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The Gold “Sandals”

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The specific burial rites and the extremely rich grave goods in several necropoleis in the south-central part of the Balkans (Trebenishte, Sindos, Beranci, Chalkidiki, near Pella - Archontiko), in the Western Rhodope Mountains (according to oral evidence about a gold mask found in that region) and, more recently, also from the region of Kazanluk, attract strongly the attention of researchers. The most remarkable and the richest graves in these necropoleis are dated to the brief period of time between 540 and 500 BC, with the exception of the grave in the Svetitsata (The Saint) tumulus near Kazanluk, dated to the beginning of the 4th century BC. They are characterised by the diversity of burial practices represented through models of thrones, tables, chariots and other objects of cult scenes, the high-quality and artistic bronze, the silver sets, etc.

A special place in the burials is reserved for the gold masks, “gloves”, “sandals” and pectorals. Through the precious metal they symbolise the most important elements of the body of the deceased - the face, the palm, the foot and the chest. There is a growing conviction that these necropoleis, albeit territorially scattered, belonged to the same population, with markedly canonised burial practices and a specific social, royal-priestly status (Соколовска В. 1997; Teodosiev 1998, 363, Fig. 20; Гергова 2003).

Earlier studies on the genesis of this culture and the ethnic belonging of its carriers outline several cultural foci from where similar finds originate (gold masks, sandals, gloves, pectorals, furniture, etc.). All of them are considerably earlier, by more than a millennium, compared to Trebenishte and analogous necropoleis. These are the Cretan-Mycenaean and Egyptian culture to the South (Filow 1931; Фол В. 1991, 1, 50-58; Битракова Грозданова 1985, 131; Соколовска 1997, 86; Кузманов, Филипова 2004; Stibbe 2002; Ogdenova 2004) and the Incrusted Ware Culture from the Late Bronze Age along the Danube - to the North (Гергова 2003). Therefore, the link between them, the continuity and the mechanism of the preservation of the traditions of these elitist burials, in view of the existence of such a considerable hiatus in time, is of particular interest.

Different hypotheses have been launched on the ethnic identification of the bearers of this royal-priestly culture in the Balkans with the Enchelei, the Paiones, the Macedonians, etc. (Соколовска 1997, 88-90). Recently the identification of the bearers of that culture with the Thracian tribe of the Sintoï was also proposed (Гергова 2003;



Fig.1

Gergova 2006). This identification with the Thracian Sintoi, sorcerers and seafarers, whose language was the mystical language of the Island of Samothrace, provides additional opportunities to clarify the cultural interactions of the population of the Balkans and the Mediterranean region in the second half of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, as well as the mechanism of the preservation of the millennial burial rites.

Many researchers perceive in the similarity of the Thracian burial practices of elitist nature with those from the East an echo of earlier contacts between the Thracian tribes and the East, mentioned in the ancient authors, in myths and legends. Thus, for example, according to the narrative of Diodorus (I 18, 20, 3), when Osiris set off to conquer the world, Macedon, as his son and brother of Anubis, received the land that was later to be called Macedonia. Herodotus (II 103) and Strabo (I 3, 21), on the other hand, mention a march to Thrace of the Pharaohs Sesostri and Psammetichus at the time of the 12th Dynasty, who conquered it and left their names carved in stone

(Соколовска 1997, 64). According to the legend, Orpheus, the religious reformer, ruler of Odrysia and Macedonia, also spent some time in Egypt (Фол 1986, 79).

The Sintoi indisputably participated in the migration processes and sea voyages of the so-called “sea peoples”, some of which penetrated into Egypt, Syria and Palestine (Герова 2003, with literature). These contacts also had consequences in the sphere of the religious beliefs. Their echoes can be found in the legends about Osiris, Macedon and Orpheus, and are reflected in burial rites. The presence of the Sintoi can be perceived more specifically on the basis of archaeological evidence in the Pontos, in the Mediterranean region and further to the East in Hindustan in the late 2nd and early 1st millennium BC (Герова 2003; Gergova 2006). That was the time of the appearance of the Indo-Aryans in Northern India and of a prolonged and controversial interpenetration with the indigenous population and culture - from a state of total isolation to military and economic relations, influences of beliefs and cults, strengthening of the class and caste system, etc. (Богнард - Левин 1981). It is necessary to recall that the Sintoi from the Northern Black Sea coast were also considered to be the carriers of the Indian speech and culture (Герова 2003; Gergova 2006).

