

Research

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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TRADITIONAL JEWELRY ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DANUBE RIVER

Pavlin CHAUSHEV

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo

Abstract. From the Ancient times Danube River acts as stabile and almost uncontested Northern border of Bulgarian lands. For a very long period it divides different populations speaking different languages, developing different cultures and political units. In the same times Danube River unites it is both banks by cheap and easy to manage transportation. More than this Danube as a liquid border connects populations from the both banks with Central Europe serving as a vehicle for people, goods, money and ideas. The aim of this article is to explore one particular segment of culture connections - the evolution of traditional jewelry from 19th to early 20th century in the region of Northern Bulgaria and Southern Romania. The focus is on snake or dragon motifs carved on belt buckles originated from both sides of the border. This

and related beliefs and cult practices reveals close cultural and commercial ties crossing Danube River. During my research I came across material that showed that those motifs were found in several Balkan countries (Serbia and Greece). The decoration of this traditional jewelry is typical for the Orient, but it is common among the Christian population of the Balkan Peninsula. It shows that in those times the Danube River was acting mostly as natural, not as a political or cultural border.

Keywords: belt buckles, border, dragon, snake, folklore, Romania, Bulgaria

Since ancient times the Danube River serves as a stable and almost undisturbed northern border of the Bulgarian lands. For a long period, it separates different nationalities speaking different languages, which form different cultural and political alliances. Meanwhile Danube River unites both sides of the river and helps to create a cheap and accessible river transport. Moreover, the Danube River has a role of water border that connects the peoples on both sides of the river with other countries of Central Europe – the source of new peoples, goods, money and ideas.

The aim of this chapter is to examine a specific part of these cultural connections - the evolution of the traditional metal jewelry from the beginning of 19th to the beginning of 20th century in Northern Bulgaria and southern Romania, and particularly on one type of belt buckles, I found during my study, with an unusual decoration. These unusual belt buckles provoked me to start this study.

Belt buckles are ones of the most popular traditional female jewelry ornaments in northern Bulgaria and southern Romania. I will stress on the images of a snake and dragon on the belt buckles of this region.

The belt buckles and other jewelry are both part of traditional costume of women. Large belt buckles keeps the womb in heavy field work and during pregnancy. Besides its purely practical application, this jewelry has deep symbolic meaning. They occupy a central place in the female costume. Traditionally they are worn only by married women, once they receive it as a gift at engagement or wedding (during girlhood decorations consist mainly of beads). In the time of pregnancy, they serve as protection against evil forces as belt buckles and they are also an amulet that protects the reproductive organs of women. So their decoration was directly related to this apotropaic (protective) function of female clothing. The belt buckles serve as guardian of life and protect from evil spirits (Петрева, 1926). A popular belief says that if on the buckles is displayed Christian symbols, the protective force was doubled.

One of the most unusual images that occur on the belt buckles from northern Bulgaria and southern Romania is the image of a snake or dragon. These symbols have both secular and religious significance. The snake is one of the few genuine animals whose image for millennia is a central to the art of many nations. Many pictures of snakes were found on various monuments in our country and in neighboring Balkan countries (Duicu, 2012, pp. 157-159). Similarity in these images is very large, which suggests the presence in this time period of strong cultural ties between the peoples on the Balkans. These ties were gradually discontinued as a result of the forming of new political borders in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century. Over the time, and depending on where the snake is depicted, amends its symbolic meaning. Snakes were placed on stone walls and fountains, on plates at the entrance of churches and burial stones. The real or stylized image of snake appears on traditional wooden items - robin, rocker arms, bridal chests, shepherd's crooks, and on small cauldrons (mencheta), Christmas ritual breads, and embroidery and fabric cushions. Over the centuries is preserved a story for a

struggle between a bird and a snake, and this is the reason they are used as a part of the decoration of the iconostasis, fountains and church buildings. Masters of metal jewelry - necklaces, brooches, belt buckles, and bracelets also include the snake image in the decoration of their products. One of the most common models belt buckles on both sides of the river Danube represents a serpent, which is located on the oval cast buckles made of alloy with little silver content (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Belt buckle depicting a stylized dragon (Lamia) (Duicu, 2012 p.159)

