

A BRACELET FROM THE LANDS OF THE GOLDEN HORDE FOUND IN THE PALACE OF THE GRAND DUKES OF LITHUANIA

**IEVA RĖKLAITYTĖ, BÁRBARA BOLOIX-GALLARDO,
EGLĖ ZAVECKIENĖ**

Abstract

The aim of our article is to discuss a rather well-known artefact from the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in Vilnius. Although the bracelet has been somewhat widely published and exhibited, the information that usually accompanies it is little more than modest. Although it is generally pointed out that the bracelet is adorned with an Arabic inscription, there is still a question mark present. In this article, we will offer a transcription and a translation of the inscription on the bracelet, along with some parallels, which will allow us to determine the origin of this unique find in Lithuanian archaeological material.

Key words: Palace of the Grand Dukes, Vilnius, Golden Horde, Arabic inscription, bracelet.

The history of the find

The bracelet was found in 1993 during archaeological surveys of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. This unique artefact (inventory record number 506) with an Arabic inscription was discovered in G cellar, 1.5 metres below ground level. It is very thin and fragile: the width is 0.9 centimetres. It is made of copper alloy, with slightly narrowed ends, and was found fragmented in three parts. The ends of the bracelet are adorned with an image of an animal's muzzle, with noticeably narrowed eyes and an elongated nose. The central part of the bracelet has decoration comparable to twirled lines. The entire surface of the artefact is filled with inscriptions in an Arabic script.

The archaeologists who initially published the find considered that the bracelet was made by cutting along a larger piece of a copper tin, and that, therefore, it was incomplete (Kuncevičius *et al.* 1995, p.53, Figs. 167, 168).

Daiva Steponavičienė discusses the bracelet in her book on luxury items from the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. She includes it in the chapter dealing with arm jewellery which was worn by the inhabitants of the Palace (Steponavičienė 2007, p.114ff, Fig. 68). Nevertheless, the author only repeats the information on the findspot, and believes that the decorations are Arabic lettering and that the bracelet is incomplete, suggesting a 14th to 15th-century dating.

Most recently, the bracelet has been described as a pre-Gothic find, dating from the 14th or early 15th century, which formed part of the collection of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania (Avižinis *et al.* 2010,

p.130). However, no up-to-date historical evidence accompanied this statement.

A description of parallels from Golden Horde settlements

As we have mentioned, the first publishers of the find considered that the bracelet was probably incomplete (Kuncevičius *et al.* 1995, p.53). Nevertheless, we can observe that the inscription on the bracelet is fully represented, and, therefore, the bangle was intended to have this shape and decoration from the beginning of the working process. It does not seem to have been made by reusing decorated tin. Starting from that assumption, some possible analogues for the bracelet were searched for.

In order to establish the significance of this bracelet from the Grand Dukes' Palace, parallels were searched for in archaeological material of the Golden Horde, since the Arabic inscription indicated that the bracelet was imported from Medieval Muslim lands.

The fact that it was possible to locate similar bangles permitted us to identify not only the animal image as a lion, but also the twirled central decoration as typical Mongol decoration. As a consequence, even the inscription became easier to interpret, because of the existence of similar ones. Curiously, the complexity of the script is proven by the fact that some well-known experts in ancient Arabic inscriptions were unable to read it, even though it was an imitation of common Arabic script.



Fig. 1. A map of the lands of the Golden Horde and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (after Batūra 1975).

In 1969, a piece of a bracelet made from a thin brass strip was found in the settlement of Selitrennoye (on the River Akhtuba, a left tributary of the River Volga, in the Kharabalinsky district of the Astrakhan oblast), a possible Sarai Batu Golden Horde town (for this, see Fig. 1.5 and Fig. 2). The inner side of the piece was carved with lines and floral decoration, while the external surface was decorated with two matrices using the cold stamping process; each matrix contained part of an inscription, as well as lines that served as a decorative frame (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.286). A third matrix representing a lion's head was used on the only preserved end of the bracelet. It should be said that the technique of stamping with diverse matrices, so widely employed by craftsmen of the Golden Horde, was one of the reasons for the frequent appearance of counterfeit money (Aleksieva *et al.* 2002, p.110). It should be observed that the inscription on the Selitrennoye bracelet is visually different and easier to interpret than that on the bracelet from Vilnius.

