

EARLY MEDIEVAL BULGARIAN BELT SET – COMPOSITION AND FUNCTION

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Cuvinte-cheie: *piese de centură din Bulgaria, arta producției de metale, compoziție, funcție, utilitate.*

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Rezumat: *În urma răspândirii credinței creștine, centura, ca element vestimentar, a început să își piardă din caracterul său sacru și simbolic. Mai mult, chiar în Bizanț, de unde provine noul sistem religios și unde acesta a produs modificări la nivelul societății, astfel de distincții militare și elemente de vestimentație nu erau utilizate în acest fel. Tipurile de centuri bine-cunoscute pentru această perioadă erau realizate din cu totul alte materiale și într-o manieră diferită. Acestea erau confecționate din metal, prin folosirea de matrice, aveau dimensiuni mai mari, dar și decorațiuni specifice.*

De la a reprezenta o distincție militară și un simbol al apartenenței la o anumită clasă socială, piesele de centură au ajuns să se răspândească treptat și în rândul altor categorii ale populației, fapt ce este confirmat de fabricarea în masă a acestor piese. Răspândirea largă a centurii cu ornamente în cadrul populației de la începutul secolului al IX-lea a produs o schimbare în alegerea materialului de fabricație. Materialul folosit cu preponderență acum este aliajul de cupru (bronzul) și mai rar bilonul și cuprul.

Dar totuși, când s-a petrecut desacralizarea și dobândirea caracterului profan al acestor obiecte în rândul societății bulgărești? Cu certitudine putem vorbi despre acest aspect în momentul în care a început și producția lor în masă în Bulgaria medievală - între sfârșitul domniei lui Simeon cel Mare al Bulgariei (893-927) și începutul domniei lui Petru I al Bulgariei (927-969). În urma instaurării perioadei de pace, concretizată prin semnarea tratatului de pace dintre Bulgaria și Bizanț, au fost create condiții propice dezvoltării meșteșugurilor și creațiilor artistice.

Abstract: *After baptism and imposing a Christian faith, the belt begins to lose much of its sacred and symbolic character. Moreover, even in Byzantium, where the new religious system comes from and changes the whole public structure, such military distinc-*

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tions and attributes of clothing are not used in this form. The well-known belt sets of this period have different material and technology of manufacture. They are forged from metal plates on matrices, have larger dimensions and a specific ornamentation.

From being a military distinction and a symbol of belonging to a certain social class, the belt gradually began to propagate and spread among various other population categories, which is confirmed by the mass production of items for belt sets. The widespread penetration of the ornamental belt among the common people since the beginning of the 9th century has permanently produced a change in the material of fabrication. Castings are mainly copper alloys (bronze), and less often billon and silver.

But when did the final desacralization and profanation of the belt in the Bulgarian society occur? Obviously at the time when the mass production of belt sets began in medieval Bulgaria - at the end of the era of king Simeon the Great (893-927) and the time of king Peter the I (927-969). Afterwards, during the following period of peace in Bulgarian history, along with the signing of the 30-year treaty between Bulgaria and Byzantium, appropriate conditions for the development of arts and crafts were created.

In the studies so far, the social importance of the belt set as a "passport" in the early Middle Ages is presented in great detail¹. Belts refer to the group of objects with consistently high status. Historically, the definition of this status depends on the perception of the mechanisms of power and the way delegation of rights in the strict hierarchical model of the imperial society.

Belt sets are craftsmanship tools, processing original components of different cultures - from the Byzantine artworks and the elements of German production to the fashion of the Eurasian nomads. The late-anatomical structure of belts spread widely in the second half of the 6th and early 7th centuries in Eastern Europe and its modifications under Asian influence were reported in the 7th century² (**Fig. 1**). According significant Byzantine influence of culture should not be related to the consequences of the war with the Empire but considered as a result of allied relations with it.

The first belts with additional straps begin to be carried by the soldiers of the Roman army. In the middle of the 6th century, the Byzantine army belt with additional decorated straps of various heraldic details spread of large space in Eurasia. The earliest belt sets were found in fortresses from the second half of the 6th century, settled by Byzantine federations³ (**Fig. 2**). In the 4th and first half of 6th century in the Crimea are wearing sets that lack additional straps. Such sets are used in Iran, Altay, Volga regions, North Caucasus. At the beginning of the first millennium BC the belt is part of nomad equipment from Central and North Asia. and in time thereafter he has a marked ethno-cultural coloration⁴. Procopius Caesarius (6th century) reported: "The Persians are forbidden to wear gold rings, belts, buckles or kind of, if it is not allowed by the king"⁵.

¹ DOBZANSKY 1990, p. 73; SOLOVEVA 1996, p. 40; PLETNEVA 1962, p. 250, 241-251.

² GAVRITUHIN & OBLOMSKY 1996, p. 144-148; KOMAR 2005, p. 160-216.

³ AMBROZ 1981, p. 16.

