

The cup of Sivin from Preslav, Bulgaria

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The author examines the form and decoration of the cup of Sivin found in Preslav, Bulgaria, and dated probably to the middle or third fourth of the ninth century. After consideration of different examples of the metalworks in Middle Asia and Byzantium she is inclined to suggest a Middle Asiatic origin of its model if not its genuine provenance.

Archaeological data

In June 1963 a silver cup (fig. 1) was found in the vicinity of today's town of Preslav, capital city of the First Bulgarian Kingdom from the late ninth until the late tenth centuries (893–972). The most detailed account of the find was published by T. Totev, the supervisor of the excavations at Preslav at that time, who made test excavations at the site soon after the appearance of the cup (Totev 1964:5–15). Totev argued that he had uncovered one of the cemeteries of the old capital from the 9th–10th centuries. The cup had been discovered accidentally, while several men were digging a grave in the present cemetery of Preslav, which is situated on the north-eastern edge of the present town, between the modern centre and the tenth century city. The outer fortress walls of the old capital cross the northern end of the cemetery, and to the west a small road leads from the modern town to the inner walls of the old capital and its northern gate.

The tenth century grave from which the cup was unearthed was totally ruined by the diggers. Totev made a trench 0.30 m wide and 1.50 m deep parallel to the newly made grave, but discovered only the north-eastern end of the old grave. He found *in situ* two bricks from the floor of the grave similar to seven other bricks broken by the diggers. On the bricks the runic sign IYI had been inscribed before the burning. Here it should be mentioned that not only have numerous bricks been found with this sign, but that it appears on other media such as stones, ceramics and sculpture. Its meaning is still not clear, but a general opinion exists which relates the sign to the pagan proto-Bulgarian culture (from AD 681, the year of the

foundation of the Bulgarian kingdom, to AD 865, the year of the official conversion to Christianity). It is interpreted either as the sign of the supreme god of the proto-Bulgarians, “Tangra”, or as the family sign of a dynastic tribe, probably that of Dulo (Vaklinov 1978:246).

The clarity of the archaeological picture is obscured also by the fact that these bricks have been used to make a grave according to the Christian burial rite. Although the bones of the skeleton were broken and thrown away by the diggers, according to them the cup was situated in the lower parts of the eastern part of the grave. Several metal pieces and three nails suggest the existence of a wooden coffin. Fragments of Early Medieval ceramic ware were also found in the trench. According to Totev these are similar to finds from Preslav, Kalugeritza, Tzar Krum, Pliska (with the exception of Preslav all of them settlements that flourished in the pagan period). However, this assertion is not backed by any photo documentation.

The inscription

On the outer side of the bottom of the cup an inscription is inscribed by means of a triangular instrument. The inscription is in Greek and consists of seven words placed in six lines (fig. 2)(Beševliev 1965). The inscription reads as follows:

Κ(υρι)ε βο(η)θ(η)	God help	
+Σηβην	+Sivin	
ζουπανος	zupan	
μεγας ης	great in	or
Βουργα	Bulga-	great of the
ρηαν	ria	Bulga-
		rians



Figure 1. Cup of Sivin, beaten silver, Preslav, middle of 9th c.



Figure 2. The inscription on the bottom of the cup of Sivin.



Figure 3. Cup from Dune, beaten silver, Dalhem parish, Gotland, 11th? century.

It is obvious that the cup was a personal possession of a person named Sivin, who had the title of “great zupan”. This title was common among the Slavs; it was used by the Serbs and refers to a Slavic institution (Ireček 1911:115, 127–128). However, it is also recorded in some of the so called proto-Bulgarian inscriptions, which were made in Greek with Greek letters on stone columns and in a way served as the King’s chancellery preserving peace treaties, contracts, commemorative inscriptions, etc. (Beševliev 1963:N52, N60, N62). In the inscription N60 this title “zoopan” is combined with the title “tarkan”, which is a high warrior’s dignitary title, known also among the Avars (Pritsak 1955). This particular inscription is found in Preslav and it is very significant for its being one of the few inscriptions in the proto-Bulgarian language written with Greek letters. A similar phenomenon is observed on the shallow bowl N10 from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, where an inscription mentioning this title is made (Laszlo 1984:158). The Turkic text has been inscribed with Greek letters and reads: “Boyla zoapan made this bowl, Butaul zoapan hung it up for drinking” (on the discussion about the meaning and attribution of the inscription, see Thomsen 1917; Nemeth 1932:28).