In the same article, Fyodorov-Davydov refers to another bracelet, discovered in Vodienskoye (on the right

bank of the River Volga, near the town of Dubovka, in the Volgograd district), a well-known 14th-century Golden Horde settlement, and arguably a Beldjamen town (for this, see Fig. 1.3 and Fig. 2). The bracelet showed a lion's muzzle at one of its ends, and a decoration identified as a simplified Mongol 'happiness-knot' at the other. Like the Selitrennoye bracelet, this one was also made by stamping a matrix.

The author not only does not discuss the inscription on the bracelet from Selitrennoye, but also does not offer a translation. However, in the case of the bracelet from Vodienskoye, a translation of the inscription in Arabic was made (although neither a photograph nor a transcription are included in the article). According to the author, there are identifiable expressions and words in the inscription, such as 'and health', a term possibly readable as 'eternal', and the word 'blessing'. The first word, according to the author, could also be interpreted as a repetition of the word 'health' (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.287ff).

IV

LIFESTYLE
IN TOWNS,
PALACES AND
MONASTERIES



Fig. 2. a) the bracelet found in Selitrennoye (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.224); b) a drawing of the bracelet from Vodianskoye (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.287); c) the inscription on the bracelet from Novokhar'kovska (Alekseeva *et al.* 2002, p.107).

Other bracelets which could be considered as close parallels to the one from Vilnius were found in Novokhar'kovska cemetery (in the Voronezh district), where more than 150 Golden Horde burials were unearthed (Alekseeva *et al.* 2002, p.106ff; and see Fig. 1.2 and Fig. 2). Two bracelets with Arabic inscriptions were discovered, both of them produced by means of the same matrix. At the ends of the bracelets were the stamped heads of lions, while in the centre of the bracelet there was a 'happiness-knot'. In the object of our study, we have observed that the arrangement of decorative features, placing the knot in the middle of the bracelet and the lions at the ends, makes the Novokhar'kovska finds more similar to the one found in Lithuania. Also, we were able to compare the Lithuanian find to the Novokhar'kovska bracelets, as a full transcription and a translation of the inscription in Arabic were offered.

The inscriptions on the Novokhar'kovska bracelets read: 'Everlasting glory and a blessed life and prosperity' (Alekseeva *et al.* 2002, p.106). According to the authors, the word 'glory' can also be interpreted as

'blessing' or 'abundance'. Nevertheless, as we will see further, in the context of such vocative inscriptions in the Medieval Muslim word, the translation of the first word as 'glory' seems to be more acceptable.

The Golden Horde bracelet from Vilnius

As we have already observed on the bracelet from Vilnius and other similar artefacts, two elements, a lion's muzzle and a 'happiness-knot', were used in order to decorate the bangles (Plate V.1).

According to G.A. Fyodorov-Davydov, a representation of a lion's head on plain bracelets is quite often found in archaeological material from the 13th to the 15th centuries in Eastern Europe, urban Russian settlements, the Bulgarian Volga, Central Asia, and Mordvin antiquities, although its origins must be sought within the lands of the Golden Horde (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.287; 1984, p.181).

The Mongol ‘happiness-knot’, of Buddhist origin, was frequently used not only on bracelets but also on Rus’ian and Tartar coins. Intriguingly, Borys Paszkiewicz suggests that the image of a lion on the first Lithuania coins was accompanied by a ‘happiness-knot’, not a net like a *tamga* symbol, as some Lithuanian scholars suggest (2007, p.17).

