

# THE VIKINGS IN THE BALKANS (TENTH TO 11TH CENTURIES) STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL CHANGES. NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA ON WEAPONRY

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## Abstract

For a long time the interest of many scholars has been focused on issues of the Viking (Varangian, Norman) presence in the Balkans. However, a series of strategic and tactical changes happened in warfare after the raids undertaken by the Russian-Varangian Knyaz (Prince) Sviatoslav in Bulgaria in the late tenth century AD. Therefore, special attention could be given to a series of new artefacts of north European (or Scandinavian) origin, which consists mainly of weapons and military equipment.

Key words: Balkans, Bulgarian Kingdom, Vikings, strategies, armament.

## Strategic and tactical changes in Bulgaria in the late tenth century

For a long time the interest of many scholars has been focused on issues of the Viking (Varangian, Norman) presence in the Balkans (Blondal 1978; Davidson 1976; Ciggaar 1974, p.301-342ff.; Guzelev 2002, p.30ff. and notes 13-29). One of the questions omitted so far is the strategic and tactical changes in warfare after the raids undertaken by the Russian-Varangian Knyaz (Prince) Sviatoslav in Bulgaria in the late tenth century AD. Therefore, special attention now should be paid to some new archaeological findings of north European (or Scandinavian) origin accumulated in recent years. They consist mainly of weapons and military equipment. In fact, such finds known to scholars until recently were very rare (Paulsen 1953, pp.59 and 63, № 1, 5; Popa 1984, pp.425-431).

The raids undertaken by the Russian-Varangian Knyaz Sviatoslav caused a chain of important events. There are many studies elucidating the reasons behind Sviatoslav's raids on the Danube, so there is no need to recall them again.

First, it is necessary to mention that in military and strategic terms, Sviatoslav's raid was not aimed at Constantinople directly; primarily, it was aimed across the Danube against the Bulgarian Kingdom (Fig. 1). All previous raids passed by Bulgaria (for more about this, see the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus).

This approach is suggested by Sviatoslav's intentions expressed in his words to his mother and the boyars: "I dislike being in Kiev, I want to live in Pereyaslavets on the Danube. That is the middle of my land ..." One

can hardly suppose that Sviatoslav had no intention or readiness to attack Constantinople. It is not accidental that after his mother's death the Knyaz's first step was to divide his "ancestral land" between his sons (Yaropolk in Kiev, Oleg amongst the "Dereveh" ("Drevlyani"), and Vladimir in Novgorod). There is a well-known interpretation of the fact, emphasizing that "Sviatoslav set off for Bulgaria, naming it 'his land' forever," and, in this connection, after he had quitted Dorostol (Drastar; Fig. 1), it was impossible for him to come back to Kiev, where his elder son Yaropolk was already ruling (Russev 2000, p.222).

One should not forget about the desire to control commerce on the Danube: "... all boons flow there [to the Danube]: from the Greek land, Czechia, Hungary, Russia, and so on."

Ultimately, one should realize that, in spite of the overall weakening of the Bulgarian state in the early second half of the tenth century, Sviatoslav's raids were the main reason for the defeat and the subsequent conquest of the Bulgarian lands by Byzantium.

The reorganization of the territory undertaken by Emperor John Tzimitzes (969-976) and continued by Emperor Basil II (976-1025) concerned almost the whole empire; yet, there were two specially created themes to stop the penetration of the Russians into Byzantine territory: the Bosphorus, the Pontos Euxeinos and Western Mesopotamia (Oikonomides 1972, p.101ff.). I shall speak about the Bosphorus and Pontos Euxeinos themes as they were created to keep Chersonesos and maintain a general influence in the northern Black Sea region, lost under Vladimir's rule.

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Fig. 1. Map of the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Bulgaria: a strategy (thema) of Western Mesopotamia; b-c location of sites with artefacts of Scandinavian or Russian origin.

### Strategy – katepanate – the Duchy of Mesopotamia

Having conquered northeast Bulgaria, Emperor John Tzimitzes organized new provinces and appointed governors. The “Taktikon Scorialensis” determines one of them, which is interesting in connection with our topic, Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers).

There are different opinions, but it seems that Western Mesopotamia was situated in the mouth of the Danube rather than between the Siret and Dniester rivers (Oikonomides 1972, p.59ff., pp.72-73; Oikonomides 1974). It is not known where the centre was, or where the governor of this territory resided.