The snake is located in the front section of the field. The head is smooth, tapering forward; there is also an engraved eye and curved horn on top. Body along the entire length is equally thick, slightly convex, covered with scales. It bends, forming wheel and ends with a smooth triangle at the end of the belt buckle. Under the head of the snake is located plant with

rounded leaves - three short stalks. In other models belt buckles the serpent's head is shaped like a beak, from which comes trifoliate plant. The body is arranged in the same manner as in the above discussed sample - bends, forming wheel tapering towards the tail ends drop wise. In another leaf – shaped, forged belt buckles made of copper silver alloy, heart on the surface takes the image of a snake. The body is thick, scaly, slightly curved, bent at the front and tapered towards the tail (Цветкова, 1991). The head is smooth, with a great eye and wide open mouth from which are coming out branches with leaf colors. Under the snake remain two folded legs with dragon paws. Sometimes the snake is placed in the center of the field. The head is directed to the buckle and the body unevenly thickened, forming wheel and ends with a highly tapered tail end of the belt buckle. The head is small, round with wide open mouth, out of which forked twig. There are also images where the snake is standing on two legs like twisted loop. The first head from this belt buckle is in the normal position and the other is curved upwards. From wide open mouth are going out plants with thick stems with large leaves and flowers. The top of the serpent's head is curved and ends with balls and rear heads have horns. Sometimes the story is varied. In the middle on a convex circular rosette is forged bird wholesale body on rough thick legs apart. A bird medallion is covered by two snakes, their heads are found in large blooming flower. The bodies of birds form dense arcs, equally broad, slightly tapered at the tail with scales. Their heads are smooth and flat, they have oval eyes and their beaks are opened.

There are also very interesting images of nacreous belt buckles. These are the most expensive models belt buckles that are often decorated with filigree. This technology is made with the help of band forged lace of silver and sometimes it is gold- plated. On pearl tile sometimes is cut a vase (on the bottom of the buckle) with two curved, symmetrical handles. In the vase are placed four herbaceous branches and in the smooth area between them is de-

picted bird drained neck. On the neck of the vase lies two-headed snake. In the mouths of the two heads there is a trifoliate plant with a short stem. In the church museum in Sofia are kept other belt buckles decorated with mother of pearl. They, unlike the others are circular nacre (Fig. 2). The center is located nacre image of a winged dragon, which is surrounded by rich floral decoration.



Fig. 2. Belt buckle depicting a stylized dragon (Lamia) from the collection of Church Museum, Sofia (Ангелов, 2001)

During my research I came across and found a very unusual kind of belt buckles that have a depiction of a winged dragon (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, preserved is only one belt buckle. It is made of silver and has a form of Indian palmette with measuring 10.5 cm to 8 cm. in the widest parts. Unlike most primitive images, this belt buckle is a master piece with a finer make of the

individual elements. The artistry is very precise, which suggests that this work is made by a very experienced master goldsmith. The Belt Buckle is made by the bilateral chipping and cutting the image by the means of special tools for hammering the metal (chikanki) and subjecting the pitch (a mixture of asphalt and crushed brick). Transmission of additional decoration after hammering the main elements, the background in between them is cut out, thus creating a beautiful filigrane decoration. The inscription on the side edge of the belt buckle says "Vetrentsi", this name is of a village, nearby Veliko Tarnovo (Fig. 4). This is one of the few cases where we have the exact location of the object.



Fig. 3. Belt buckle depicting a stylized dragon (Lamia); personal collection of Pavlin Chaushev

The inscription is slightly indented in the metal, which suggests that it is placed later. However, it is a valuable evidence of the location of the belt

buckle. The image of the buckles is very interesting. In the center lies an image of a dragon. The image has the shape of a circular medallion, which is lined with a wiper-shaped decoration, meant to distinguish and separate from the rest of the decoration. Around the central image is located a very rich decoration of lush vegetation – poppy clumps, bouquets of flowers, and winding vegetation. During my research I found another piece of jewelry from the region of Veliko Tarnovo that has very similar appearance. This is a silver casing lid of a wooden box (Fig. 5). Unfortunately, only the silver part of it reached us. The manner of the artistry and fine details are very similar, so I think it can be assumed that the two works were made by the same master goldsmith from North Bulgaria. He probably practiced his craft in Central North Bulgaria (Tarnovo, Gabrovo). The images can help in the dating of the two subjects. The iconography of the buckles is quite similar to the images on the iconostasis of churches in Gabrovo and Veliko Tarnovo. For the most part, they are dated around the middle of the 19th century. Almost similar is the image of the dragon of the royal doors of the iconostasis of the church of St. John the Baptist in Gabrovo (Fig. 6). As a result of all available data, buckles and accessories box can be dated to the period from 1850 - 1880.

