

A LEAD SEAL OF THE ARCHBISHOP GEORGE OF PLISKA (886-889)
FOUND IN THE CAPITAL OF KOTSEL

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First I will mention what the seal is about. There are two groups of seals known as the seals of archbishop George of Bulgaria.

In the first group on the obverse of the seals there is a half-length figure of the Virgin facing, with the Child before her; she wears nimbus of dots, chiton and maphorion; her hands are placed on the Infant's nimbus. Christ wears cross behind head, chiton and himation. On either sides of the image there is an engraved cross instead of titles; and there is an inscription in Greek over the image: + ΘΚΕΡΟΗΘ'ΤWСWΔ8ΛW.

On the revers of the seals there is a five-line inscription: + ΓЄW | PΓTWAPX | IЄΠICKOΠ | WPOVΛΓA | PIAС

When we connect the texts from both sides of the seal we could read the following:

+ Θεοτόκε βοήθ(ει) τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Γεωργίῳ ἀρχιεπισκόπῳ
Βουλγαρίας.

In translation: “Holy Mother, help your slave George, archbishop of Bulgaria.”

There are 11 copies of the first group which attest that fact. They were found in different settlements in Bulgaria of today, Istanbul, Athens and some others¹.

In the second group of seals on the obverse is presented the Virgin Hodegetria, standing, three-quarter right, holding the Infant Christ on her l. arm, her r. hand touches His feet; she wears nimbus, chiton and maphorion, whose hem hangs down from her l. arm; her r. knee is bent slightly forward. Christ wears nimbus cross, chiton and himation; r. hand extended in benediction; attitude of l., indistinct. There is an inscription over the image: + ΘЄTOKEPONHΘЄITWCWΔ8ΛW

On the revers of the seal there is the same five-line inscription, as it is above: +ΓЄW | PΓTWAPX | HЄΠICKO | ΠWPOVΛ | ΓAPIAС

+ Θεοτόκε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Γεωργίῳ ἀρχιεπισκόπῳ
Βουλγαρίας.

In translation: “Holy Mother, help your slave George, archbishop of Bulgaria.”

¹ Jordanov 2001, nos. 133-140; Jordanov 2003, nos. 140a-c.

There are two copies that attest that fact, found in Pliska and the village of Ovcharovo, the region of Turgovishte².

In the published corpus of presentations on the medieval Bulgarian seals I took it for granted that: the archbishop of Bulgaria who represents these seals could be identified with the Bulgarian bishop George, who was mentioned several times in the letters of pope John VIII. The Bulgarian bishop George was ordained as bishop of Beograd – one Sergius. These seals dated back as follows: the first group of seals dated back from 877 to 886, the second group of seals – 886-889.

A seal from the second group of the Bulgarian archbishop George of Pliska was found in Zalavar (Blatnograd) or in German Mosaburg (Mosapurc), the capital of Blatna principality few years ago.

The finding of the lead seal of that superior Bulgarian prelate in Prince Kotsel's capital which is undoubtedly connected with the mission of St. Methodius and his students, quite naturally stimulates our interest.

We could find the original publication of that monument published in 2001. In the collection of presentations *Paradisum plantavit* with a subtitle *Benedict monasteries in medieval Hungary*³. The molivdovul was found during the so called versiget excavations and is now preserved in Balaton museum in the town of Kesthej, inventory no. 2000.24.1.

The author of the original publication, who is an unknown researcher for me, Kish Etele, didn't have the full set of data and information about that kind of seals and especially the data from the last finds, but generally speaking the father V. Laurent's opinion prevails – the identification of George, archbishop of Bulgaria known from the seals as George monk and synkellos of Bulgaira, whose seals were in Cyrillic.

The finds from Zalavar were discussed in detail by the outstanding Hungarian professor Imre Tot who specialized Bulgarian studies. He carefully examined the find, its parallels and dating and quite naturally asked himself the question when the seal first appeared in Zalavar and whom it was addressed to /concerning the correspondence⁴.

He agreed with me about the dating and identification with bishop George mentioned in the letter of pope John VII but in his attempt to make a connection with the seal and the possible receiver in the monastery St. Adorjan in Zalavar he got into difficult position and suggested that the dating of the seal should be corrected – before the year 874.