⁴ TISHKIN *et alii* 2015, p. 121-135.

⁵ PROKOPY KESARISKY 1993, p. 53, gl. 1.17-28.

In the second half of the 6th-7th centuries along with the Danubian-style items in the garments, the small Byzantine buckles and ornaments from the Byzantine circle were widely used (**Fig. 3**). The fashion of golden sets decorated with sapped grains and colored glass inlays was spread among the military establishment. At the same time, centers of production of popular buckles, mounts and ornaments were established in Cherson, Bospor and in the South-West Crimea. The heraldic belt sets of the 6th-7th century are specific of the Southwest Crimea and the Byzantine fortresses of the Lower Danube (**Fig. 4**). In the Byzantine Danube fortresses they are also very close of technology and style buckles that are not found in other areas of Byzantium⁶. At the boundary of the 7th-8th century in Danube and Siberian nomads belts with geometric (rectangular and segmented) mounts with horseshoe and heart cuts of the strap have been appeared⁷ (**Fig. 3**). It was a rapid change of belt types in the entire nomadic world, but a totally different complex was created in Southeast Europe. The simultaneous production of belt sets in Eurasian steppe proves the widespread popularity of the fashionable belt and the attitude towards of belt as a sign of distinction. Such metal finds are found in excavations in almost the entire Central Asia - Fergana, Horezam, Vahsa, Pendikent (**Fig. 5-6**). Noteworthy horsemen depicted on frescoes have two belt sets; a sword hanging on two straps, a knife and a quiver. This type of belt was imposed in the circle of steppe people from Central Asia to Hungary⁸ (**Fig. 7**). The study of the belt sets leads to the following conclusions: belts accompany only the male burials; belts were placed not in every male burial, and perhaps in those of the most prominent warriors, commanders; mounts of each belt differ from one another; ornaments on the belt coincide with the ones described in the illustrated figures (**Fig. 8**).

The social significance of belt sets, ornaments of horse equipment and vessels made of precious metals is confirmed by such finding in many memorial complexes. For example, the analyze of finds from Central Asia allows to identify things that are of particular importance of high political status of their owner (**Fig. 9**). These items are mainly related to military affairs. The symbols of power are the weapon of close combat (sword, dagger), battle ax, spear, and protective armor. An important indicator is the well-defined belt set. The other items of toreutics (vessels, mirrors, ornaments, etc.) and the costume are generally a symbol of wealth and a basic attribute of the noble establishment.

The golden warrior belt sets as element of the imperial ritual, are the only instrument which built the vertical of power in Mongols. The practice of distributing of golden belts had a place in all Mongolian yards. An annual ritual for distribution of "300 golden belts" has been documented in Mongolian Iran. The ritual lay at the heart of the imperial feast of "Kurulaj", which has been related with giving away robes and golden belts⁹. Obtaining a belt meant entering or confirming of the place in the hierarchy at the top of which the khan was stan-

⁶ AMBROZ 1971a, p. 118, 96-123.

⁷ AMBROZ 1971b, p. 123, 106-132; SCHMAUDER 2000, p. 38; SCHULZE-DÖRRLLAMM 2009, p. 286-303; DASKALOV 2012, p. 27.

⁸ RASPOPOVA 1965, p. 89, 78-91.

⁹ JURCHENKO 2015, p. 19-29.

ding. Speaking of the "barbaric" elements in the Chinese costume in 6th-10th century Shen Co, a scientist from the 11th century, refers to the "belts with hanging belts": "Strap ends are designed to hang a bow, sword, cloth, bag, quiver. Later strap ends ceased to hang, but the mounts, as before, were preserved. Mounts through which the strap ends were passed are what is called "daikoua belt details".

Also, in China, the original shape of the belt varies with time, and applications with a definite functional design become an element of decor. This in itself determines the change in the material from which the details are made. Earlier, as the "Chengzizutun" dictionary reported, 1-2 grade officials were allowed to wear a belt with golden appliqués, 3-6 ranks - from rhinoceros, 7-9 ranks - silver, and commonwood - iron; they later began to make them out of such valuable material as the Chinese like jasper. Starting from the time of Tan Dynasty, such belts become an attribute of the formal costume.

Concerning belt sets, richly decorated with mounts and adapted for hanging various types of objects, are one of the most striking features of material culture and the ancient Turks. Remnants of such are often found in Turkic burials. The mentioning of decorative ornamentation belts is not rare and among epitaphs, too. According to them, the material, number and shape of ornamental decorations served as a mark of excellence: "Just as with you there is happiness [...] we have done the lunar current belt." And "As with him, there was a valiantness in his khan, Azza tutuk, I reached the current belt set." At another monument: "My heroic courage. My belt is with 42 rank mounts - adornments"¹⁰.

