

SIGNET RINGS WITH MYTHICAL CREATURES FROM MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

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Rezumat: *Articolul tratează câteva sigilii cu reprezentări mitologice, descoperite pe teritoriul Bulgariei. Ele datează din perioada Evului Mediu (secolele XII- XIV) și pot fi considerate unele dintre cele mai rare exemplare din această categorie. O varietate de figuri mitologice sunt gravate pe aceste sigilii: himere, grifoni și dragoni. În ceea ce privește locul unde au fost realizate, nu se pot oferi date certe. Unele erau probabil realizate la Constantinopol, în timp ce altele erau probabil rezultatul producției locale. Studiile recente au demonstrat existența unei producții a obiectelor din metal decorate, bine organizată și dezvoltată în Evul Mediu pe teritoriul Bulgariei. Numeroase exemple de astfel de sigilii sunt cunoscute la acest moment. Imaginile ce înfățișează animale și figuri mitologice prezente pe aceste sigilii scot în evidență faptul că ele pot fi rezultatul producției locale.*

Abstract: *The subject of this article are several signet rings with mythological images found on the territory of medieval Bulgaria. They are dated back to the period of the Middle Ages (12th-14th centuries) and constitute one of the rarest category of monuments among the group of signet rings. Various mythological creatures are engraved on them – chimera, griffin, and dragon. Regarding the question about the place of manufacture of the rings, we cannot give a definite answer. Some of them were probably made in Constantinople while the others could be the products of local craftsmen. Recent studies have shown the existence of a well-organized and developed production of art metal in Bulgarian Middle Ages. Numerous examples of objects in*

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various types have reached to our days. There are images of animals and mythical creatures on them which made entirely possible their local production.

The subject of this article is represented by several signet rings with mythological images found on the territory of medieval Bulgaria. Various mythological creatures are engraved on them – chimera, griffin, and dragon. They are dated back to the period of the Middle Ages (12th-14th cent.) and constitute one of the rarest category of monuments among the group of signet rings. Images of animals on stamping surface is not uncommon motif and there are many examples of rings from this period with eagles, lions, griffins, as well as various ornaments – stars, lilies, acanthus leaves, crosses. Mythological scenes, however, are few, and that is the reason to pay close attention on that small group of objects. Two of the rings discussed here are made of silver, and two others are made of gold.

The first ring is made of a silver alloy and consists of two parts welded to each other - a round thin plate and hoop with ornament¹. In the center of the visual field of the stamping surface an image of the mythical creature is incised, surrounded by round frame (**Fig. 1**). A concentric ring of thirteen stars, bounded by an incised line on the outline runs around it. The image represents a mythical creature - chimera. The creature is presented on the move to the left, head facing up. Its jaws are open and two hanging ears are suspended beneath the head. When engraving the eye, the cutter has cut across the full thickness of the substrate and formed a small opening. The body of the creature is elongated, with additional emphasis on the fur over it. Instead of the tail of the animal a head of a goat with two horns is depicted. It winds as a serpent (dragon), ending with a clear-shaped head with two ears. After a closer look at the details of the figure, it appears that they are fully consistent with those of the popular mythology and with quite a few ancient monuments decorated with a chimera having a lion's head, tail of a dragon (serpent) and body ending with a goat head².

A similar image is applied on the stamped surface of the second ring (**Fig. 2**). The silver ring consists of a high round stamping plate, separated from the substrate with embossed ring oblique incisions³. There is a floral decoration shaped as an "S"- curved volutes on the ring's surface, but next to the plate it is engraved on a forked sign with an additional cut in the middle. An image of a goat head with two horns is applied on the stamp surface coming out of the body. Its head is facing upwards with its mouth open. Its strongly curved tail ends with a snake head. The image presents a similar style of implementation to the one on the first ring, with some variations in body position and some details in recreating the image. The shape and size of the stamped surface are also different. The dating of the two rings is the same and belongs to the Middle Ages (12th-14th centuries). The image of the mythical creature Chimera, which is very popular in antiquity, but quite rare later, is quite astonishing.

¹ Dimensions: d: 2.1 cm; thickness: 0.08 cm; width: 0.3 – 0.4 cm; d: 2.0 – 2.2 cm; weight: 5.80 gr.

² HOLL 1996, p. 95-96.

³ Dimensions: loop - d(ext): 2.3 cm; d(int): 2.0 cm; plate - d: 1.9 cm, height: 0.7 cm.