It must be said that the words of goodwill that appear on the bracelets are typical in the Muslim world. As one of many propitiatory inscriptions in the Medieval Muslim world, we can refer to a bowl from 13th-century Iran or Mesopotamia that bears an engraved decoration split into three superimposed registers on its outer face. It is comparable with the inscription found on bracelets of the Golden Horde, although the inscriptions are much more complete. On the upper register we can read: ‘everlasting glory, growing prosperity, enduring wealth, ultimate peace, sustained fortune, perfect peace, enduring wealth, peace’. On the middle register, the inscription in italic script reads: ‘everlasting glory, growing prosperity, enduring wealth, peace’. While in Kufic script, the inscription is: ‘everlasting glory, long life and growing prosperity’ (Junot 2010, p.162). Also, a brass goblet from Iran (most likely dating from the 14th century) shows several bands of similar propitiatory inscriptions: ‘eternal glory and prosperity, and eternal, eternal, eternal glory...; complete benediction, total favour, and eternal glory; complete benediction, total favour, and glory’ (Junot 2010, p.181). An inlaid brass candlestick, attributed to 14th or 15th-century Egypt, carries an almost identical inscription to that on bracelets from the lands of the Golden Horde, although numerous examples of these propitiatory inscriptions can be observed on the metalwork produced in Medieval Syria or Yemen (Milwright 2003, p.101).

Nevertheless, the bracelets made by the craftsmen of the Golden Horde were ‘barbarised’, because some calligraphic or grammatical errors were clearly made. Some additional letters that served more as ornamentation were added, while certain letters lack these inscriptions, or they were changed by other characters, as can be clearly observed on the Vodianskoye bracelet (Fyodorov-Davydov 1978, p.287). These errors could be explained by the fact that the craftsmen were probably illiterate, and could have made errors while preparing the matrix. In addition, the difficulty of Arabic writing makes reading the inscription more complicated, as some of the words can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the position of the vowels. After examining the bracelet and its parallels, we offer here a possible transcription and a translation of it from the bracelet from the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania (Plate V.2):

[Al-‘izz] *al-dā’im wa-l-‘umr al-[sālim] wa-l-iqbāl*

Everlasting [glory] and [healthy] life and prosperity

We have placed between brackets the words which can scarcely be read in the inscription, their meaning is more likely to be guessed after comparing characteristic inscriptions of this type. The adjective for the word ‘life’ (*al-sālim*) may be translated indistinctly as ‘successful’ or ‘long’. Along with the inscription found in Novokhar’kovska, we can observe that the Lithuanian bracelet was made using the same type of mould, as the inscription is the same. From the photograph of the Selitrennoye bracelet, we can identify quite easily the word *al-dā’im*, and suggest the existence of the words *wa-l-iqbāl* and *al-sālim*, although these two terms are more guessed at than actually seen. We would guess that the inscription on the Selitrennoye bracelet is the same as on the other bangles we have mentioned.

The inscription on the Lithuanian bracelet does not differ from other similar inscriptions found on similar artefacts, since propitiatory words appear on it as well. Within the lands of the Golden Horde, such jewellery was worn as a sort of amulet. Nevertheless, it is hard to tell if the owner of our bracelet was able to read or interpret the inscription that the bracelet bore. It was more likely seen as an unusual and interesting object. It should be pointed out that exotic goods like Arabic coins were widespread in north and northeast Europe. The interest in goods with exotic Arabic writing is proven by the appearance of coins with bilingual inscriptions in Arabic and Latin, or the use of false imitation Arabic script as an adornment in Medieval lands bordering on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Jansson 1988, p.611, Fig. 18; Noonan 1980, p.84).

We should point out in this essay that the bracelet is not the only find of the Golden Horde in the Palace of the Grand Dukes. We should refer to numismatic finds, such as a copper coin, called a *pula*, minted in the Sarai al-Djadid mint during the rule of Yanibek (1342–1357) in 1350–1351 (AH 752) (see Fig. 1.4) (Remecas 2002, p.261ff). The coin was found in 2001 in the inner yard of the palace, and is the only reliably dated Golden Horde coin to be found on Lithuanian territory. According to E. Remecas, the coin could have reached Vilnius between 1357 and 1399 as war booty, or through commercial links with merchants of the Golden Horde. Although trade relations in this area began under the rule of Grand Duke Gediminas (1275–1341), most trading activity took place under the rule of Vytautas (c. 1350–1430).

Most probably, on the basis of the few parallels, our bracelet should be dated to the second half of the 14th

IV

LIFESTYLE
IN TOWNS,
PALACES AND
MONASTERIES

century or the first half of the 15th century. It is the opinion of the late Professor Juan Souto that the type of inscription on the bracelet cannot be earlier than the 12th century.