Necropolises on the territory of Bulgaria show that two types of belts were used at the end of 6th - the first half of the 7th century - ordinary and multi-component¹¹. Those of the first type consist of a main belt with a buckle and a strap end, i.e. from two (strap end and opposite mount) to four elements (buckle, strap end, mounts), (**Fig. 10**). The multi-component belt consists of a basic belt and attached side strap ends. It is known that more than one belt or accessory with a similar function is worn. One fixed caftan, and the other, richly decorated with metal details, showed personal belongings. The belt was not just fashionable in Pliska capital. The weapon, warrior belts, stirrups, horse's harness and objects of warlike manner, such as the precious metal horns and vessels used in the courtyard's feasts, are closely related to the life of the medieval warrior and highest society. These precious things were made in the workshops in feudal estates, often under the auspices of the supreme authority of the prince, emperor, or khan. In the time before the conversion in Bulgaria, the belt carries its sacred functions and is of decisive importance in the hierarchy of the society at that time. The belt is worn predominantly of the aristocracy and the military caste.

Following the imposition of golden sets as a sign of investment and social status in Byzantium, belts began to be handed a gift and a symbol of honor not only to Romans but also to foreigners. Known is the example of the Patritian belt, obtained by Khan Kubrat by Emperor Heraclius¹². At the same time, the elements

¹⁰ JURCHENKO 2015, p. 20-24.

¹¹ DASKALOV 2012, p. 11.

¹² VERNER 1988, p. 22-26, 39, 42-44.

of material culture typical of the Slavs and nomads in Dnepr river area are spreading among Alano-Gothic population through the visitors. With the advent of Great Bulgaria, heraldic belts enter in these areas (necropolis in Risovo and Bogachevka)¹³. This was proven of reaching us belt sets at pagan period and the initial period after that (**Fig. 11**). Toward identification of the ornamental belt as an inspiration used by the Old Bulgarian aristocracy explains the existence of numerous and varied elements¹⁴. They are masters' production made for the ruler needs and the aristocracy with various different dignities in the service hierarchy (**Fig. 12**). It is very likely that ornamental belts are ordered by the ruler and then distributed to the nobility according to the rank¹⁵. Ornamentation meant belonging to different clans; and the rank in society is determined by varying of details¹⁶.

The production of art metal was primarily intended for the benevolent gifts of the companions and played the role of a symbol of the feudal-secular understanding of honor in the different societies and cultures of the medieval world¹⁷ (**Fig. 13**). The function of the belt sets is determined by finding them in the funeral of honorary warriors. The belt and its construction, metal details, defined the holder's place in the hierarchical gradation. For this purpose, the belt sets were also made in the 7th-10th century. A typical Hungarian belt, for example, included several basic elements: buckles, horizontal and vertical strap ends, metallic mounts and a belt end (**Fig. 14**). Small straps were also hanging from the basic belt, also decorated with mounts. The belt was double - an inner strap and a main strap, ornamented with metal details, passed over the main strap and its end hanging down on the left. Several personal belongings could be hanging from the belt - a bag, an iron knife, a weapon, and possibly a cup or a bowl¹⁸ (**Fig. 15**).

The belt was a sign of social relations. There is no division of the world of symbols and the world of things. Items are always in the role of signs. The unity of the symbolic and practical possessions of the war-clear sets allows the formation of a notion of the semiotic status of the possessions. When entering the semiotic system, for example, in rituals of coronation or redevelopment, belt sets array function as signs when they drop out of the system as objects. The semiotic status of the belts reflects the "sign" and "object" ratios and, respectively, symbolic and utilitarian functions. Belts refer to the group of objects with consistently high status. Historically, defining this status depends on the perception of the mechanisms of power and the means of delegating powers in the strictly hierarchical model of the imperial society.

After baptism and imposing a Christian faith, however, the belt begins to lose much of its sacred and sign character. Moreover, in Byzantium itself, where the new religious system comes from and changes the whole public structure, such military distinctions and attributes of clothing are not used in this form. The

¹³ AYBABIN 1990, p. 72.

¹⁴ ZALESKAJA *et alii* 1989, p. 39-52.

¹⁵ TOTEV & PELEVINA 2010, p. 58-77, 73.

¹⁶ LÁSZLO 1974, p. 54, fig. 24.

¹⁷ ORLOV 1983, p. 36, 29-40.

¹⁸ BOLDOG *et alii* 2015, p. 7, www.hungarianarchaeology.hu.

well-known belt sets of this period have different material and technology of manufacture. They are forged from metal plates on matrices, have larger dimensions and a specific ornamentation.

From military excellence and a belonging sign to a class, the belt gradually began to propagate and spread among the broader sections of the population, which is confirmed by the mass production of items for belt sets (**Fig. 16**)¹⁹. The widespread penetration of the ornamental belt among the ordinary population since the beginning of the 9th century has permanently changed the material of fabrication. Castings are mainly copper alloys (bronze), less often than bilon and silver (**Fig. 17**).