According to Hesiod, Chimera was the daughter of Typhon and Echidna, the front of her torso was shaped as a lion, it bearded a dragon tail, and by the middle of the body goat's head, erupting flames. Strabo shows Kragos mountain in Lycia as its habitat. It is believed that the Chimera has lived near the present town of Kemer, 60 km from Antalya, Turkey. According to one of the versions, the Chimera is the mother of the Sphinx and the Nemean lion by his brother Orfo. Apollodorus wrote, "not just one person, but a whole army cannot fight the monster". Chimera invaded the land and destroyed the animals, but was defeated by the hero Bellerophon at the request of Myra King Iobat. While sortieing over her with his winged horse Pegasus, Bellerophon showered her with arrows, and then, by using his long spear, he forced a block of lead between her jaws. The strong fiery breath of the monster melted the metal piece that flowed down her throat and burned her⁴.

The most famous image of the Chimera is a bronze sculpture in Arezzo, Florence from the first half of the 4th century BC (**Fig. 3**)⁵. Chimera is one of the preferred mythological motifs in the decoration of various objects in antiquity, such as pottery, dating back to the archaic period (6th-5th cent. BC) (**Fig. 4**). The story of the fight between Bellerophon and Chimaera has been also carved on cameos and gems. This fearsome creature appears as a heraldic animal in the arms of several cities, such as Corinth, Sitsion and Cyzicus (5th-4th cent. BC)⁶. The preference for this iconography is attested on Roman colonial coins. On the reverse of a coin of Hadrian, for example, is presented in detail the match between Bellerophon riding the winged horse Pegasus and the three-headed monster Chimera⁷. This composition occurs on mosaic floorings and some items of art metal. A lead amulet from that time (3rd-4th cent.) with an image of Bellerophon and Chimaera is found in northwestern Bulgaria⁸.

Unlike Antiquity, images of Chimera in the Middle Ages are rare. However, it can be found on mosaics, stone sculptures and textiles and everywhere there is symbolism carried by this image. Chimera is the epitome of the storm clouds for the ancient Greeks, the victory of the mythical hero Bellerophon above it is seen as a sure victory of good over evil. Chimera commands the winds and storms on earth and in the sea; symbolizes danger, and deception (can create illusions). It is therefore a symbol of the non-existent⁹. According to a commentary on Virgil, Chimera is the epitome of the eponymous volcano in Lycia¹⁰ - in its foot a dragon breathes, on its slopes goats graze, at the top is the lair of lions, and out of its crater spews fire. Chimeras embody hellish forces locked in the bowels of the volcano, so they are seen as an image of the danger of inciting people.

⁴ KOROLEV 2007, p. 646; TOKREV 1982, p. 592.

⁵ KLEINER 2010, p. 151, obr. 6, 12.

⁶ SEABY 1966, p. 98.

⁷ SEABY 1966, p. 96.

⁸ MARKOV 2005, p. 45, A.7.

⁹ ROSHAL 2008, p. 364.

¹⁰ ADAMCHIK 2006, p. 213.

In the Middle Ages in Western Europe Chimera is associated with evil, lust and satanic powers¹¹. In the Gothic tradition it becomes an attribute of the allegorical representation of sin and symbolizes its power. The figure of the Chimera serves as an illustration of how the human soul, harrowed by desires, becomes captive of its animal origin. This link appears in the late alphabetical indices and collections of canon law, and the articles collected in Slavic *bestiarii* in the 16th-17th cent.¹². Chimera could be interpreted as an image of human folly. Chimeras subsequently began to symbolize something nonexistent, amazing, nowadays the name "chimera" refers to something unfulfilled, fantastic, but harmless and nonfrightening. According to the interpretation of Paul Diel chimera is "an expression of the danger of an exalted imagination"¹³. Serpent or dragon tail depicts the corruption of selfishness; the goat on her body - capricious and perverse sexuality, and the lion's head symbolizes the supreme bias that distorts all relationships.

From a brief overview of the symbolism of the image of the Chimera it can be concluded that its appearance on a variety of artwork, including seals and amulets, has one purpose - to repel the devil's forces and protect the bearer of bad influences. The significance of the mythical creatures on the present two-ring seals is the same. This symbolism is further reinforced by the thirteen stars around eight-rays stars locked in a round picture frame on the first ring. Stars with eight rays are the epitome of loyalty, creativity and abundance. In different beliefs they are seen as an expression of hope and aspiration of men to push the boundaries of their world. The heavenly nature of the stars makes them a symbol of the spirit and the clash between spiritual forces (forces of light) and physical forces (forces of darkness). In this sense, the iconography on both presented signet rings could be seen. There is no doubt about their protective functions.