The cross before the name Sivin in the inscription, although at first glance it could be read as a Christian symbol, is quite commonly found at the beginning of the proto-Bulgarian inscriptions, most of them done at the time of the pagan rulers Omurtag and Malamir, famous otherwise for their persecution of the Christians (Beševliev 1963).

The name of the owner Sivin also suggests a Turkic milieu (Moravcsik 1958:262). In its Turkic variant the name is recorded in the Bulgarian prince list, a document specifying the chronology of the Bulgarian pagan rulers (Pritsak 1955; Beševliev 1981). In its Graecized formula the name is listed as Sabinos in the chronicles, referring to a pagan Bulgarian ruler from the eighth century (*Theophan.*, ed. de Boor, 433, 19–20; 436, 12–13; *Nikephor. Patr.*, ed. de Boor, 70, 1–27; Zlatarski 1918:20).

On the other hand, the Christian formula at the begin-



Figure 4. Silver cup from the Seattle Art Museum, beginning of the eighth century.

ning of the inscription “God help” indicates a date in the period after Christianity was officially adopted, i.e. after AD 865. On the base of linguistic and palaeographic analysis of the Greek inscription, Totev suggests that it belongs to the tenth century. However, he leaves a definite area of uncertainty in noticing that the Christian formula might have been inserted after the original inscription beginning with the cross and the name was carved. This hint is quite plausible because without the Christian formula the inscription is placed quite symmetrically in lines and with a regular spacing between them and between the inscription and the rim of the bottom of the cup. The letters of the Christian formula seem quite rough in comparison with the others and look as if they have been secondarily inserted in the narrow place left between the rim of the bottom and the line with the name of the owner.

The conclusion concerning the inscription is that it can not prove the exact dating of the cup, although the Christian formula supposes that the cup was in use after the official adoption of Christianity in Bulgaria in 865. Other facts, such as the similarity of the inscription to the proto-Bulgarian examples and the name and the title of the owner, suggest that the cup was made and used before this date, i.e. the middle of the ninth century.

Comparisons of the form

The form of the cup is cylindrical or rather an inverted frustum of a cone with a small straight foot. The ringed handle is cast and soldered.

It is already well known that the closest parallel example is the cup from the treasure of Dune, Dalhem parish, the island of Gotland (Andersson 1983:56, and references cited therein). The differences between the two examples lie in the size, the weight and the ornament of the middle band of decoration (fig. 3; see also Trotzig’s text below).

The ring handle with a plate for the thumb is a characteristic feature of some vessels made during the Early Middle Ages in Middle Asia and among the Turkic tribes. Probably one of the earlier known examples

comes from the treasure of Malaja Pereščepina (Werner 1984:Pl. 9).

On the one hand a similarity is evident between the Sivin cup and these vessels from Middle Asia (Belenickij 1968:Pl. 72–73). Such an example is cited as a parallel to Sivin's cup by V. P. Darkevič. This is the cup from Plehanova, the former Perm region (Darkevič 1976:174, table 57). A similar form is represented in the cup from Zemplin (former Czechoslovak Republic), which comes from the grave of a Hungarian chieftain from the 10th–11th centuries, decorated with the so called "Hungarian palmetto motif" (Budinski-Krička & Fettich 1973:81–90, figs. 9–11).

On the other hand the cone form is represented in a certain type of vessel from Middle Asia which is attributed to the Sogdian metal-works (Maršak 1971:T12, T25, T40, T44, T45, etc.). The examples from Vihareva and one other which is attributed by B. Maršak to the Saltovo–Mayaki culture (Marschak 1986:Pl. 77, 78, 91, 92) show that the walls of the cups are concave and the mouths of the cups are wider than the bottom. A similar form is attested in some examples from the gold and silver production of the T'ang period in China (AD 618–907). Here only two of the great number of such cups in existence need be mentioned. One comes from the Art Museum in Seattle and is dated to the beginning of the eighth century (fig. 4) (Gyllensvärd 1957:227, Pl. 9b). The other comes from a private collection and is dated to the end of the seventh and beginning of eighth centuries (Kelly 1984:63). Cups with these features seem to have been in use in the Steppes, Middle Asia and China generally in the eighth and up to the tenth centuries. However, a Byzantine example of this form is published by A. Bank and is dated to the 12th century. (The dating of the cup is disputable. If we look at the production of Byzantine vessels and mass metal production in the 11th–12th centuries it could be noted that this cup is an exception, unlike the common production of other metal objects from the period, see Bank 1978:Pl. 29.)