Other unions and another military and administrative unit, Thracia and Mesopotamia, were created later. We know about it from two seals of the dignitary Damian Dobromir, anthipatos, patricios and Duke of Thracia and Mesopotamia (Bojilov 1995, p.303ff., № 334). First of all, these seals surely confirm the existence of the Western Mesopotamia mentioned in “Taktikon Scorialensis”. As for Mesopotamia, opinions differ. I will not repeat all the opinions about the tasks and the purpose of this unit, but I would like to recall that the best researcher into this issue, N. Oikonomides, believes the reason to create Western Mesopotamia (later also Thracia and Mesopotamia) was the military and commercial undertakings of the Russians. Its aim was to ensure the military defence of the region, and since 1000, its centre also played a role in customs (Oikonomides 1974).

### Military treaties of the second half of the tenth century

The military treaties of the time have been elucidated in many publications. Although it is impossible to make a list of even the main opinions, still one can consider it widely accepted that the reforms were essentially aimed at creating and favouring the use of units of heavily armoured horsemen, *kataphrakts* (Plate VI: 2). The well-known tactics by Emperor Nicephorus II (963–969) “Praecepta Militaria” should be mentioned.

Some scholars believe that Nicephorus II’s reforms were of a “revolutionary” character, whereas others deny the fact of the reforms, partly or entirely. Still, we know that Leo Diacon mentions twice the creation of a heavy cavalry (Plate VI: 2), and one of the instances refers to the battle at Dorostol, when the *kataphrakts* aligned the “sides” of the flank of John Tzimitzes’s army (Diacon 1988, pp.8-9 and 73). After Tzimitzes, all data about *kataphrakts* gradually disappears.

The creation of a detachment of “immortals” by Emperor John Tzimitzes can be regarded as a tactical innovation. As Leo Diacon writes, the detachment was created “to anticipate [Sfendoslav’s] invasion and to block his access to the capital” (Diacon 1988, pp.6, 11 and 57). These hasty measures were quite reasonable because of the great danger.

Remarkably, both before and during the rule of Nicephorus and Tzimitzes, the army consisted mainly of Romaion, while the foreigners were the allies. After a 6,000-strong Russian corps of mercenaries reached Constantinople in 988, in Emperor Basil’s army<sup>1</sup>, as well as later under the rule of subsequent emperors, the Varangians, Normans, Angles, Franks, etc played an important part in military activities (Vasilevskii 1875, p.394ff.; Ciggaar 1974, p.301ff.).

### The fortress on the island of Pacuiul Lui Soare on the Danube

A fortress was built on an island in the Romanian part of the Danube facing the Bulgarian town of Silistra, ancient Dorostorum, mediaeval Dorostol or Drastar (Plate VI: 3). It was extensively researched by the Romanian archaeologist P. Diaconu (Diaconu, Vilceanu 1972). Although still a debatable issue, it can be supposed that the fortress was built by Byzantium. There was a special wharf for commanders’ and emperors’ vessels, while it is known that the medieval Bulgarians did not have any fleet. The fortress’ main purpose was to serve

<sup>1</sup> The “Russian-Varangian” retinue as a mercenary unit had existed at the Byzantine court after the treaty of 911 during Oleg’s rule.

as a military counterpoint to Bulgaria's biggest medieval town, Drastar (Fig. 1). I ask for your attention to this fortress mainly because it has yielded the biggest quantity of Scandinavian and Russian finds: a sword pommel (Popa 1984, p.425ff.), two medallions with images of eagles or falcons, and other items (Diaconu 1972; Yotov 2002).

### Preslavitsa–Veliki Preslav

It is widely accepted among researchers to locate the Preslavets-on-Danube mentioned in the Russian primary chronicle "Povest vremennyh let" somewhere in the river's delta. I. Iordanov, a Bulgarian specialist in sphragistics, has listed all the sources mentioning Preslav, the town of Preslav, Predslava, Perkslava, Preslavitsa. In his opinion, in the tenth and 11th centuries all these names refer to the second capital of the Bulgarian Kingdom, Preslav. Here is, in the chronicler's words "the middle of my land, where all boons flow". Anyway, in order to find out if Pereyaslavets is not another town, rather than the capital, and to place it in the delta of the Danube, we need more evidence. It is most likely that this evidence can be offered by the excavations at the village Nufaru (on the right bank of the Danube's right branch in the delta of the Danube, now in Romania). The digging has revealed the debris of a wooden structure (Fig. 2), which is most typical of northern architecture.