In the context of these cultural and historical processes, the gold “sandals” evoked considerable interest. Among the gold symbolic objects from the necropoleis in the Balkans, they impress with their extremely limited number, as well as with the fact that for the time being they are known only from the necropolis of Trebenishte (Цермановић

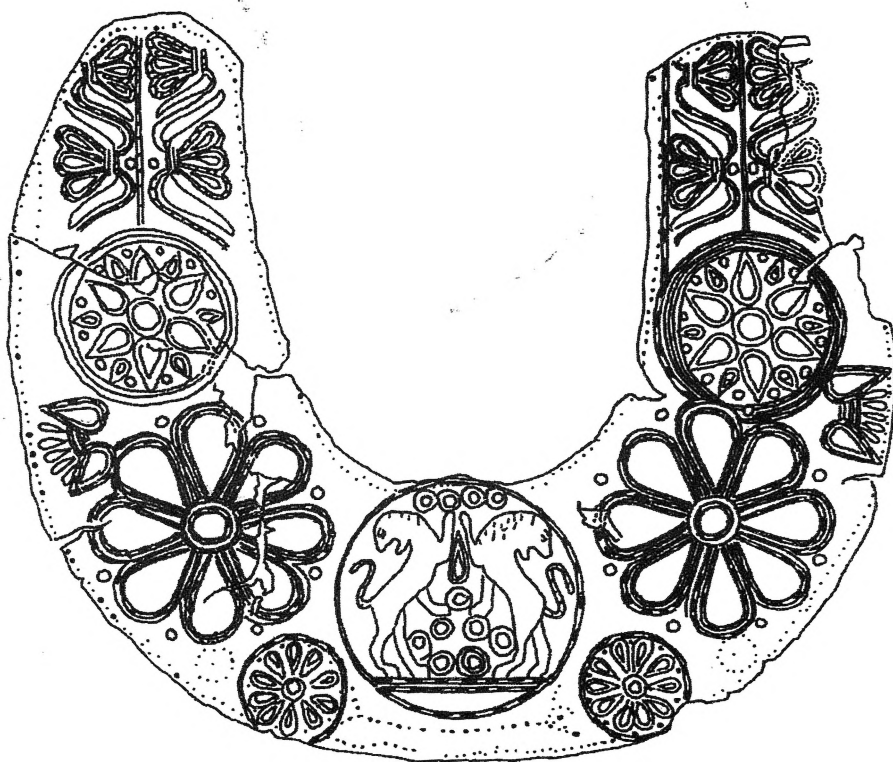


Fig. 2

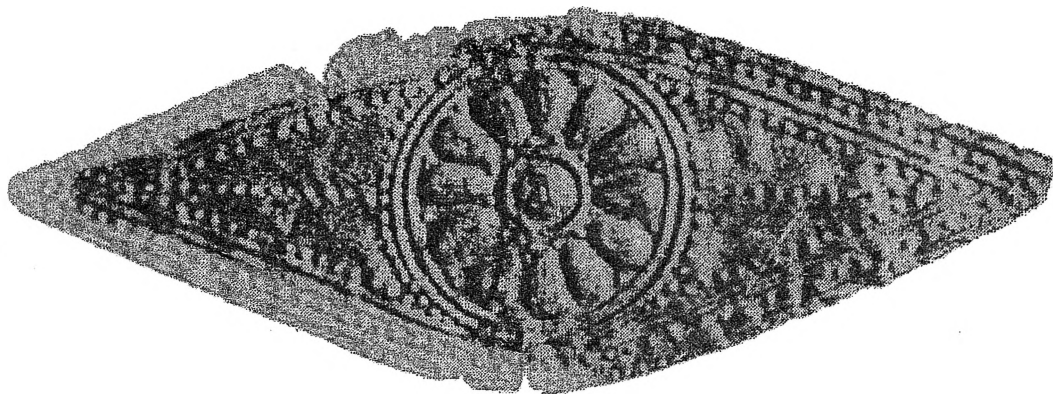


Fig. 3

1956). In grave VIII the "sandals" are made of a thin gold plate and are decorated with a hammered Gorgo, below which there are two sphinxes and two aquatic birds above ovules and a meander (Соколовска 1997, 142, Figs. 70-71) (Fig. 1). Other badly fragmented sandals have been discovered in graves X and XII (Вулић 1931, 7, 4, 5). They are decorated with hexagonal or octagonal rosettes and palmettes, and are framed by an interwoven ornament. The same ornament also features on the gold right "glove" with a gold ring on the fourth finger from Grave I (Соколовска 1997, 142, Fig. 69). The palm is decorated with a round embossed spiral ornament. Some of the sandals have pearl ornaments stippled in their periphery, which probably suggests that they were attached to the sole (Цермановић 1956).

Most researchers dwell predominantly on the ornamentation of the gold objects and on their symbolism. Filow examines the apotropeic significance of the image of the Gorgo and of the Sphinx as necrophilax, and accepts the exclusively burial function of the gold objects. This thesis is supported by the researchers after him as well. The decoration on the sandals, pectorals, gloves and masks forms a circle of selected motifs with a specific symbolism, which was probably mandatory for their decoration. They comprise the images of the Gorgo and of the heraldic images of the lions (Fig. 2) and Sphinxes, connected with the chthonic deities, of rosettes (Fig. 3), palmettes, the meandres, the intertwined ornaments, etc. (Filow 1931; Соколовска 1997; Ognenova 2004) (Fig. 3). However, this symbolism was superimposed over the symbolism of the actual foot or shoe.

In ancient Egypt, in prehistoric Europe and in ancient Greece, the shoe and the solar barque are connected with the two roads leading to the world beyond by land or by water. The foot appeared as a separate symbol on prehistoric monuments in Europe in the remotest antiquity (Цермановић 1956, 307). It was also known from stone stelae dated to the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Thracian lands. The foot became the symbol of many and varied deities. The earliest cited examples of prints of divine feet in a temple of a deity are those from the 10th century BC Ayn Dara temple in Syria (Qualiotti 1998, 14).