To these comparisons of the cup from Preslav with other cups with spherical and concave form another should be added. There exists another type of form that seems to be between the two already discussed and which is probably closer to the form of Sivin's cup. There are few examples with this intermediate form in the metal-works, but V. P. Darkevič published such an example which comes from Iran and is attributed the Samanid metal production of the 12th century (Darkevič 1976:table 33). The cup has a ringed handle; the cylindrical form ends at the bottom with slightly spherical walls slightly different from Sivin's cup. Though this type is different from the bulk of post-Sassanian silver vessel production and from the Turkic vessels found in Middle Asia, it is possible that the form of the cup originated from an earlier type which is better preserved in the ceramic ware (Tašhodjaev 1967).

A very similar form is common in examples of early



Figure 5. Glazed clay cup from Preslav, 10th century.

Medieval ceramic pottery found in Bulgaria, mentioned in the first publication about the cup from Preslav where Totev gives a photo of a fragment of a ceramic ringed handle (Totev 1964:5–15). A cup from white clay glazed with green has been found in Preslav and is dated to the tenth century (fig. 5). Its height is 7.5 cm and the mouth is 9.5 cm wide; the diameter of the foot is 5 cm and the cup is probably a Byzantine import (Vaklinov & Vaklinova 1983). In his article discussing the cup of Sivin, S. Stanilov shares the opinion of Totev regarding the attribution of this form of cup to Byzantine ceramics (Stanilov 1994:87–95). They consider that since the closest examples to the Sivin cup come from a Byzantine pottery, there is a major argument for attributing the cup of Sivin to the Byzantine circle. However, as was mentioned above, this type is common also for the pottery of Middle Asia and it is not known whether the direction of influence in ceramic techniques flowed from Middle Asia to Byzantium or, which is also conceivable, whether the types emanated locally. Therefore, the availability of this form in the Byzantine pottery, which is found also in Preslav, is not a solid argument for attributing the cup of Sivin to the Byzantine sphere of influence.

Comparisons of the decoration

The decoration on the body of the cup is divided into three registers.

The lowest register is filled with a floral motif usually called "spear-like leaves". Probably these originated from acanthus leaves, but have been developed so much that their original form is rather distorted. The same motif is common in the sculptural decoration of the architecture in Preslav and it is accepted that this decoration manifests an Antique influence assimilated in the art of tenth century Preslav through the Byzantine influence. Totev indicates not only Byzantine examples of the same motif in the steatite works (Weitzmann 1972), but also its appearance in Islamic architectural decoration (Creswell 1932:174, 177, 180). However, the closest and most numerous examples of the use of this design come from the

metal-work production of the post-Sassanian period of the Early Middle Ages in Middle Asia. Although we know that motifs travel and are assimilated in many ways, it is particularly these media that should be searched as a source for the appearance of the design on the cup of Sivin.

The closest example of the lower register of Sivin's cup come from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, especially the decoration of the neck of ewer N2 (Mavrodinov 1943). Another similar example comes from the decoration of a golden belt end (fig. 6) discovered in a grave from Pliska – the pagan capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (from 681, the date of the Foundation of the Bulgarian Kingdom, until 893, the date of the declaring of Preslav as the capital of Christian Bulgaria). Although the belt was unearthed from a grave constructed according to the Christian custom, the form and decoration of the belt mountings suggest earlier modes in technique and ornamentation (Mihajlov 1979:56–57, Pl. 3032). Generally it could be attributed to the trend suggesting post-Sassanian influences in the metal-works of the Steppe peoples and the kingdoms of Central Europe (Balint 1978:133).