Fig. 2. Wooden structure at Nufaru, Romania (a "Varangian street" according to Damian).

whorls (Plate VI: 4a) and decorated eggs (Plate VI: 4b). They are found in Drastar (Silistra) on the Danube and in the medieval settlements of the ancient fortresses of Dynogetia (Garvan) and Noviodunum (Isaccea). These towns might have functioned as Russian trade factories (Yotov 2006, p.143ff.).

### Varna

Varna (the ancient Odessos) was abandoned, to come to life again in the late tenth and early 11th century. We do not know the exact date, but most likely a fortress was erected there in the 11th century. During one of the last raids on Constantinople in 1043, ships with the Russi and the Varangians led by Kn-yaz Vladimir of Novgorod (Yaroslav's son) wrecked it. Around 6,000 warriors, led by their commander Vyshata, started on their way back by land, and were defeated near Varna by Katakalon Kekaumenos, a local governor of Danube provinces. This story is well known and has received many comments. Besides, resulting from unpublished material from the sixties, Varna is one of the few cities in the Balkans yielding items originating from northeastern Europe (Russia): the so called "Ovruch" spindle

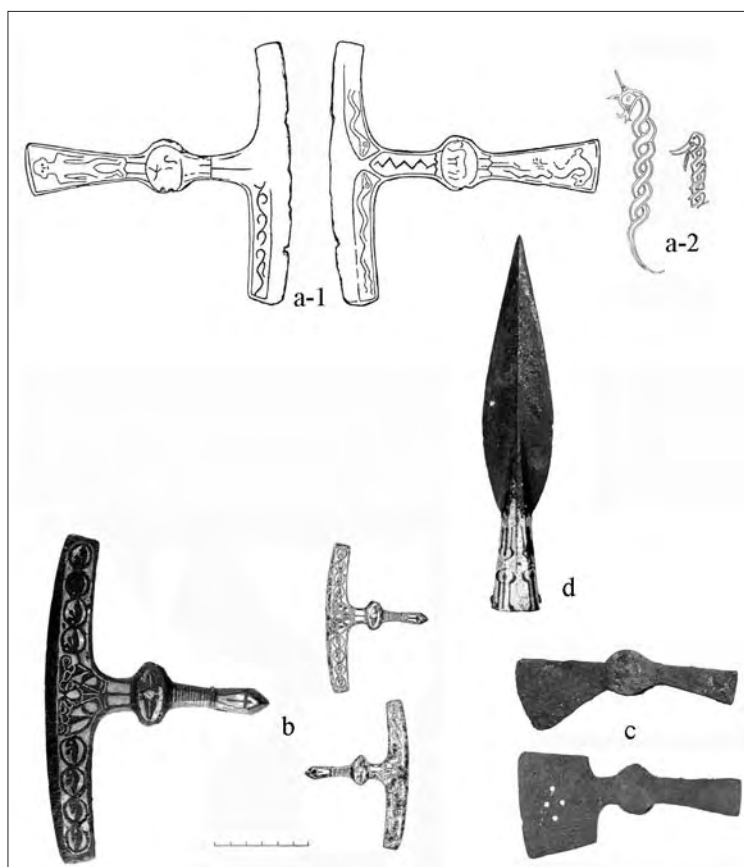


Fig. 3. Axes and a spear: a-1 Vratsa region; a-2 incised drawings; b Shumen region; c-d northeast Bulgaria.