But when does the final desacralization and profanation of the belt in the Bulgarian society take place? Obviously at the time when the mass production of belt sets began in medieval Bulgaria - at the end of the era of king Simeon the Great (893-927) and the time of king Peter the I (927-969). Then with the occurrence of the period of peace in Bulgarian history and the signing of the 30-year contract between Bulgaria and Byzantium, appropriate conditions for the development of arts and crafts were created (**Fig. 18**).

Confirmation is not only the production of the art metal centers in the vicinity of Preslav (at present more than 3,000 details have been found about such belts, and if we add the objects from the museum collections to them, the number is a lot increasing), but also the fact, that the complexes, like the many settlements in their neighborhood and not only there, were unstable and unprotected, which speaks of peace and security in the state. A similar tendency is also observed outside the country. Widely distributed belt sets in the 6th-7th centuries were known in Russia, Scandinavia and the Steppes in the 9th-10th centuries, too. At that time, however, the details of the belts did not play this important role, as with the steppe peoples in the preceding era; they are no longer signs of dignity, but only details of decoration²⁰.

The suit was an imperial uniform loaded with symbols, so it was read in a particular symbolic system. Outside the symbol system, the symbol is dead. What makes the imperial symbol costume is the existence of a political hierarchy whose operation implies a transparent system of codes (**Fig. 19**)²¹. Only in the ritual the objects acquire important meaning. The ritual shapes the relationship of coexistence and is dictated by the real military superiority proved in battle. The replacement of the war with peace also changes the social status of the war regalia, such as the decorated belt. Probably the belt, in addition to the military costume, retains its importance in honoring the hierarchical structure in the Bulgarian society and in the later period. Then there is no longer a division between the world of symbols and that of things. The unity of symbolism and practice held by the warlike clarifying sets allows for the formation of concepts of their status. They reflect the relationship "significance-object" and respectively symbolic and utilitarian function (**Fig. 20**)²². In rituals of coronation and

¹⁹ GOMOLKA-FUCHS 2002, p. 493-514.

²⁰ FEDOROV-DAVIDOV 1966, p. 124; PLETNEVA 1981, p. 62-75.

²¹ BOZILOV & GYZELEV 1981, p. 126.

²² BOZKOV 1972, fig. 20.

rewarding, the belt functions as a sign, when dropped out of the system and beyond it, as an object. It is precisely as an object that has dropped out of the sign system have to adopt the belt set after the beginning of the 10th century. Its growing vogue among the population, proven by the mass production of belt set from relatively inexpensive and accessible material (copper, bronze) is an expression of fashion trends in society and the purely pragmatic role of the belt. The belt is desacralized and largely loses its basic importance in the earlier age as a sign of origin, position, or military rank. The sets are unified and become uniform and simple. The role of a social marker begins to play mainly the material of which it is made, and the main criterion - the financial capabilities of its guarantor. The symbolic meaning of the belt came back during the Second Bulgarian Empire in the 12th-14th centuries, when the decorated belt with a changed style and a different technique of manufacture became a sign of origin and a high social status, undoubtedly influenced by the fashion of Byzantine Empire.

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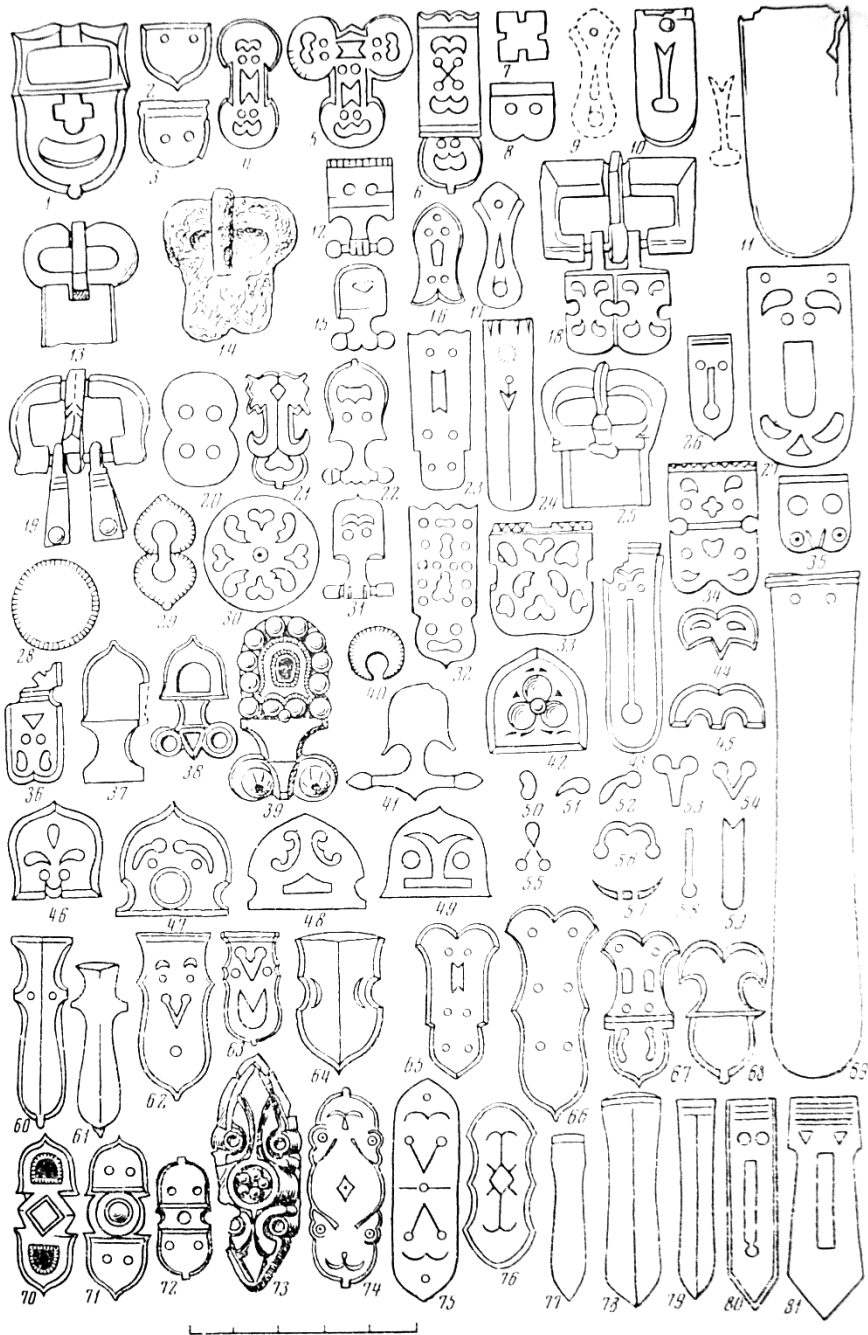