The examined buckles are made of different materials, different in shape, size and technical performance. Similar to all of them is the image of a serpent, included in their ornamental decoration. It is located in the middle and situated just as intended by the artist, with no dependence on other elements. The bodies of snakes are slightly convex and rounded, with engraved scales. This model buckles is one of popular models that are found on both sides of the river. This can be demonstrated by the image of buckles that are stored in the museum of Craiova (Romania) (Fig. 7) (Duicu, 2012, p. 157).



Fig. 4. Inscription on the belt buckle depicting a stylized dragon (Lamia); personal collection of Pavlin Chaushev



Fig. 5. Silver hardware from XIX century; personal collection of Pavlin Chaushev



Fig. 6. Photo of the iconostasis gates of the church St. John the Baptist, Gabrovo (Angelov, 2001)

The beautiful body curves are giving a special grace of the posture of the iron snakes. In the fields between the heads and tails at the end of the snakes are present almost identical fan-shaped ornaments - alternating smooth concave, convex and engraved wiper shape decoration stripes last of which ended with a curved inward akant sheet. Identical pattern belt buckles are found in Northern Bulgaria (Цветкова, 1991). These spectacular "fans" that

could be described as wings protruding from the body of the snake and floral ornaments on some of the images seem to be made for compositional balance of the overall decoration.



Fig. 7. Silver belt buckle with the image of a stylized snake dragon (Duicu, 2012, p.157)

In all examined images there is a logical connection between the constituent elements of the decoration. The floral ornaments are required for the plot. For example, around the body of the snake is left a smooth free zone, and the plant ornament is not elaborated on it. There are exceptions where near the head of the snake there is one trifoliolate plant and blooming flower, in all other cases from the throats of the snakes are going out herbaceous branches with flowers, arranged according to the remaining free space. The careful consideration of the proposed mode, leads to the conclusion that any decoration

around the image of a snake is the main subject, which emphasizes the overall composition. In some samples where snakes may be merged with the rest of the decoration, the master decided to highlight a big relief Scallop. These are two actual living beings that are placed in the center of the composition (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Bronze belt buckle depicting a stylized snake dragon; personal collection of Pavlin Chaushev

Although there are few different variations of the motif "snake" ("dragon"), it is not preferred by the goldsmiths in the decoration of metal jewelry and ornaments. This can be explained by the controversial interpretation of the symbolism of the snake. According to the pagan beliefs the serpent is a protector, while in the Christian worldview it is the personification of the evil and temptation (Беновска-Събкова, 1992, p. 122).

In a study of the mythical notions of the serpent (and dragon) can be found that the most popular uses are of the Serpent Lady - patroness of the snake-house, well, treasure, vineyard or other property. This snake is a protector and should be protected. Probably silversmiths tackle display snake-guards led by their deep belief in their existence. In some samples snakes are guarding a Bird (bearer of another rich symbolism) and other two-headed snake is located on the neck of the vase as a reliable keeper of content, part of which is also a bird. In some folklore legends the dragon is of a human origin (one can become a snake through spells). The dragon has gills, legs, tail, speaks whirlwinds, to whom as long curving mountains. Dragon of a smaller type is represented as a snake. Only on two of the examined specimens the serpent (dragon) stands. In some jewelry the snake is seated on crimped legs that are smooth and elongated. In others the legs are short and thick and it rests on them to balance the two-headed snake's body. Under the bodies of snakes at the bottom of buckles are embedded stylized palmettes, which can also be attributed to the functional role of the foot. Thus, as depicted clinging to the body, they form therewith a single unit, in addition to round off the whole artistic composition. Along with the belief that "the snake has legs that lies" is spread the belief that snake creeps (trailing) since he was cursed by God for having seduced Eve.

According to the Christian religion serpent it is a symbol of evil and should be killed as the main culprit of original sin. In deed and messenger of God recommendation: newly children do not reach for the fruit of the tree of the death, but only to those of other tree that will provide them with immortality – seen through stealth and cunning (Георгиева, 1993, pp. 62-66). As a result, human beings are deprived of God's patronage and began the difficult life of mortals. The snake, although fraud, is a bundled anger of the Lord constantly rejuvenating every year and shedding its skin. Hence the widespread perception that the skin of the snake, and other parts of her body have restora-

tive, healing powers and properties, and horns bring her luck. In this direction it is not accidental the presence of a snake on the buckles firmly fastening the waist of the woman or girl. It is possible that the artist folklore consciousness ascribes some of these images or fruitful therapeutic role of patrons, guardian of women's honor, while others, on the contrary, deliberately reminiscent on the disturbed mystery of sin, lead to temptation. Perhaps between these beliefs matters the snake as a symbol of wisdom and wealth of life experience.