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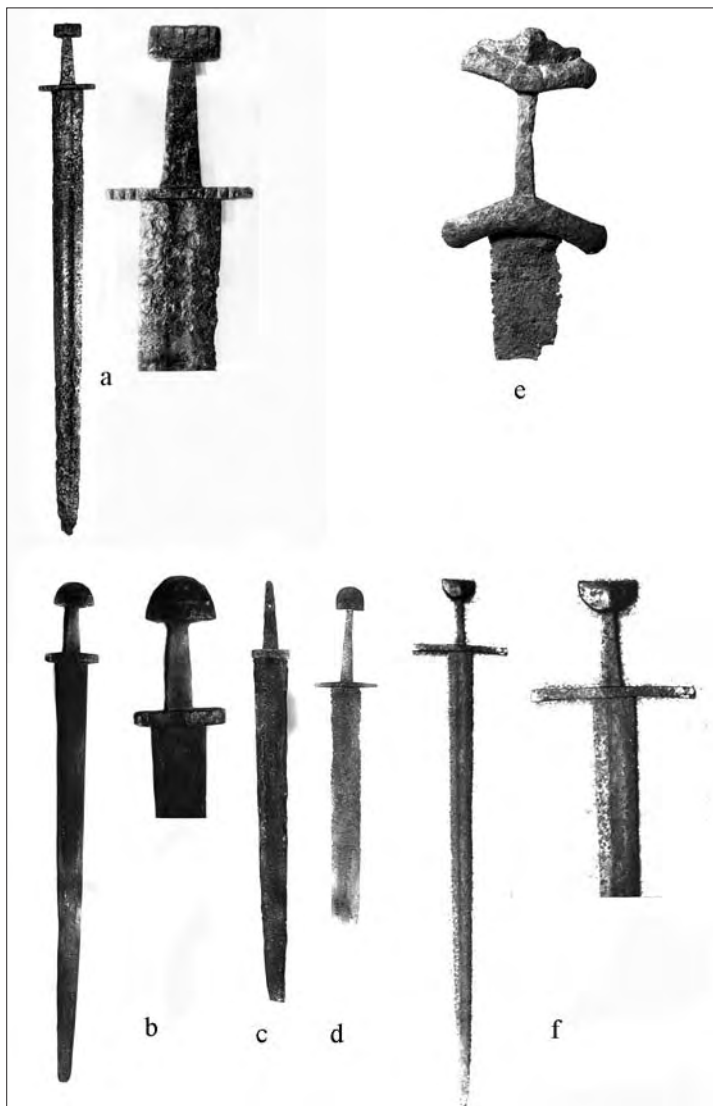


Fig. 4. Swords: a Opaka, Popovo region; b-d Constanța, Romania; e Gradeshnitsa, Vratsa region; f Govezhda, Montana region.

### Armaments

Of all frequently commented evidence by Leo Diacon about the armaments of the Russians during Sviatoslav's raid, the description of their shields seems to be worth mentioning: "their shields are durable and reach to their feet to ensure more security" (as mentioned in the siege of Preslav); "reaching their feet" (at the Battle at Dorostol) (Diacon 1988, Figs. 8:4:70, 9:2:75).

However, the most reliable evidence is offered by archaeology. Until recently, there were only three or four reliable published archaeological works about the impact and penetration of the Russian (also called Scandinavian, ie Varangian) material culture into the mouth of the Danube. These are several bronze sword scabbards' chapes (published in the articles on weaponry by P. Paulsen and G. Korzukhina), one sword's pommel, a small number of so-called "Ovruch" spindle whorls, and three glazed clay eggs (Plate VI: 4a-b).

The number of such finds has been increasing over the last decades.

We must make a small clarification: the artefacts discussed below could have been worn and used over a long period of time by people of different ethnic groups. It is more important to try to determine the origin of finds, either north European, Russian or Scandinavian, and identify their closest analogies.

The first and the main group of researched artefacts is connected with weaponry and military equipment (the main sites are published in Yotov 2004).

### Axes, spears and swords

There are two axes (no doubt battle ones), one of which comes from Vratsa (Fig. 3: a-1) and the other one from the Shoumen region (Fig. 3: b). They have forms and peculiarities (mainly motifs of images) typical of Scandinavian finds of similar types of weaponry. The technology that was used is the application of silver on an iron surface. The motifs of images are very similar to the motifs known from Scandinavian and north European sites (Herman 1986, p.30f., Fig. 14; Paulsen 1953, p.44ff.; about ornamentation, see also Darkevich 1961, p.91ff., Fig. 1: 3).

Besides the first two, we include here two more axes (Fig. 3: c) from northeast Bulgaria that have forms indicative of Scandinavian or Russian influence (Kirpichnikov 1966, p.33ff., Fig. 6; plates XII: 5, 6 and XIII: 1, 4).

I believe that only one spear (Fig. 3: d), kept in a private collection, can be surely qualified as belonging to this group. The blade is "oblong egg-shaped", according to Anatolii Kirpichnikov's classification, but, what is more important, it has silver plates on the surface of its socket. This enables us to refer this spear to similar ones of Scandinavian, specifically Gotlandian origin, which are found in Russia as well (Kirpichnikov 1966b, p.13, Plate VI: 1-2).