Fig. 1 - Belt mounts. 6th-8th c. (after AMBROZ 1971a).

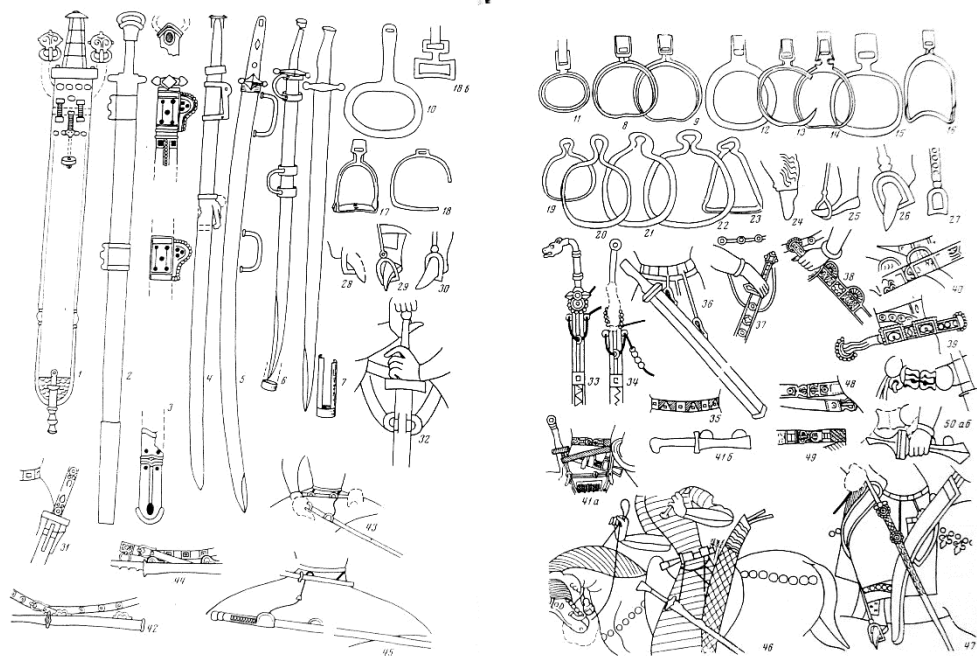


Fig. 2 - Weapons and belt sets. 5th-9th c. (after AMBROZ 1971b).