The middle register of the decoration of Sivin's cup is filled with a scroll motif. From the two sides of a thick stem tendrils twist to the left and to the right and form roundels. The ends of the tendrils form either five-leaved palmetto blossoms or three-folded leaves. The five-leaves palmetto blossoms seem to be formed from two leaves at the base surmounted by three bigger and thicker leaves. Every one of them is executed in a slightly different way in a relatively high relief. Totev points at some parallels containing this type of palmetto in Preslav architectural and ceramic decoration (Totev 1964:5–15). However, the variants of the palmetto design that appear in Preslav architectural and ceramic decoration refer to another palmetto motif, usually described as “dispersed” or “double-built one over another” or “rumpled or dishevelled palmetto-acanthus”. Their best known contemporary analogues come from the architectural decoration of Fenari Isa (fig. 7), the Church of Constantine Lips in Constantinople (Grabar 1963:100–122). Thus the comparison of the decoration of the middle band of Sivin's cup with the architectural and ceramic decoration of Preslav, made by Totev is not quite exact. This slight lack of correspondence to the Byzantine analogues in book illumination pointed out by St. Stanilov (1994:87–95), although these also help to reveal the dispersion of the palmetto motif as a general type circulating in the ninth and tenth centuries. Another suggestion made by Stanilov seems quite acceptable, however. He points out the treatment of the palmetto on the cup from Plehanova (already mentioned for its form), which is attributed by V. P. Darkevič to the Byzantine tradition in the east-European lands (Darkevič 1976:table 29) and that on another vessel from Bolsaja Anikova dated to the beginning of the ninth century but bearing a later Kufic inscription from the

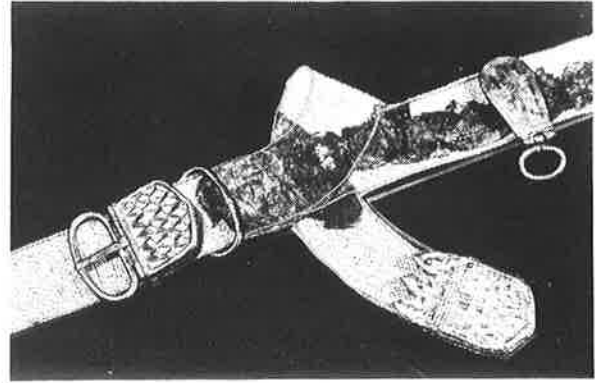


Figure 6. Set of gold and silver belt ornaments from Pliska, second half or end of the ninth century.

tenth century (Marschak 1986, p. 96–98, pl. 115–118). Stanilov insists on the similarity between these Byzantine palmettos and those on the cup of Sivin, although he describes the palmetto as a “rumpled or dishevelled palmetto-acanthus” leaf coming from Middle-Asiatic examples (Stanilov 1994; Marschak 1986:86). Bearing in mind also the fact that the palmetto on the cup of Plehanova is combined with Eastern or Central Asiatic motifs such as the phoenix and winged lion, executed in a manner and style which are more typical for the Asiatic than for the Byzantine tradition, it is possible to presume that this kind of the palmetto motif is not a characteristic only of Byzantine book illumination.

The upper register of Sivin's cup is decorated with a variety of the motifs sometimes called “falling waves” which consist of a symmetrical repetition of palmetto and scroll leaves. This is not common for Bulgarian art monuments from the Early Middle Ages. Again the closest analogous examples come from Byzantine book illumination and from Middle-Asiatic examples of precious metal-works.

A great similarity is noticeable between the cup of Sivin and the cup from Dune, Gotland, in the floral decoration on the thumb plates of their ringed handles. The acanthus leaf is treated in a similar way in both cases. The difference lies in the sides of the twisting and wrapping of a part of the leaf. This characteristic is discussed by B. Maršak (Maršak 1971:66). He highlights the Chinese variants of this kind of leaf called “muffled”, which became a much loved stylistic treatment in Chinese ornament during the T'ang period (618–907), as pointed out by also by J. Rawson (1982). However, he notes that it was also one of the most common ornamental motifs in Byzantine book illumination during the 9th–10th centuries.

Attribution of the style and dating

According to Totev the cup of Sivin was made in a Bulgarian workshop at Preslav at the end of ninth or in the tenth century (Totev 1964:5–15).