Regarding a sword (Fig. 4: a) coming from the area of the mediaeval fortress at the village of Opaka, in the Popovo region (first publication: Parushev 1999, pp.31-32), the ferrule of the handle, the cross-bars, width of the groove and the section of the blade classify it as type K by J. Petersen. According to Petersen's chronological principle, type K includes swords from

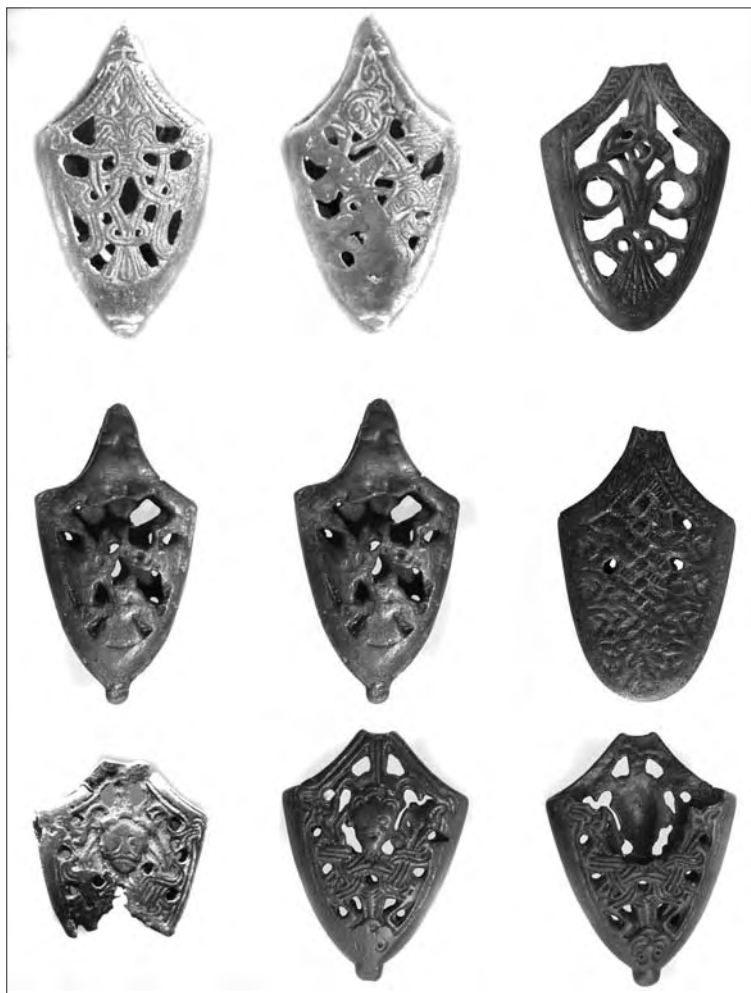


Fig. 5. Sword scabbard chapes: “germanisches Vogelemotiv”, “germanisches Vierfüßlemotiv” and “orientalischer Palmette” style.

the early Vikings to the first half of the ninth century (Petersen 1919, p.176), although they could have reached the area south of the Danube in somewhat later time.

There are three swords kept at the museum of Constanța, Romania (Fig. 4: b–d). One of them was found near the village of Albești (west of Mangalia), the other two come from somewhere in inland Dobrudja. The sword from Albesti has on one of its surfaces a stamp, and on the reverse side there is the inscription “Ulfberht”. In J. Petersen’s classification, all three swords belong to types E/W, X, V, dated to the second half of the tenth and the 11th centuries (Petersen 1919, p.75ff., and 156ff.). Bearing in mind their location and date, these three swords may be connected with Sviatoslav’s raids in 969–971 into the area of the Lower Danube.

About the sword from a settlement by the village of Gradshnitsa, in the Vratsa Region (Fig. 4: e), in J. Petersen’s classification, such swords belong to the Z type, and are dated to the second half of the tenth and the middle of the 11th centuries (Petersen 1919,

p. 175ff.). The origin of swords of these types is unclear and could be discussed, as they are found across Europe. However, they may well be connected with our topic of discussion.

Most researchers refer such swords to a group that includes a wide variety of types and variants, type Xa (“swords from the Vikings’ time”) in the classification of E. Oakeshott (Oakeshott 1991, p. 50) dated to the early 11th and later centuries; type III (?) or rather V in Kirpichnikov’s classification, dated to the 12th century, but the author admits an early dating (Kirpichnikov 1966a, p.56ff., Fig. 1), and type XV in A. Ruttkay’s classification, dated to the 12th to 14th centuries (Ruttkay 1976, p.255ff., Abb. 1). To this type belongs the sword from the village of Govezhda, Montana Region (Fig. 4: f).

