of fastening. Some of the ornaments are made of silver sheet and are of the so-called box-like type of strap-ends. Other were cast of bronze, and have loops for fastening on the backside. They reveal traces of wear.

*The 'burial find' from Plochata (Kaylaka Park, Pleven)* probably comes from a grave. The elements are identical in terms of material, manufacturing technique and manner of fastening to the straps, and obviously belong to a single set (fig. 11).

*The find from grave B-14 at the cemetery of Piatra Frecăței (ancient Beroe), Tulcea County, Northern Dobruja* consists of numerous bronze belt fittings found around the bones of the lower limbs of the deceased. Careful analysis can identify elements of two sets (fig. 10).

*The 'chance find' from the vicinity of Dragoevo near Shumen* is a set of 13 elements (fig. 12). They have open-work decoration of the same style and are cast of the same material. The casts are of high quality, the edges are carefully smoothed and emphasized, but some of the openings of the decoration are not well cleaned. Undoubtedly, they belong to a single set.

Another *belt set* has been found *at grave 12, the cemetery of Kaleto near Rupkite*, Chirpan region, a necropolis with clear chronological limits. Both the composition of the set and the places of all elements of the belt were identified. A fixed loop, gear for hanging a knife, and a small buckle, a loop and a strap-end from waist-bag were found to the left of the skeleton (fig. 13).

This overview would not be complete without *the stone molds from Caričin Grad (ancient Justiniana Prima)*. Cavities for casting fittings for a belt set are carved in three stone molds. One of the artifacts was repaired; new cavities were carved for items that were similar to the original ones. Most probably, it was used by the same artisan. The terminus ante quem for the molds is AD 613-614.

There are various materials from the 6th and 7th centuries at the cemeteries on the Italian Peninsula. They are dated to horizons from the time before and after the settling of the Langobards on the Apennines (AD 568). The 'Langobardian' necropoleis possess good internal chronology: the first horizon is dated to the last two or three decades of the 6th and the first decade of the 7th century, and the second horizon falls within the limits of Heraclius' reign.

Many finds that illustrate the wearing of belts with various sets of ornaments are known also from Southern and Southwestern Crimea, part of the Byzantine Empire in the 6th and 7th centuries. There, the presence of militarized population has been identified, including of forces from Moesia. Parallels of all types of ornaments from the territories south of the Danube can be found at the cemeteries of Suuk-Su, Kerch, Chifut-Kale, Slalisto, Luchistoe, etc.

Several cemeteries have been excavated in present-day Abkhazia (Shapka hill, Verkhnyaya Eshera, Tsibilium) that have also yielded graves with belt sets and single fittings.

The composition of the so-called hoards from the forest-steppe zone of Eastern Europe raise interest as well. Various interpretations have been offered: 'Antean antiquities', 'Rossian hoards', etc. After their number increased, new summarizing works were written. For the purposes of this paper, the studies of G. Korzuchina (1996), L. Pekarskaja, and D. Kidd (1994) have been used.

Another group of finds from Eastern Europe consists of the decorated belts from graves dug in earlier mounds. These sets were part of the warrior's costume. At some graves, horses were also buried, a diagnostic characteristic of 'nomads'. They have been considered together as Sivashovka Group based on common features in the burial rite and the grave goods, and have been identified as a Proto-Bulgarian group from the period before the migration of Khan Asparuh to the southwest.

Numerous finds - entire sets and single elements - come from graves dated to the 'Early Avarian' period in Central Europe, and have been considered as 'Byzantine imports'. They have been classified as eponymous types and according to the decoration on their front sides. The 'Byzantine specimens' are dated to the very end of the 6th and the first third of the 7th century (E. Garam's first chronological period), for which there are sufficient chronological benchmarks: coins of the emperors Maurice, Tiberius, Phokas, and Heraclius.

The simultaneous appearance of decorated belts

on the Apennine, Balkan, and Crimean peninsulas, in the Eastern Black Sea area and the Eastern Mediterranean indicates their Byzantine origins and prototypes. Their distribution in Central Europe and the steppes of Eastern Europe was the result of contacts of various nature and the creation of local workshops or recruiting artisans to work on the spot.

The ornaments differ in terms of material and execution. Probably, their owners were of varying social status. In the latest studies, no doubts have been raised regarding the fact that both military men and administration officials wore belts with metal fittings. These belts were clearly a mark of social status.

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When mapping the distribution of belt sets, another question emerges: are the pieces with lateral straps and numerous ornaments indication of mixed ethnic environment? It was definitely one in Crimea (Gothic-Byzantine population), and on the Apennines (the descendants of Theodoric's Ostrogoths conquered by Belisarius, native 'Romanic' population, and the Langobards that settled here after AD 568); various ethnic groups penetrated south of the Danube in the decades of the Migration Period. This problem doesn't have a simple answer as it depends on the interpretation of other characteristics of culture such as burial practices, ceramic traditions, other specific personal ornaments, etc.

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