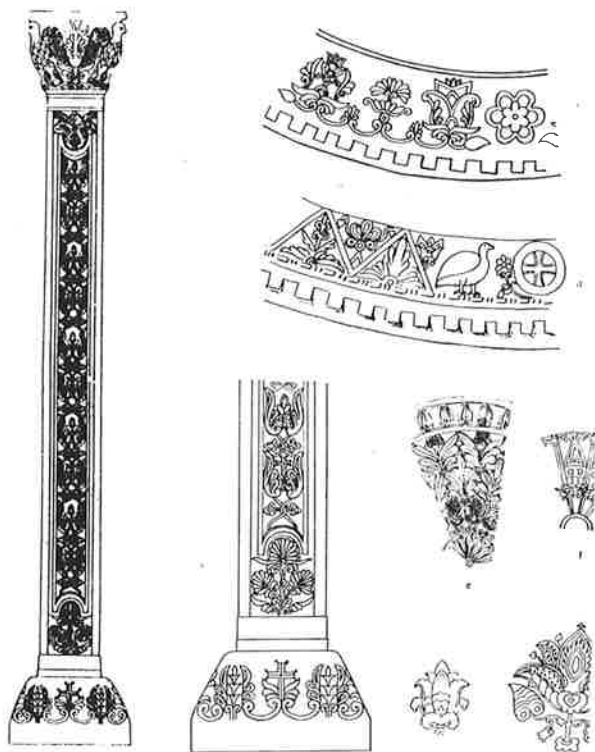


Figure 7. Drawings of architectural decoration designs of Fenari Isa, beginning of 10th century. After Grabar 1963.

According to Stanilov the cup of Sivin does not belong to Preslav culture, but rather to the Byzantine tradition, although he also mentions that there are some T'ang elements in the decoration of its closest parallel – the cup from Dune, Gotland. He accepts the opinion that the cup was made either in Constantinople or in Preslav after a Byzantine model. He also publishes a horse harness found in Preslav, which he considers to be the closest parallel to it in decoration, especially regarding the five-leaves palmetto (Stanilov 1994:Pl. 4). The date of the cup of Sivin, supported by this composition is probably tenth century.

According to V. P. Darkevič and B. I. Maršak, the cup of Sivin belongs to the Byzantine cultural circle (Darkevič 1976:Pl. 57, 7–9; Maršak 1971:60).

Having in mind the data given by the inscription on the bottom of the cup concerning the name and the title of Sivin, combined with the fact that the closest parallels to its type, form and decoration are found in post-Sassanian metal-work and that of the T'ang period (618–907), another suggestion could be made. The date of the cup could be considered to be earlier than the tenth century – i.e. in the middle of the ninth century or no later than the second half of the ninth century.

Regarding the stylistic attribution of the cup it may be suggested that it possesses features found outside the Byzantine tradition. Its similarity in certain points with examples from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós (ewer N2), the belt from Pliska and the horse harness from

Preslav do not suggest Byzantine models. The form and style of Sivin's cup are more close to metal-work production from the post-Sassanian period in Middle Asia and the east-European Steppes. In this respect they echoed the Steppe tradition with its combination of Byzantine and Middle Asiatic stylistic features. The cup of Sivin stands alone if we bear in mind the whole development of Preslav culture with its "neoclassical" features following the Byzantine models. It is related to an earlier phenomenon before the official conversion to Christianity in Bulgaria in 865 and it stands much closer to such intriguing and still not thoroughly explained art objects as those from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós. As in the Nagyszentmiklós artefacts, stylistic features from the Byzantine and the Middle-Asiatic metal-working tradition are combined so perfectly that it is very difficult to detect the original inspiration. This has resulted in numerous suggestions about the place of production of the cup, i.e. from what workshop and ethnic tradition does it derive. The notion that Preslav is the place of original production of Sivin's cup can not be asserted with any certainty, however, neither can its execution safely be attributed to Constantinople. In conclusion, the attribution of the cup of Sivin to the east-European Steppe tradition in metal-work seems more likely, at least based on the current evidence. Particularly, the fact that this tradition was influenced during the ninth and tenth centuries by those of both Byzantium and Middle Asia, makes this conclusion as plausible as that which asserts the cup's provenance as being from the Byzantine circle. Further investigations and possible new discoveries will certainly give more weight to this opinion.

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