The latter two swords (coming from northwest Bulgaria) seem to be connected with the Magyars’ raids on the Balkans from the late 930s to the middle of the 11th century (Dimitrov 1998, p.71ff.). The north European, namely Scandinavian, influence in these two swords is doubtless.

Sword pommels are not often found in Bulgaria. One (Popa 1984, p.425ff.) was found in the fortress on the island of Pacuiul Lui Soare (the possible residence of Knyaz Sviatoslav in 971), and a second one was found somewhere in northeast Bulgaria. There are engravings of silver with motifs of spirals and interlacing lines on the iron surfaces of the two ferrules. In Petersen’s classification, they belong to the S type, and are dated to the tenth and early 11th centuries (Petersen 1919, p.142ff.).

Sword scabbard chapes are openwork or solid cases fixed to wooden scabbards. Each one has a round asymmetric rhomboid, triangular or more complex form with convex or concave shoulders. They are elliptical in section and are cast in bronze. There are various types in P. Paulsen’s and G. Korzukhina’s classifications (Korzukhina 1950, pp.63-94; Paulsen 1953). Six sword scabbard chapes have parallels in the so-called “germanisches Vogelemotiv” and “germanisches Vierfüßlemotiv” style (Fig. 5: 1-9) pieces according to Paulsen (Paulsen 1953, pp.17-57).

Researchers admit that chapes of this group were manufactured in Sweden. What is interesting is their

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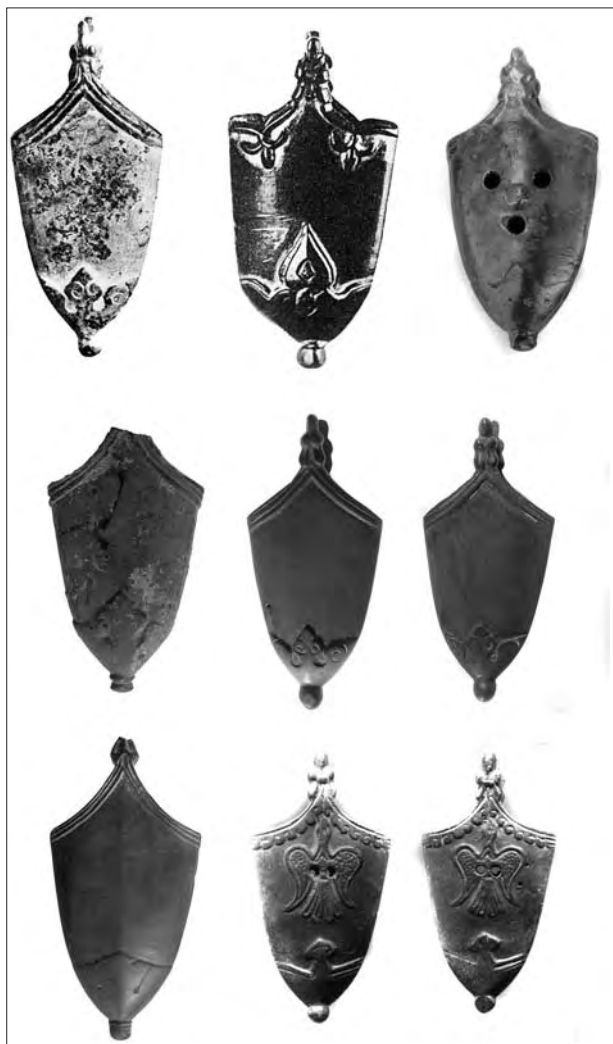


Fig. 6. Sword scabbard chapes: “Kreuz und Ranke” style and “niedrige” (“low”) style

distribution across a vast territory. G. Korzukhina and P. Paulsen write about finds in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Ukraine (Korzukhina 1950, p.65f., plate I; Paulsen 1953, p.48ff., 183, Fundkarten IV.). A similar chape was published 20 years ago (Fehner 1982, p.243f.). It was found in a grave which is supposed to belong to the Varangian-Russian Knyaz Igor (912–945). The chapes found in Bulgaria have extended the geography of finds of this type south of the Danube.