His considerations are the following: Methodius lived in the court of Kotsel from 869 to 871, as bishop of Panonia and archbishop of Sirmium. After 871 he was a captive of the Frank clergy. In 873 he was set free and left for Moravia. At the same time we should bear in mind that in 873-874 the Germans

² Jordanov 2001, nos. 141-142.

³ Takacs 2000, 61.

⁴ Tot 2002, 10.

dethroned Kotsel and that was the end of the independent Blatna principality. Panonia was set again under Zaltzburg domination and the liturgies in Slavonic in Kotsel's capital were forbidden.

As prof. Tot dated the seal of Archbishop George before 874, he accepted the fact that the letter of the Bulgarian prelate reached its destination during Methodius's absence and it was kept in the archpresbiterian archive. It did not make any sense, stated prof. Tot after 874 the archbishop of Bulgaira to send a letter to Kotsel's court.

Without being absolutely sure of his hypothesis, prof. Tot ends its presentation with the following words: "the mystery connected with the seal from Zalavar, is still unrevealed."

Within the framework of the present announcement I will try to clarify some aspects about that important find.

First I learned about the seal of Zalavar in the beginning of November, 2001 at a symposium in Athens "Byzantium as oikumene". Among the participants in the symposium there was a young Hungarian colleague who told me a seal of a Bulgarian archbishop was found in Hungary. My efforts to get some information from my colleagues from Budapest and the Hungarian cultural institute in Sofia were in vain. Again, at the beginning of November but in 2002 I visited the Institute of Slav studies in Moscow and gave my book on the Bulgaian seals to the library of the institute. Among the associates in the institute I met Anna Kuznetsova, who immediately identified the seal of archbishop George of Bulgaria in my book and said that as a student she had taken part in the excavation works in Zalavar, the place where the other copy of the same kind was found.

It was also an interesting fact the coincidence that after I came back from Moscow I found a copy of Prof. Tot's paper, which was unknown for me until that moment. It was left for me by Iliya Pehlivanov – editor-in-chief in "Za buk vite" newspaper.

I have come to the conclusion from my experience that the events just happen no matter what our wishes and interests are and we simply have to wait for a while.

Soon after I came back from Moscow, I received two letters from Anna Kuznetsova. From the second letter (November, 10, 2002) I learned that she was in touch with Agnes Ritok, an archeologist, who was a head in the excavations in Zalavar and she wrote in return that nobody really knew in what circumstances the seal was found. The story, due to Anna's words, turned into a detective one. A certain peasant who brought the seal had said that he had found the seal in his corn field. That person didn't appear again; perhaps he might have been a treasure-hunter or maybe he might have had some other concerns. Soon after that my Hungarian colleagues sent me an illustration and I am deeply grateful for that. I can summarize from the illustration that the molibdovul is part of the second group of seals (that was constituted neither by the publisher nor by professor Tot) and is printed with one and the same bulloterion in our two copies.

In order to answer professor Tot's questions – what is the relation between the seal and the medieval Zalavar (Blatnograd) we must be certain in its authenticity and that it was really found in Zalavar. From the illustration I could hardly say if it is authentic or fake; but if it is a copy that means the original has not been found yet.

If you admit that the seal is authentic, really found in the region of Zalavar how we could really explain its presence there and come over prof. Imre Tot's concerns.

I will start with the fact that group of seals dated after 886. St. Cyril and Methodius's students came to Pliska most probably in the spring of 886. They were kindly welcomed and started their educational work in the boundaries of the Bulgarian state⁵.

What was the connection between their arrival in Bulgaria and the letter that the Bulgarian archbishop sent to Zalavar.

There are different speculations on that. But the most probable is that after the arrival of the students and their cordial welcome in Pliska, they could have informed the Bulgarian ruler that in Zalavar monastery a fellow-companion of theirs was imprisoned there. Logically, the Bulgarian ruler Boris-Michael I (856-889) could have asked the Bulgarian archbishop George to write a letter to his spiritual brother, the abbot of Zalavar monastery. Offering a ransom, some kind of exchange or of something of the kind.

Another hypothesis was developed by Dr. P. Georgiev, who connects the seal of Zalavar with the work of the Bulgarian church and state which tried to gain the support of the main figures in the Slavonic enlightenment in Bulgaria.

Practically everything is possible. The more hypotheses the greater possibility of finding the truth. Unfortunately we could not be absolutely certain how it was found.

⁵ KBE. 1998, 632-650



Pliska



Ovcharov



L1



L1

ZALAVAR

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