On a gold signet ring, found during excavations in the necropolis around church No 10 on the Tsarevets hill, in the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire Tarnovo, an inscription and an image of the griffin are present (Fig. 5)¹⁴. The sign is negative and reads: "ΘΕΟΔΟΡΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΦΙΛΑΝΤΡΗ", "To Theodoros son of Philantres" which is the name and patronymic of the owner of the gold signet ring¹⁵. The letters are accurately drawn on a field and at the same height. Some of the letters are additionally decorated with horizontal hitches. The inscription is located around a central field separated by a circle in which the image of the fantastic animal is represented. The griffin is moving to the left, straight and standing on his hind legs, with outstretched wings, and passing over the front of the body. The lion head is with erect ears and tail is "S"-curved, ending with a *palmette*. On both sides of the plate, on the ring, decoration is engraved. It consists of two circular medallions woven into lily ornament, which contain animal

¹¹ SHEPHERD & SHEPHERD 2002, p. 229; TYRSKOVA 2003, p. 718.

¹² BELOVA 2000, p. 264.

¹³ DIEI 1966, p. 83.

¹⁴ TOTEV 2010, p. 105, 153, Tab. I, 1.

¹⁵ Dimensions: d (plate): 1.78 cm; d (loop): 2.13 cm; height: 2.10 cm; weight: 13.26 gr; 18-20 carats.

images. On one side a winged lion is presented, while on the other – an eagle with a long beak and spread wings.

There are plenty of examples demonstrating that griffin with lion or eagle head is the preferred motif in medieval Bulgarian art during the First Bulgarian Empire as well as in the Late Middle Ages¹⁶. The griffin is a common motif in stone sculpture, monumental architecture and metal art (**Fig. 6, 7**). Images represent both types of griffins – bearing an eagle's head or a lion's head, but the second type is less common (**Fig. 8, 9**)¹⁷.

The image of the griffin is known and popular in Iran and the Achaemenid art. From there it passes into the Asian art as a symbol of the deified ruler and a reflection of the cosmic struggle of good and evil (6th-4th cent. BC)¹⁸. Its image became widespread in the art on the Northern Black Sea Coast, where we can identify three types of griffins – Oriental (or from Asia Minor), Greek and Scythian (4th-3rd cent. BC)¹⁹. Griffins were the most commonly used as apotropaic symbols on numerous monuments in antiquity. This peculiar antique realism was so great that the image of the griffin was starting to look like the real ones²⁰. It should be noted that the image of a lion-headed griffin penetrates the art of Central Asia in 5th-6th cent. BC, where it received iconographic embodiment in some new imaging options with the likeness of a dog or a horse. Obviously, these variants exhibit certain stability over time, to reach even to the medieval era, albeit with a different interpretation. When comparing the images of eagles and lions it can be argued that the griffin combines earth power of the lion and the heavenly power of the eagle, interpretation that can be found in the symbolism of the rescue forces²¹.

Later in the Byzantine secular art, its image can be encountered in royal emblems and begins to symbolize the warrior's courage and genius. Images of griffins in imperial clothes are common, often found in the palace painting and luxurious metal objects²². The griffin from the medieval emblems borrows the symbolism of the lion and the eagle, which denotes the splitting of his solar nature. Significantly, these are two images represented on both sides of the ring's plate. The gryphon holds terrestrial and celestial features, thus becoming a symbol of Christ's two natures - divine and human.

Finally, we present a famous and controversial in the specialty literature, Kaloyan's gold ring found in the necropolis of "St. 40 Martyrs" church, Veliko Tarnovo²³. The size of the ring and the match between the name of its owner and that of the Bulgarian Tsar Kaloyan (1197-1207) gave rise to unfounded theory that the grave of the Bulgarian ruler was found (**Fig. 10**). Over time, this version was overcome by the conclusion that there was buried a nobleman who lived at the

¹⁶ DONCHEVA – PETKOVA 1996, p. 13-50; DONCHEVA 2007, p. 213-223.

¹⁷ DONCHEVA – PETKOVA 1996, p. 32.

¹⁸ PUGACHENKOVA 1959, p. 70-84.