In Bulgarian and Balkan folklore worldview the snake occupies a very important place (Беновска-Събкова, 1992, p. 27). Perceptions of it are very mixed and contradictory. They reflect not only the unpleasant feeling of fear that awakens in each type of this animal, frightened by its deadly poison, but no doubt very old notions that can take us to the initial stages of human consciousness. Duality and contradiction in the minds of the snake are inherent in the beliefs of many nations and the Bulgarian in this respect is no exception: it is the keeper of the health, the boundaries of landed estates, it is the Healer and so on, and the snake jewelry is a lucky charm against sickness and all evil. However, it is considered a clever, cunning and deadly creature.

According to folklore beliefs and ideas, most of which have been preserved almost to the beginning of 20th century, the snake is a multifunctional being mastering cosmic and social order, which could be noticed to a full extent in the notion about the dragon. Primarily in folklore beliefs is impressive the mythologizing of the snake, which separates it from the realm of ordinary human relations – animal.

According to folklore snakes live at the ends of the earth or the underworld in a big cave. In the fall, before they leave for their underground hideouts, snakes are obliged to confess to their head snake, what they did during the summer. Snake bites of man or beast, in the minds of people is wrong and the earth brought her other snakes, it must be killed or left to die of cold.

According to these folk beliefs outlined chthonic serpent being located in close contact with the underworld and places that lead to it.

One of beliefs represents snake as a king and a queen. King has two heads, very large, with a large precious stone on the head. The Queen also has a precious stone on her head and gives orders to the behavior of snakes in the summer, and she commands that they suck the milk. According to folk concepts snake plays a role in the maintenance of the cosmic order. Huge snake holds land not to crack. It is one of the key elements that underpin the ground. Some ideas, long since faded, the snake lies on an ox, which is on the fish in the sea, and it is on the turtle; or - that the environment of the earth there is a sea in which there lives a snake as big as can be swallowed whole sail. According to medieval apocrypha "Revelation Varuh" on the big field on high mountain lying snake that is long from east to west (Петканова, 1982, p. 65).

Stooping, she sips a cubit from the sea every day and eats as hay land, "so as not to overflow the sea or be reduced. A womb is big as hell of depth and breadth. In folklore serpent is often presented as a wise and clever animal expert who knows the language of all animals, and this gift can forward it to the person by spitting in his mouth. Snake as people know all healing herbs and herbs. Her witches learn these herbs and the ability to do any miracles themselves have chicks like snakes. Many of these skills people can acquire obtain a precious stone that bears his mouth the serpent queen. Who take the stone and put it under his mouth will understand the language of all animals.

Snake occupies an important place in the medical and agro-magical practices because the popular mind its specific attributes health and fruitful role. Magical healing is the first crawl of snakes when out in the spring. So has the practice of sick people and women who want to give birth, to leave belts, towels and clothes to crawl on them snakes and throw them when they see snakes collected a ball. Magical power attributed and parts of serpent skin,

head, heart, eggs. This is probably the main reason for the display of snakes on metal jewelry and ornaments from North Bulgaria.

Snake appears as a negation of positive human beginnings. A hot snake is born because of relationship of brother and sister - Yankul and Yankinka, lately converted into stars. Some relationship exists between perceptions of the snake and death. It is believed that the snake creeps into the tomb and "drinks" the eyes of the dead man nesting in his hair. Its appearance around the tomb is considered the soul of man. The fear of the snake and its deadly effect on a person's life is reflected in a number of preventive actions and customs, with the participation of some elements of nature. Some of these rituals are attached to the spring holidays, where it is believed that snakes go out: St. 40th (March 9), Annunciation (March 25), Jeremiah (May 1). Each house also has a snake called hostess on old Bulgarian language (izhnitsa), *who protect the house* (domosharka), (kashtnitsa), (pazachka), (gluharka) and *because of chasing mice* (mishkarka). This idea was once widespread in Bulgaria, but in the middle of the 20th century it almost disappeared. It is believed that this snake sometimes appears, but is not displayed. If it appears, it is a sign of omen that something bad will happen. It lies on the prohibition to kill if you kill a snake someone in the house will surely die. It is believed that the snake keeps home from misfortune she rotates the luck of the house. It does not bite. It stays on the right side of the fireplace or in the principal foundations of the house. In general, to gain snakes favor they are leaving milk for it (Георгиева, 1993, pp. 113-120).