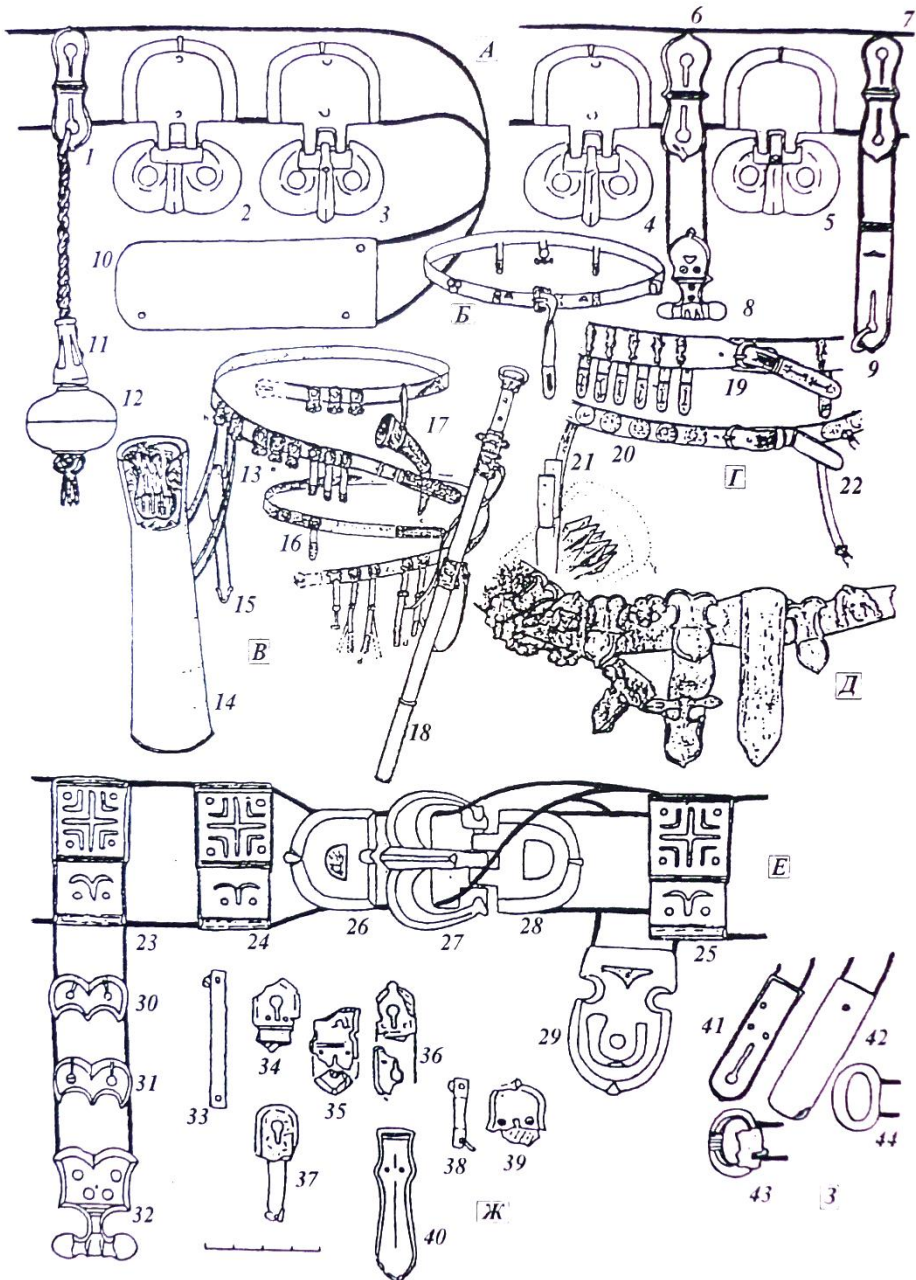


Fig. 3 - Belt sets. 6th 7th c. (after GAVRITUHIN & OBLOMSKY 1996).