There is a possibility that the bracelet was brought to Vilnius as war booty through Algirdas' military campaigns in the lands of the Golden Horde in the second half of the 14th century. However, the fact that the bracelet could have reached Vilnius as a commercial item should not be discounted.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, our bracelet should be considered an imported good from the lands of the Golden Horde, although it is impossible to identify precisely its exact provenance. Some of the parallels that we have quoted were found in the region of the lower River Volga and the middle River Don basin, although bracelets are found all over the former territories of the Golden Horde. In addition, it is difficult to determine when and how the bracelet reached the Palace of the Grand Dukes in Vilnius, although it is probable that it reached the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as war booty. In accordance with the parallels, we can assume that our find was made by means of several matrices impressed on a thin, flat strip of brass. The existence of various bracelets very similar to our discovery suggests that this type of bracelet, with inscriptions with propitiatory words, was quite popular in the vast lands of the Golden Horde, and was probably mass-produced by craftsmen. Other decorative features, such as a flat lion's muzzle or a Mongol 'happiness-knot' were also used in order to adorn the ends or the central parts of bracelets. The bracelet from Vilnius must be considered as a kind of amulet, as it bears a propitiatory inscription in Arabic script; however, it is hard to tell if the person in Vilnius who wore it knew the meaning of the inscription.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the staff of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania for the photographs and the drawing. We are also grateful to both the late Professor Juan A. Souto (University Complutense in Madrid), who passed away so unexpectedly and prematurely, and to Dr Federico Corriente, professor emeritus at the University of Saragossa, for their advice and help.

References

- ALEKSEEVA, T.I., BUZHILOVA, A.P., VINNIKOV, A.Z., VOLKOV, I.B., KOZLOVSKAIA, M.V., LEBEDINSKAIA, G.B., MEDNIKOVA, M.B., TSYBIN, M.B., 2002. *Novokhar'kovskii mogil'nik epokhi Zolotoi Ordı*. Voronezh: Izdatel'stvo Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta.
- AVIŽINIS, D., DOLINSKAS, V., STRIŠKIENĖ, Ė., eds. 2010. *Lietuvos didžiųjų kunigaikščių rūmai Vilniaus Žemutinėje pilyje. Istorija ir rinkiniai. Albumas. In: Lietuvos didžiųjų kunigaikščių rūmų albumai*, I tomas. Vilnius: Nacionalinis muziejus, Pilių tyrimo centras "Lietuvos pilys".
- BATŪRA, R., 1975. *Lietuva tautų kovoje prieš Aukso Ordą. Nuo Batu antplūdžio iki mūšio prie Mėlynųjų Vandenių*. Vilnius: Mintis.
- FYODOROV-DAVYDOV, G.A., 1978. Braslet s nadpis'iu s Selitrennogo gorodishcha. *Sovetskaia arkheologia*, 2, 286-288.
- FYODOROV-DAVYDOV, G.A., 1984. *The Culture of the Golden Horde Cities*. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- JANSSON, I., 1988. Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien. *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Commission*, 69, 564-647.
- JUNOT, B., ed. 2010. *Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum. Masterpieces of Islamic Art. Catalogue*. Berlin: Nicolaische Verlags-buchhandlung GmbH.
- KUNCEVIČIUS, A., TAUTAVIČIUS, A., URBANAVIČIUS, V., eds. 1995. *Vilniaus žemutinės pilies rūmai, 3 (1990-1993 metų tyrimai)*. Vilnius: Pilių tyrimo centras "Lietuvos pilys".
- MILWRIGHT, M. 2003. Modest Luxuries: Decorated Lead-Glazed Pottery in the South of Bilad al-Sham (Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries). *Muqarnas*, 20, 85-111.
- NOONAN, T. S., 1980. Andalusian Umayyad dirhams from Eastern Europe. *Acta numismatica*, 10, 80-91.
- PASZKIEWICZ, B., 2007. The earliest Lithuanian coins: vingt ans après. Part I: the first decade. *Numizmatika*, 6. Metraštis 2005, 9-48.
- REMECAS, E., 2002. Numizmatiniai radiniai iš Vilniaus žemutinės pilies valdovų rūmų teritorijos. *In: Archeologiniai tyrinėjimai Lietuvoje 2001 metais*. Vilnius: Diemedžio leidykla, 261-266.
- STEPONAVIČIENĖ, V., 2007. Lietuvos valdovo dvaro prabanga XIII a. viduryje – XVI a. pradžioje. Vilnius: Versus Aureus.

