

Old Bulgarian mirrors from the North and West Black Sea region (Abstract)

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The present study is dedicated to the mirrors with floral decoration from the Old Bulgarian Period. They are set apart as an individual group because of their shape, material, working surface, technique of manufacture, manner of hanging, and size. Typical of the group is the back side, decorated with a symmetrical composition of elements of the Lower Danube floral-animal style, made by casting. The name of the group, Old Bulgarian mirrors, reflects the cultural milieu and the archaeological context of most finds, and the types are named after the geographical location of the archaeological complexes.

Topola type of mirrors. They are named after a village in Northeast Bulgaria, where a mirror, decorated with four opposite palmettes with their tips turned to the centre, was found in a biritual necropolis (cremation grave No. 378). Fourteen entirely or partially preserved mirrors are known of this type with seven variants.

Dubovoj type of mirrors. They are named after a village in the Azov Sea area, where a tumular grave was excavated, containing a fragmentary mirror. Its decoration consists of four symmetrical arched tendrils with solid volutes at their ends. Three variants are distinguished.

Cherna type of mirrors. They are named after a village in Northeast Bulgaria, where a mirror was discovered in a partially investigated Old Bulgarian necropolis (cremation grave No. 3). Typical of its cast decoration is the ornament of eight “linked circles”, inscribed in two concentric relief circles. The spiral-like ornament is an original rendering of the twisting tendril. So far, three mirrors of one variant are known.

Krasnodar type of mirrors. They are named after a regional centre in the Russian Federation, in the surroundings of which six mirrors of this type were discovered. They are decorated with a large floral, cross-like rosette of four large, ellipsoid leaves. The type has three variants.

Platonești type of mirrors. The type is named after a village in South Romania, where a mirror,

decorated with highly stylized four-leaf rosette, was discovered in cremation grave No. 70 in Old Bulgarian biritual necropolis. Most probably, the decoration was influenced by Krasnodar type – its Variant 3 is the transitional shape to Platonești type, which is known in only one variant.

Large portion of all finds are concentrated in present-day Northeast Bulgaria. At present, the only finds of Old Bulgarian mirrors, discovered beyond the northeastern territories of the Balkan Peninsula, come from the old territory of Khan Kubrat’s Bulgaria – the Kuban area and the lower reaches of Seversky Donets.

The date of the mirrors of the Old Bulgarian group is specified by analyzing the archaeological contexts and the chronological indicators of the accompanying inventory in graves from the late 7th to the second half of the 8th c. The date is supported by the evidence, gained from the stylistic analysis that relates this group of mirrors with the decoration of the belt fittings of the Vrap group and the Lower Danube floral-animal style. However, many of their elements are absent in the decoration of the mirrors of the Old Bulgarian group. The absence of scenes and of animal and mythical figures as a whole indicates that such images were not part of the semantics, invested in the mirrors. There are limitations not only in the ornamental solutions, but also in the compositions, where palmettes and “linked circles” appear only in specific combinations. This conservatism indicates that the decorative elements are only external manifestations of a semantic code that was well known to the mirror’s owner. The cross-like figure of four palmettes is a version of the main composition of floral ornaments that originated from the tree of life. Possibly, the palmettes on the Topola type of mirrors represented the motif “sheep’s horns” that was well known among nomadic people and symbolized wealth and prosperity. Four rams’ skulls, shaping a cross, are a traditional symbol of the prosperity ritual of the “white path”, performed in the beginning of the Eastern New Year. The highly

stylized tendril on the Cherna type of mirrors has the symbolic meaning of the number eight. The eight “linked circles” hint at the semantics of the eight rays and the half-pearls, typical of mirrors of the Han and Sui dynasties. There are eight spokes on the golden wheels, used as amulets by the Old Bulgarian aristocracy and resembling the Buddhist symbol of “Dharma, the wheel of fortune”. The number eight (*bā*) is considered lucky in China and has the meaning of wholeness, all realized possibilities, and luck. It is considered the base of the world order. Its symbolics connects the square (the Earth) with the circle (the Celestial Dome). Eight planets revolve around the Sun, and the eight trigrams and the pairs of opposites, arranged in a circle, symbolize time and space.

All mirrors were found in female graves, indicating that, along with their ritual functions, they were used as an item that was related to the female toilet and cosmetics.

The finds of the Old Bulgarian group are the earliest mirrors with floral decoration to appear on the territory of Medieval Europe. Their complex decoration and the symmetrical compositions are notable against the background of the schematic and carelessly executed geometric decoration of other contemporary types. Probably, their appear-

ance was not an original and local phenomenon, but one should look for connections with the established traditions and the manufacturing centers of the civilizations of Caucasus, Central Asia and North China. Some features of the Old Bulgarian group bring them closer to the decoration of the mirrors in the Celestial Empire. Chinese prototypes provided the base for the ornamental composition of “Saltovo” mirrors with lotuses that were typical of Tang Dynasty. It is difficult to say whether such a conclusion would be possible for the mirrors of the Old Bulgarian group. In addition to the Lower Danube floral style, the mirrors of the group are also related to its Caucasian variant, and the closest parallels and prototypes of the decoration are the artifacts of the Turco-Sogdian style of the Malaya Pereshchepina group and the contemporary Kuban complexes. This connection, along with the absence of Balkan prototypes of the Old Bulgarian mirrors, reveals the origins of a tradition that was brought from the territory of Old Great Bulgaria.

Having in mind the appearance of the Old Bulgarian group of mirrors in the late 7th - early 8th c., it seems very probable to relate them directly to the migration of Asparuh’s Bulgarians to the Danube.