¹⁹ POGREBOVA 1948, p. 62-67.

²⁰ PUGACHENKOVA 1959, p. 83.

²¹ SHEVALIE & GEERBRANT 1995, p. 225; BIDERMAN 2003, p. 82-83.

²² DARKEVICH 1975, p. 242.

²³ TOTEV 2010, p. 113-115, 154, Tab. II, 6.

end of the 13th - beginning of the 14th century²⁴. The ring is massive, with round plate that goes into broad shoulders and a thick ring with an arched section²⁵. Two concentric circles divide the surface into separate fields. The exterior field is occupied by a negative sign with the name of the owner "+ Kaloianov ring" and the interior by an animal figure moving to the left, with his head turned towards his back, his mouth opened and pointed ears and bearing a curved lion tail. Its body bears punctate decoration, which drove some researchers to the idea that it can be identified with a panther²⁶. According to the archaeologist who found the ring, the image is "a fantastic animal with a body of a panther, leopard or lion and a dragon's head"²⁷. We believe that this image is a dragon as suggested by the dog head, elongated neck and short legs ending in large, curved claws. The points on the body imitate the scaly coating on the skin. Only its wings are missing, but many types and subjects in bas-reliefs, pottery and metal objects from the period (13th-14th cent.) show that they are not compulsory²⁸. Some dragons carved on the door of the church in Hrelyo's tower, completely lack their wings (**Fig. 11, 12**)²⁹.

The image of the dragon combines body parts of different animals (reptiles, birds, fish, panthers, goats, wolfs, dogs). It is assumed that the dragon is a further development of the image of the snake. The dragon is comprehensive and is considered as a major cosmogonic character acting as mediator between the two opposing, other than earthly, worlds - upper (bird) and lower (snake, reptiles). It is associated with the element of water and is often present fire-breathing, combining contrasting symbols of water and fire. Each of the creatures that make up the dragon is associated with an element (air, earth, water), i.e. the three spheres of the universe - the underworld, earth, and sky. In this composite image are collected three spatial zones of the basic elements. So the dragon acts as a mediator space - it is free to cross the border of the worlds, endangering the well-being of the cosmos. The water symbolism remains primary. Dragon King is the king of snakes and is associated with the receipt of rain and thunder and the manifestation of divine activity. The image created when combining earth and water is a symbol of the heavenly rain, onto the fertile ground. In different mythological traditions a dragon is a monster, the personification of the initial chaos³⁰. According to Democritus, the dragon is "Chaos or Spirit." The world was created by dividing the body of the dragon Tiamat - Marduk. In the Far East it is a symbol of wisdom, majesty and power.

Victory over the dragon embodies the conflict resolution between light and darkness, the destruction of the forces of evil and the defeat of their dark nature and attainment of self-control. Initially, the symbolism of the dragon was completely positive and meant life bearing water (dragon), and breath of the earth (bird). He is identified with the heavenly gods and their earthly representatives -

²⁴ TOTEV 2010, p. 114.

²⁵ Dimensions: d(plate): 2.1 cm; d(loop): 1.9 cm; weight: 61.10 gr; 23 carat.

²⁶ TOTEV 2010, p. 113.

²⁷ VALOV 1974, p. 44-51.

²⁸ DONCHEVA - PETKOVA 1996, p. 82-95.

²⁹ IVANOVA & KOEVA 1979, p. 117.

³⁰ BELENICKI & MESHKERIS 1986, p. 16-27.

emperors and kings. Subsequently, the symbolism becomes ambiguous, meaning both blessed rain and destructive power of lightning and floods. The dragon can be solar and lunar, male and female, good and evil. It is a symbol of longevity. In the Western tradition, dragons are divided into fire-breathing or *viverni* (like a snake with wings) and *lindvurni* (wingless *viverni*). *Viverni* are heraldic dragons which were depicted on shields and crests. In alchemy the winged dragon is a fickle element, but when it is wingless it represents a stable substance. Victory over the dragon means taming its lower nature, subjecting it to the overriding principle made by the ordinance of initiation, in which the passing yield "spiritual treasure".