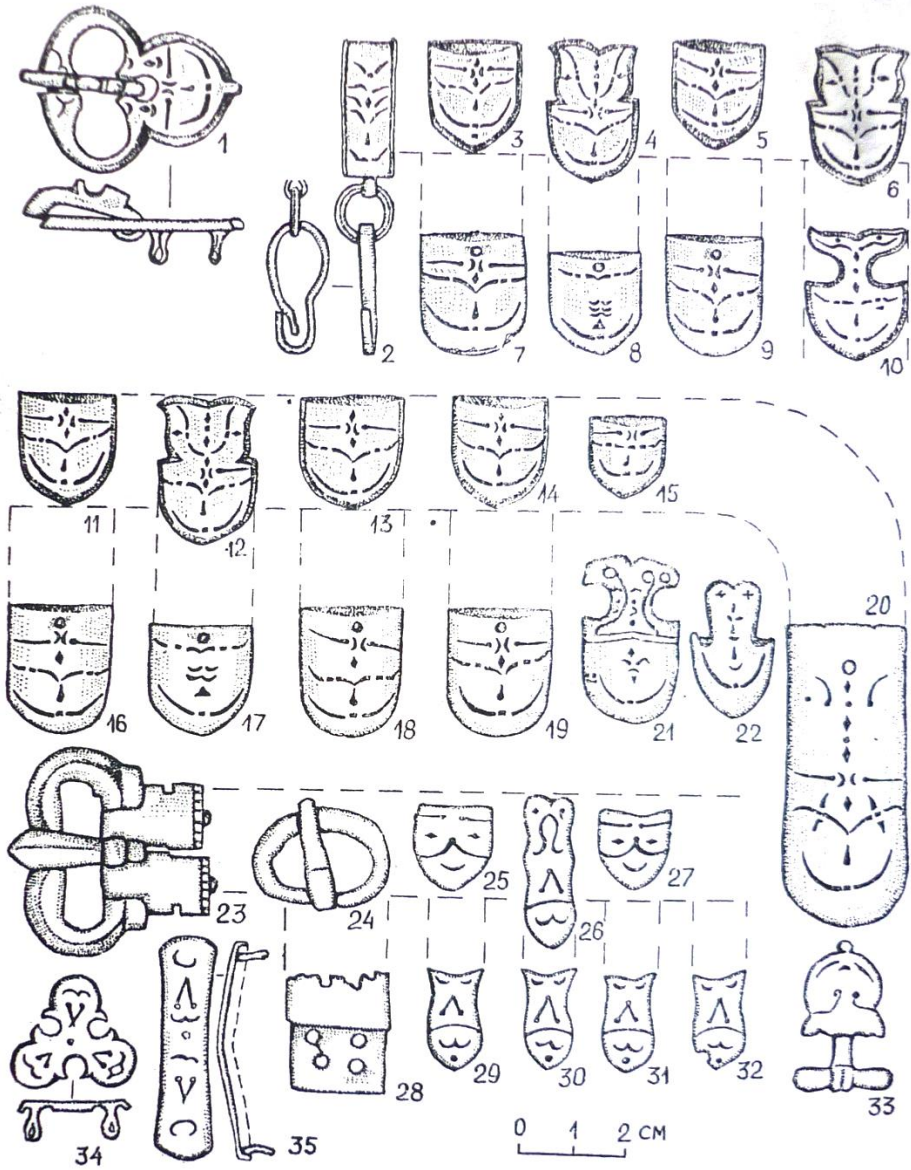


Fig. 4 - Belt mounts - 6th 7th c. (after AIBABIN 1990).



Fig. 5 - Wall-painting. Pendjikent. Middle Asia. 6th-8th c. (after BELENICKIJ 1973).



Fig. 6 - Wall-paintings. Pendzikent. Middle Asia. 6th-8th c. (after BELENICKIJ 1973).

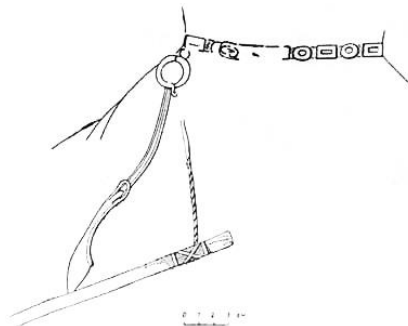


Fig. 7 - Wall-paintig. Sogd. 7th-8th c. (after BELENIZKY-RASPOPOVA 1980).

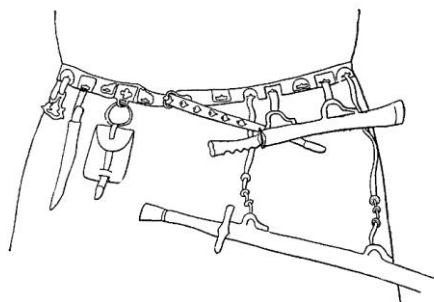


Fig. 8 - Wall-painting. Sogd. 7th-8th c. (after RASPOPOVA 1965).

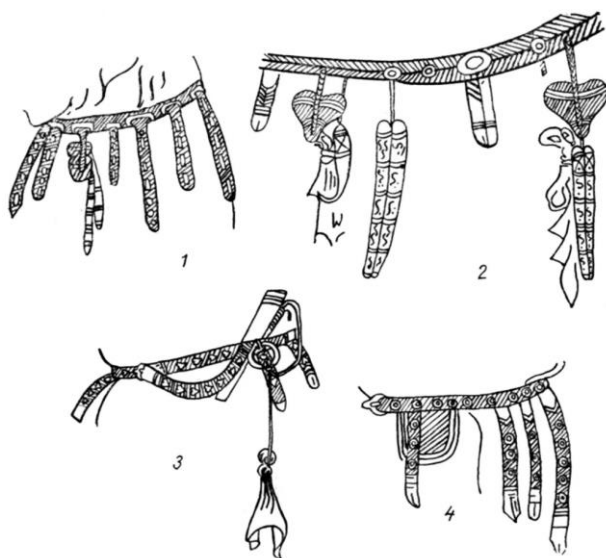


Fig. 9 - Belt sets. Wall-paintings from East Turkestan. 8th-9th c. (after ARJANZEVA 1987).

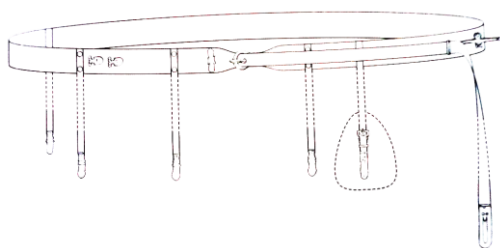


Fig. 10 - Reconstruction of belt set found of necropolis at Rupkite, Chirpan district. 6th-7th c. (after DASKALOV 2012).