Another interesting group of chapes belongs to the style of “orientalischer Palmette” in Paulsen’s classification (Paulsen 1953, p.59ff.). P. Paulsen and G. Korzukhina point to the fact that they are not found in Scandinavia. Paulsen suggests that they were produced in East Prussia, but, as Korzukhina rightly remarks, he “mixed ferrules of two different types in the same group” (Korzukhina 1950, p.68). Having in mind the chapes from Bulgaria and several more from Hungary published by G. Fecher, Korzukhina admits that the centre of production of “orientalischer Palmette” chapes must be

placed “somewhere in the Danube area, and by no means in the Baltic region” (Korzukhina 1950, p. 68). This conclusion is based on the list of locations of similar ferrules, which shows that they were uncovered only in the area south of Kiev, in Hungary, in Romania (where these finds, no doubt, are connected with the Hungarians, who had learned many things during their life in the steppe) and south of the Danube. Of all the artefacts I know across Europe (eight or nine pieces), the ferrules found on Bulgarian territory are most numerous.

Typologically, the last two chapes are of “Kreuz und Ranke” and “niedrige (= low)” types (Fig. 6) and are dated also to the tenth and 11th centuries, but they might have come from south of the Danube in the second half of the 11th century. This can be connected either with later raids by the Russians, or with the Varangian corps.

The main ways by which these artefacts of Scandinavian and Russian origin would reach the lands in the mouth of the Danube were by Varangian-Russian military and commercial raids to Constantinople from the ninth to the middle of the 11th centuries, and the recruitment of Varangians and Normans by the Byzantine Empire in the late tenth and early 11th centuries (Vasilevski` 1875, pp.394-451). At the same time, the dating of most of the items leads us to the firm conclusion that they are material evidence of the Kievan Knyaz Sviatoslav’s raids (in 968 and 969–971), which resulted in the consecutive conquest of almost all important centres of the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

Besides the Varangians and the Normans, Byzantine mercenaries, I believe some of the artefacts are connected with the Pechenegs, who had direct commercial and military contacts with the Kievan state in the tenth and early 11th centuries, and since the 1050s they stayed south of the Danube.

Translated by the author

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## VIKINGAI BALKANUOSE (X–XI a.): STRATEGIJOS IR TAKTIKOS PASIKEITIMAI. NAUJI ARCHEOLOGIJOS DUOMENYS APIE GINKLUOTE

Valeri Yotov

Santrauka

Ilgą laiką daugelis mokslininkų – istorikų ir archeologų – buvo susidomėję vikingų (variagų, normanų) istoriniais pėdsakais Balkanuose. X a. pabaigoje rusų ir variagų kunigaikščiui Sviatoslavui pradėjus išpuolius

į Bulgariją, įvyko karo veiksmų strategijos ir taktikos pasikeitimų (1 pav.; iliustr. VI: 2–4), kuriuos liudija toje teritorijoje randami Šiaurės Europos (ar skandinaviškos kilmės) dirbiniai, daugiausia ginklai ir ginkluotės elementai.

Straipsnyje aptariami rusiškos ir skandinaviškos kilmės kirviai, ietigaliai, kalavijai ir jų rankenų buoželės bei makščių apkalų galai, taip pat verpstukai ir keli moliniai stiklu padengti kiaušinio formos dirbiniai, kurie pasiekė Dunojaus žemupį rusų ir variagų karinių išpuolių bei prekybinių žygių į Konstantinopolį IX a. viduryje – XI a. pradžioje metu ir jų samdomosi Bizantijos imperijoje X a. pabaigoje – XI a. pradžioje laikais (3–6 pav.; iliustr. VI: 4). Daugelio Bulgarijoje rastų dirbinių nustatytos datos leidžia daryti išvadą, kad jie čia pateko 968 m. ir 969–971 m. Kijevo kunigaikščio Sviatoslavo žygių metu. Šių karinių veiksmų rezultatas buvo nuoseklus beveik visų svarbiausių pirmosios Bulgarijos kunigaikštystės centrų nukariavimas. Gali būti, kad kai kurie Bulgarijoje rasti dirbiniai yra susiję su pečenegais, kurie X–XI a. pradžioje turėjo tiesioginių karinių ir komercinių ryšių su Kijevo valstybe, be to, nuo 1050 metų buvo įsikūrę teritorijoje į pietus nuo Dunojaus.

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