The proposed identification of the bearers of the "Trebenishte" culture with the Sintoi, with their historical fate and cultural characteristics, tempts us to propose to interpret the gold "sandals" through comparative observations and with cult monuments from India, more specifically with the feet of the Buddha.

According to tradition, when the Buddha arrived in Northern India, he left behind precisely his footprint. In addition, although India knows the footprints of different deities, his footprints were distinguished by their unique ornamental system of symbols. Buddha's feet are considerably more stylised, and they were depicted shorter or longer depending on the power of the faith of the concrete individual (Qualiotti 1998, 24-25). Compared to them, the "sandals" from Trebenishte repeat the shape of the foot. Buddha's feet always feature the chakra, the wheel with a thousand spikes associated with the sunrays. Pada means at the same time leg and sunray. The solar deity is depicted as a walking deity. This is why, the wheel, as a solar symbol, represents one of the characteristic signs that are intended to mark the footprints of deities, great rulers, heroes and wise men. The ornamental motifs and their combinations on Buddha's footprint are an enormous but precise number - 108 (Qualiotti 1998, 14, 24-25). They are remarkably comparable to those on the gold sandals from Trebenishte - the gold objects from the elite Balkan necropoleis. Buddha's footstep features, in addition to the chakra, other solar symbols as well: rosette and palmette. In Trebenishte the palmette is not known as an ornament on sandals or gloves, but it is one of the principal motifs on some of the pectorals (Соколовска 1997, 143, Fig. 72). Another ornament, particularly characteristic of Buddha's feet, is the so-called "Omega-like" motif, to which Qualiotti (1998) devotes particular attention. In the search for parallels and prototypes of this motif, the author has turned to a 7th century BC Etruscan decoration with Ionian influence. Asking herself the question whether it is possible to speak about influence of the Greco-Etruscan world in India, the author nevertheless decides to rule out this possibility due to the hiatus of nearly five centuries between the Etruscan and the earliest Indian monument with such a decoration (Qualiotti 1998, 168, Fig. 78).

The question raised was intertwined in an interesting way in the issues studied connected with the ritual traditions and the mechanisms of their dissemination, which have been preserved over the millennia.