Received: 28 September 2010; Revised: 11 October 2011;
Accepted: 20 December 2011.

Ieva Rėklaitytė
University of Saragossa
Department of Antiquity Studies
P. Cerbuna, 12
50009 Saragossa, Spain
E-mail: ieva@unizar.es

Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo
Washington University in St Louis
Department of History
Campus Box 1062
One Brookings Drive
St Louis, MO 63130-4899, USA
E-mail: bboloix@artsci.wustl.edu

Eglė Zaveckienė
National Museum
The Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania
Katedros Square 4, LT-01143 Vilnius, Lithuania
E-mail: e.montvilaite@valdovurumai.lt

APYRANKĖ IŠ AUKSO ORDOS TERITORIJOS, RASTA LIETUVOS VALDOVŲ RŪMUOSE

**IEVA RĖKLAITYTĖ,
BÁRBARA BOLOIX-GALLARDO,
EGLĖ ZAVECKIENĖ**

Santrauka

Straipsnio objektas – iš vario lydinio pagaminta apyrankė su arabišku įrašu, rasta archeologinių tyrinėjimų metu Vilniaus Žemutinės pilies Valdovų rūmų rūsyje G 1993 m. (2 pav.; V: 1–2 iliustr.).

Trapus papuošalas pagamintas iš plonos vario lydinio skardos, jo galus puošia stilizuotos liūtų fizionomijos, per patį arabiško įrašo vidurį išpaustas ornamentas vadinamas „laimės mazgu“. Ilgą laiką apyrankė nesulaukė didesnio tyrinėtojų dėmesio, nors jos nuotraukos buvo publikuotos keletą kartų, nemėginta radinį perskaityti ar tiksliau datuoti.

Detaliau patyrinęjus vilniškę apyrankę paaiškėjo, kad analogiški rankų papuošalai randami visoje Aukso ordos teritorijoje – nuo Rytų Europos iki Centrinės Azijos, datuojami XIII–XV a., t. y. per visą Aukso ordos gyvavimo laikotarpį (1 pav.). Apyrankės su įrašais galėjo būti dėvimos kaip amuletai. Įrašai, linkintys laimės ir sėkmės, – gana dažni viduramžių islamo pasaulyje. Jais buvo išrašomi ne tik papuošalai, bet ir namų apyvokos reikmenys: žvakidės, įvairūs indai. Įdomu paminėti, kad Aukso ordos meistrai, gaminę matricas apyrankėms spausti, dažnai buvo neraštingi ir pridarydavo klaidų. Ši aplinkybė dažnai apsunkina įrašų dešifravimą ir jų interpretacijas. Vilniaus Žemutinėje pilyje rastos apyrankės įrašą siūloma skaityti taip:

[Al-‘izz] al-dā’im wa-l-‘umr al-[sālim] wa-l-iqbāl –
Amžina [šlovė] ir [ilgaamžis] gyvenimas ir klestėjimas.

Daiktavardis *gyvenimas* „al-sālim“ taip pat gali būti verčiamas kaip *sėkmingas* ar *ilgas*. Apyrankių su tokiu pat įrašu ir gamybai naudojant panašią matricą rasta ir kituose Aukso ordos archeologiniuose objektuose – gyvenvietėse ir kapinyuose.

Remiantis analogais ir kultūrinio sluoksnio stratigrafija, Vilniuje rastą apyrankę galima datuoti XIV a. antrąja puse – XV a. pradžia. Galima manyti, kad papuošalas į Žemutinės pilies teritoriją pateko kartu su variniu chano Džanibeko (1342–1357) pulu, tačiau ar šie radiniai yra karo grobis, ar atkeliavo prekybos keliu, telieka tik spėlioti.