

## FINDS RELATED TO THE VRAP–ERSEKE-GROUP FROM THE STARA BULGARIA COLLECTION (VARNA)

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*Abstract: The Stara Bulgaria Collection (Varna) consists mainly of small metal objects (belt and horse harness mounts, buckles and lead moulds for such pieces) dating from the 7th–11th centuries and originating from Northeast Bulgaria. The present article deals only with those pieces of the collection which show strong similarities with the Vrap–Erseke-group and seeks to consider the wider context of these finds. The significance of the objects presented here lies first of all in the fact that they show some features of the Vrap–Velino-group, but in most cases only in a simplified form. The Stara Bulgaria collection of Varna seems to corroborate the conclusion that the elite culture represented by the Vrap find was present in a certain way in Bulgaria as well, but cannot be regarded as a widespread phenomenon, since the ornaments of the Vrap group were applied to simple bronze imitations only in a quite simplified form. The impact of the Vrap–Velino-group is most clearly discernible in the choice of the shallow relief, the form of the palmettes, and in certain compositional principles.*

**Keywords:** *Early Middle Ages, Bulgaria, Vrap–Erseke-group, Late Avar period, Lower Danube*

### INTRODUCTION

The Stara Bulgaria Collection (Varna) consists mainly of small metal objects (belt and horse harness mounts, buckles and lead moulds for such pieces) dating from the 7th–11th centuries and originating from NE Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> Most pieces have been gathered during the last fifteen years by Stefan Valkov, director of the Allianz Bank at Varna. He acted as a sponsor of the early medieval archaeological research in Bulgaria and invested large amounts of money to keep the most outstanding items in Bulgaria. For systematizing, safekeeping, and cataloguing of the material the authors have received considerable help from the staff of the Archaeological Museum at Varna and would like to express their deepest gratitude for this assistance. The Stara Bulgaria Collection compris-

es ca. 4210 pieces. The vast majority date from the 7th–11th centuries, but occasionally there are some earlier (Scythian, Thracian and Roman) as well as later objects from the 12th–18th centuries. In 1997 the cultural minister of Bulgaria, the renowned art historian Ivan Mazarov granted the collection the status of a museum collection. The collection has been thoroughly catalogued, the catalogue deposited in the Archaeological Museum, Varna and the most beautiful pieces are exhibited in the Varna office of the Allianz Bank.

In 2006, the idea of publishing the entire catalogue of the collection was born. Since there are many similarities with the contemporary finds from the Carpathian Basin, a joint Hungarian-Bulgarian research team (the authors of the present article) was

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created. During 2007, every item was photographed, conserved and described, and currently their publication is being prepared. The present article deals

only with those items of the collection that show strong similarities with the Vrap–Erseke-group and seeks to consider the wider context of these finds.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDS

1. *Hole fitting* (Inv. No. Б-Я 28; *Fig. 1. 1a–b*): Light-coloured hole fitting cast of a copper-base alloy. The two ends of the horseshoe-shaped object terminate in rectangular plates. A trapezoid plate protrudes from the external side of its central arch, on the backside of which rivets are placed, they are cast together with the object. The worn front side is decorated with wavy lines combined with tendril leaves scrolled back in a semicircle, executed in flat relief. The decoration is separated from the edge of the object by a shallow groove, and the cast base motif was re-engraved in a number of places. The back side of the object is flat; there are three rivets on the three protruding plates, probably cast together with the fitting. Length: 2.7 cm, width: 2.1 cm, thickness: 0.2 cm, height of rivets: 0.4 cm, weight: 6.26 g.

2. *Hole fitting* (Inv. No. Б-3227; *Fig. 1. 2a–b*): Horseshoe-shaped hole fitting cast from a copper-base alloy. There is a trapezoid protrusion on the external side of the central arch with an almost round hole, formed during casting, which cuts through the edge of the object. The front side, heavily worn, has a crudely wrought decoration in flat relief. Two symmetrical tendrils composed of half-palmettes grow out of a common root and branch off towards the two ends of the fitting. A shallow groove separates the decoration and the edge of the object, while the perforation in the central, trapezoid protrusion is framed by a wedge-shaped engraved groove. The backside is slightly concave, with a low rim along the edge and two round casting marks on the ends of the horseshoe-shaped object, which had been initially designed as rivet holes but became filled with bronze during casting. Length: 2.4 cm, width: 2.1 cm, thickness: 0.15 cm, weight: 2.8 cm.

3. *Hole fitting* (Inv. No. Б-4257; *Fig. 1. 3a–b*): Hole fitting cast from a copper-base alloy. The two ends of the horseshoe-shaped object terminate in rectangular plates. The square plate protruding from the external side of the central arch is decorated with a circular groove and has on the reverse side a rivet cast together with the object. The slightly scratched front side is decorated with cable pattern in flat relief. Three rivets, probably cast together with the fitting, can be seen on the back side at the ends of the horseshoe-shaped object and in the central trapezoid protrusion. Length: 2.8 cm, width: 2.3 cm, thickness: 0.2 cm, length of rivets: 0.4 cm, weight: 2.22 g.