Fig. 11 - Details of belt set. Malaja Pereschepina. Ukrajna. 7th c.
(after *Khan Kubrat treasure* 1989).



Fig. 12 - Mounts of belt set. Malaja Pereschepina. 7th c.
(after *Khan Kubrat treasure* 1989).

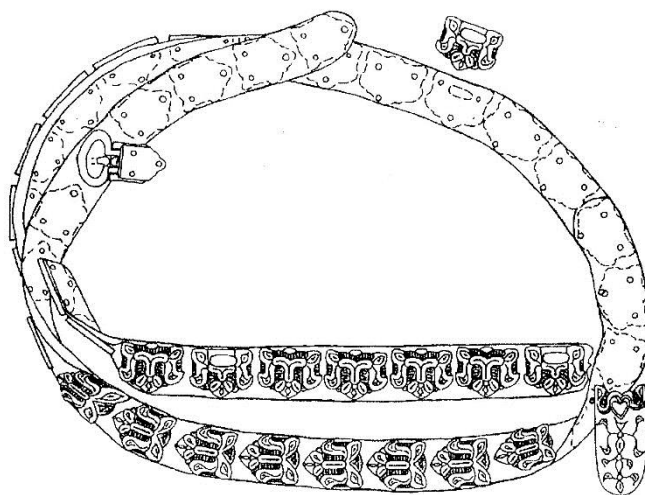


Fig. 13 - Belt set found at Armiev necropol. 9th-10th c. (after ORLOV 1983).

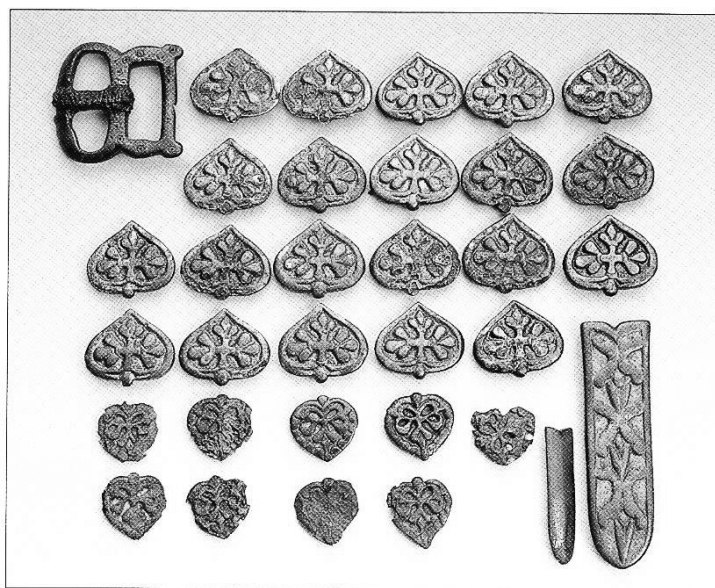


Fig. 14 - Belt set found of necropolis Kecel-Vádéi dűlő (Bács-Kiskun county).
10th c. (after *The Ancient Hungarians* 1996).



Fig. 15 - Belt set. Vereb. 10th c. (after *The Ancient Hungarians* 1996).



Fig. 16 - Belt set found in Krivina, Bulgaria. 10th c. (after GOMOLKA-FUCHS 2002).



Fig. 17 - Reconstruction of belt set on items found at Zlatar, Preslav municipality. First half of the 10th c. (after the author).

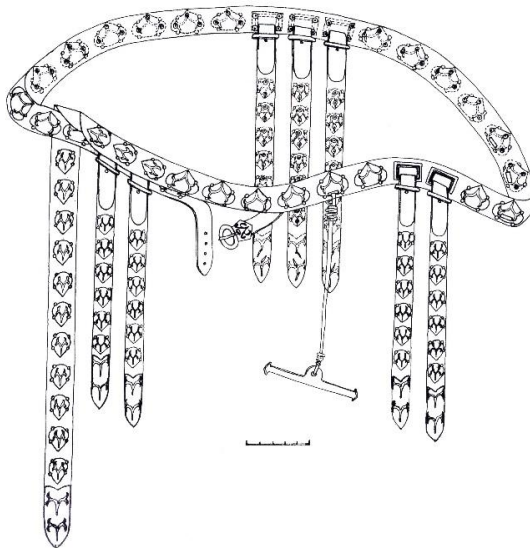


Fig. 18 - Reconstruction of belt set on items found at Zlatar, Preslav municipality. First half of the 10th c. (after the author).



Fig. 19 - Bulgarian soldiers from the 9th century. Miniature of the Menology of Emperor Basil II of the 11th c. (after *Istoriја na Bălgarija* 1981).



Fig. 20 - Prince Boris I sent a messenger to the Empress Teodora, the mother of the Byzantine Emperor Michael III (after BOZKOV 1972).