At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of XX century, it was served more as decorative element of aesthetic function. This semantic connotation could be clarified in view of its role in people's beliefs and worldview. Often this image has protective function. This deadly beast is compared with one of the most terrifying forces of nature. In Antiquity this image is found in many bracelets. They have snake heads widespread in the

Caucasus and the Balkans, where it spread to the Crimea. In medieval necropolises (8th -14th c.) often occur bracelets with snake heads, which should be regarded as a Thracian ancient heritage. They disappear after 14th century. Probably influenced by the dominance of the Christian worldview the snake is emerging already as a negative character. Serpent as ornament does not disappear completely from folk art. Snake and dragon are highlighted chthonic animals and serpentine always indicates proximity to land and the use of her powers. Therefore it occupies a special place in magic fertility of many nations. Fruitful function of the snake extends to human fertility. The idea of immortality and longevity of the snake is typological phenomenon. Some researchers believe this still occurs in the early stages of human history, when not knowing the law of multiplication, people were unable to explain the birth of animals such as a snake, beetle and thought that they regenerate and live forever. The view that it brings health and healing herbs makes it a major attribute of healing deities as Asclepius, Apollo, Hygiene, etc., and it takes an important place in the healing magic. The healing abilities of snake venom were known in ancient times and used skillfully. But this rational idea is intertwined with a number of views that reflect certain worldviews and social phenomena. Snake as an animal that is "born" from the ground brings fertile magical powers as any other animal. The lower world is a place that is associated with the world of the ancestors in whose favor depends on the health and welfare of their living descendants. During Middle Ages the snake is common on headers of books, except perhaps where he symbolizes wisdom. On some monuments reflected the image of the serpent as being a cosmic function. As a symbol of immortality and the afterlife snake is found on tombstones monuments. At the end of the 19th century, considered images have lost their main semantic and functional load and they were used only like a decorative ornament. This applies to metallic ornaments and decorations which depicted.

In Christianity the serpent is a symbol of evil, image of Satan that caused the original sin, or a symbol of paganism and heresy. Perhaps under the influence of Christianity there are beliefs who say that the snake must be killed, that God will forgive 40 Sins on all who kill or at least when he meets a snake should throw a stone. Imagining the snake is typological phenomenon inherent to many nations. Snake (and the same to her dragon) are basic characters in the space model and projected onto all of its component parts. Portions of this concept, albeit in a very modified form, are retained until the end of the 19th century. According to them, the snake stands as a universal classifier because it connects the three elements: Death - fertility - life. Traces of totem belief are found in the prohibition to kill a snake in the image of the serpent - patron and master, snake - Shower of deceased ancestor, snake – donor to extraordinary knowledge and fertility. According to Bulgarian folk concepts reserved by the end of 19th century, the snake stands with two opposite each other aspects, positive and negative: it is an evil force threatening human life and on the other hand is a good force that brings fertility, health, life, success. The name of the snake *god* (bozhyo) leads us to mythological identification of the snake and the bird, two contradictory images. It probably represents a stage in the transformation of beliefs about the snake and is the basis for the emergence of myth – dragon.

But whatever is the meaning embedded in the interpretation of this symbol, the Balkan goldsmiths discovered its rich decorative possibilities with the help of highly professional and fantasy decorate the most common female metal jewelry - the belt buckles. Examined images help us to better understand and rationalize the purpose and complex semantic load image of a snake and dragon on the buckles of northern Bulgaria and southern Romania. They sometimes differ in type and method of manufacture, but are all connected with religious and folk beliefs of the local population. Some of them gradually lost this sacred meaning, but continue to be replicated as a traditional orna-

ments. During my study I found identical patterns on buckles from southern Romania and northern Bulgaria. This is testimony to the close cultural and commercial ties crossing the Danube River. During my research I found additional material, which proves to me that these motifs are found also in the other Balkan countries (Serbia and Greece). This in turn shows us how wrong the modern view of the borders is. The decoration of this „typical Bulgarian jewelry can be found in many other countries“. The decoration on most part is characteristic for the Orient and occurs around the "Levant", but this does not prevent local Balkan goldsmiths, it widely used in the decoration of traditional ornaments used by the Christian population of the Balkans Peninsula. This shows us once again that in the past the Danube River is acted mostly as a natural, not as political or cultural borders.

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✉ Dr. Pavlin Chaushev
Pavlin Chaushev, PhD,
St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo
2, T. Tarnovski Str.
5003 Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria
E-Mail: chayshev_ps@yahoo.com

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