The Omega-like appliqué cited as a parallel by Qualiotti is one of the numerous examples of the iconography of the Great Goddess from the Late Bronze to the Hellenistic Age, which was widespread in the Mediterranean region. Her Hellenistic iconography is known from the mosaics in the palace of Vergina, from the Sveshtari tomb, from Scythian monuments of toreutics, like the plaque from Kul Oba, from Typho's tomb in Etruria (Мапазов 1984, 28-38). It is an example of an exceptionally prolonged existence. The Omega-like ornament, combined with a chakra and two swastikas, six-petalled rosettes, double axes and concentric circles are the characteristic elements in the decoration of the feet of Buddhapadi, e.g., from Amaravati (Qualiotti 1998, 24-25, Figs. 6, 7, p. 65, Figs. 41, 42). In this way, the ornamental pattern on the gold objects from the rich necropoleis dated to the end of the 6th century BC in the southern-central territories of the Balkans and that on Buddha's step - his most significant symbol, demonstrate an interesting and maybe accidental similarity.

Buddha's step is not only the first evidence of his appearance in Northern India. The last sign left by him before he set off to Paliputra and entered the state of nirvana were again his steps (Qualiotti 1998, 162). From a philosophical point of view, Buddha's step is the last trace of his presence on earth and it is the boundary between the visible and the invisible Buddha (Snellgrove 1978, after Qualiotti 1998, 162).

Legends recall that even if artists succeeded in seeing the Buddha, they were unable to catch his features. This required a magic form of transmission and of contact with his shadow. The model of the Great Miracle linked with the transcendental personality of Buddha Shalyamuni, or of the notion about him, is the magic dismemberment and return to unity. Buddhology is the perfect replica of the dismemberment of Pradjapati or of Purusha, and his reconstitution in the image of Agni. Buddha's step is transformed from an anionic presentation of the Buddha into a cult object in itself (Qualiotti 1998, 162).

The interpretation of the gold objects from the elitist necropoleis from Southwestern Thrace devotes the greatest attention to funerary masks. The covering of the face with a gold mask and the solar symbolism of the metal are connected with the heroisation and deification of the deceased individual and with his transformation into an anthropodaimon who is to return from the world beyond. In the cult of Dionysos, the god's masks are perceived as sacred objects - symbol and incarnation of the god himself. The participants in the Orphic ritual connected with the dismembering of Zagreus are also wearing masks (Теодосиев 1998, 360-361, with literature). The Thracian beliefs and burial practices repeat the model of dismemberment, re-burial and immortalisation (Герова 1986, 2003). It is noteworthy that both the long explored graves of Trebenishte and the recently discovered grave with a gold mask from the Svetitsata [The Saint] tumulus near Sheynovo (Китов 2004) suggest that the burial rites there comprised re-burying of parts of the skeleton.

The gold "sandals" occurring much less frequently than the masks probably had the same significance and even emphasised more strongly the sacred nature of the buried individual.

Indian terminology distinguishes three categories of worshipped objects. The first, known as Sariraka, is connected with the body and includes the relics or separate parts of the sacred individual. The second - Paribhogika (serving the needs) - includes objects belonging to the saint, such as items of clothing, bowls, chairs or thrones, and even the bodhi tree. The third group is Uddesika (illustrating, explaining, marking) and it comprises the most important symbols: the wheel, the palmette, the trisula as a symbol of the Tree of Life, the Omega-like motif, etc. Researchers perceive behind this diversity of symbols and their different significance the perfect unity of the ideas of Buddhism, which evolve in their diversity in a remarkably broad spectrum (Qualiotti 1998, 140).

The preservation for millennia of a model of burial rites and of their elements, subordinated to definite religious norms and symbolism, suggests that once created, they were extremely constant and were probably disseminated together with the religious notions that they expressed. The gold "sandals" from Trebenishte complement the notion about the unity of the burial rites and the symbolism of the objects, determined by the idea about the immortality of the soul. Their interpretation through the prism of

the Orphic death and of the myth about Dionysos-Zagreus is possible and similar also through Buddha's death. It allows thinking also about a much closer connection between the Thracian lands and Hindustan in terms of ideas during the early centuries of the penetration of the Indo-Aryans and the dissemination of Buddha's teaching there.

This hypothesis gives grounds to think about the common roots of these two teachings in their earliest phase, before each of them took its new path in the new territories and ethnic-cultural environment.

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