In Christian symbolism the dragon is an embodiment of evil, the evil generation. Its defeaters are archangels and saints. As a demonic symbol the dragon is associated with the serpent. Origen confirms this in connection with Psalm 73. Crushed heads of the dragons are Christ's victory over evil. Besides the well-known image of St. Michael and St. George, Christ himself is sometimes depicted while stomping snakes with his feet³¹. The dragon represents great power, acute vision, and lack of need for sleep. Entrusted with guarding the temples and treasures, it is the preferred pictorial motif on the facades and doors of the Christian churches, thus becoming an allegory of prophecy and wisdom³². The dragon represented on the ring discussed here also has safety features designed not only to its owner, mentioned in the inscription around the figure, but also to personal property affixed with this signet ring. Similar meaning is assigned to dragons' representations on belt decoration – buckles and strap ends (Fig. 13, 14)³³.

Regarding the question about the place of manufacture of the rings, we cannot give a definite answer. Some of them, like gold signet rings of Theodore Philantry and Kaloyan were probably made in Constantinople while the first two, with images of Chimera could be the products of local craftsmen. Recent studies have shown the existence of a well-organized and developed production of art metal in Bulgarian Middle Ages. Numerous examples of objects in various natures (stone sculpture, metal, ceramics, bone) have reached to our days³⁴. There are images of animals and mythical creatures on them which made entirely possible their local production. Future studies and finding products with traces of manufacturing will hopefully provide a clear answer to those questions. More importantly, the images of mythical creatures on signet rings of the Bulgarian Middle Ages are rare and this defines the significance of the finds represented here as part of the material and the spiritual culture in this period.

³¹ SHEVALIE & GEERBRANT 1995, p. 280-284.

³² VOROBIOVA 1981, p. 209-218; TURSKOVA 2003, p. 162-166.

³³ PAVLOVA 2007, p. 28, 2.14; 39, 4.7.

³⁴ BOZKOV 1985, p. 28-37.

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Fig. 1. Signet ring with the image of Chimera.
Silver alloy. 13th-14th cent. Shumen Plateau.



Fig. 2. Signet ring with the image of Chimera. Silver alloy. 13th-14th cent. Preslav.



Fig. 3. Sculpture of a Chimera. Bronze. 4th cent. BC.
Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Arezzo. Florence.



Fig. 4. Ceramic vessel with Chimera. 350-340 BC. Musée du Louvre. Paris.



Fig. 5. Signet ring of Theodore Philantry. Gold. 14th century. Veliko Tarnovo.

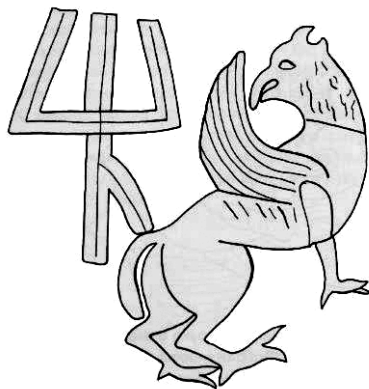


Fig. 6. Marble capital with griffin and monogram of Tsar Michael Shishman (1323-1330). Tsarevets, Veliko Tarnovo.

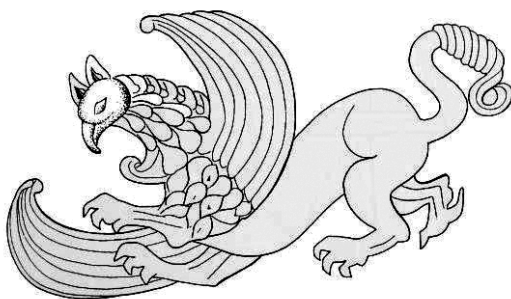


Fig. 7. Marble frieze with griffin. 12th-13th cent. Drenovo village, Prilep region.



Fig. 8. Tile of the diadem of Preslav treasure with eagle-head griffin. Gold with enamel. 10th-11th cent. Preslav.



Fig. 9. Tile of the diadem of Preslav treasure with lion-head griffin.
Gold with enamel. 10th-11th cent. Preslav.



Fig. 10. Signet ring of Kaloyan. Gold. First half of the 14th cent.
Church "St. 40 martyrs". Veliko Tarnovo.



Fig. 11. Detail of the door of the church in Hrelyo's tower with winged dragons.
Tree. 1335-1340. The Rila Monastery.



Fig. 12. Detail of the door of the church in Hrelyo's tower with wingless dragon. Tree. 1335-1340. The Rila Monastery.



Fig. 13. Buckle with dragon. Gold. 13th-14th cent. Tsarevets, Veliko Tarnovo.



Fig. 14. Belt ornaments: buckle and strap end. Silver alloy with gold. 13th-14th cent. Dolishte, Varna district.