4. *Hole fitting* (Inv. No. Б-0033; *Fig. 1. 4a–b*): Horseshoe-shaped hole fitting cast from a copper-based alloy. The rectangular protrusion on the external side of the central arch and the upper end have round perforations. The lower end is broken off, but the edge of the perforation can be observed here too, particularly on the back side. The worn front side is decorated with a crudely shaped cable pattern in flat relief. The back side of the fitting is plain, but has a casting mark near the edge of one of the perforations. Length: 2.8 cm, width: 2.1 cm, thickness: 0.1 cm, weight: 1.61 cm.

5. *Belt fitting* (Inv. No. Б-4071; *Fig. 1. 5a–b*): Rectangular belt fitting cast from a copper-based alloy. Its front side is worn, particularly on its edge, and has a casting defect, mostly observable along the chipped edge of the upper side. The seam was not removed along the other edges either. On the front side, floral motifs are placed symmetrically within a rectangular field, which is bordered by a rather uneven frame executed in flat relief. Two tendrils emerge from a single root and the leaves of their branching sprouts fill the upper and lower sections on either side of the decorated field. The tendrils and half-palmettes encircle a rhombic recess in the centre. The fitting is perforated between the two half-palmettes in the central axis of the upper edge. The backside is plain, worn, without any traces of rivets. Length: 2.9 cm, width: 1.8 cm, thickness: 0.2 cm, weight: 6.24 g.

6. *Belt fitting* (Inv. No. Б-3168; *Fig. 1. 6a–b*): Rectangular belt fitting cast from a copper-base alloy. Its front side is worn, the decoration is crudely wrought. The highly stylized floral pattern is arranged centrally, the background and the motifs cannot be properly distinguished. The pattern consists of two symmetrically arranged horizontal tendrils, branching off and terminating in trifoliate ornaments. The two shorter sides are slightly curved, and the upper and right sides have a narrow edge. The worn back side is polished flat, without any traces of rivets. The fitting is perforated from the front side in the centre of its upper edge. Length: 2.7 cm, width: 1.8 cm, thickness: 0.15 cm, weight: 4.82. g.

7. *Belt fitting with loop pendant* (Inv. No. Б-3164; *Fig. 1. 7a–b*): Bipartite fitting made from copper-base alloy sheet with a loop-pendant made of similar material. The upper plate is trapezoid with its edges bending downwards. A tapering suspension plate bent back into a hook is riveted to the back of the lower part.

The large, hemispherical head of the rivet is seen in the lower third of the front side. The upper plate of the mount was perforated in three places where rivets with large hemispherical heads were placed, of which only the lowermost one remains. The central part of the fitting is slightly deformed. The loop pendant forming the lower part is worn where it is attached to the hook. Here its cross-section is rhombic, while elsewhere it is circular. Length: 4.6 cm, width: 1.5 cm, thickness of plate: 0.08 cm, diameter of loop: 2 cm, thickness of loop: 0.3 cm, weight: 5.21 g.

8. *Strap end* (Inv. No. Б-2174; *Fig. 1.8a–b*): Short, pentangular belt end cast from a copper-base alloy. On its upper end a wide, closed, case-like edge was formed, in whose front side centre a beak-like protrusion points toward the centre of the object. This central point is

encircled by three rivets with large, hemispherical heads fixed along the lower edges of the object. Two rivet heads are slightly concave in the middle. Length: 2.7 cm, width: 2.6 cm, thickness of plate: 0.8 cm.

9. *Bronze mirror* (Inv. No. Б-0190; *Fig. 1.9a–c*): Fragment of a flat, disc-shaped bronze mirror with an irregular, uneven fracture line. Prior to conservation, its both parts got badly scratched. The decorated side, embellished in flat relief, is worn. It is divided into four heart-shaped fields by tendrils. The floral motifs within the fields are arranged centrally. In the centre, a rectangular field enclosed by the four tendrils was created. The back of the mirror has a plain, even surface, densely covered with deep scratches. Diameter: 6.1 cm, thickness: 0.15 cm, weight: 15.3 cm.

## THE VRAP GROUP

In 1901, an important treasure came to light during agricultural work in the vicinity of Vrap village. The assemblage of forty-one pieces represents a large amount of gold and silver<sup>2</sup> and contains works of art which are of primary importance for the archaeology of the Balkans in the 8th century, e.g. some Byzantine metal vessels with Greek control stamps on their bottoms, indicating that they had been manufactured before 659.<sup>3</sup> The gold belt mounts of the treasure (cast and pressed ones) are, however, even more intriguing. They do not make up a complete set, but must have belonged to different sets. Josef Strykowski who was the first to publish these pieces, compared them to 8th century cast bronze ornaments discovered in the Carpathian Basin.<sup>4</sup> This opinion was accepted and the theory of the treasure's Avar origin dominated the research for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

Parallels in the Balkans had already been noticed by Joachim Werner who considered the finds from Vrap and the Avar treasure of Erseke as a single group and associated them with the bronze belt buckle found at Zlatare in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of a Byzantine origin of the treasure made its first appearance in the work of Zdenek Klanica who, considering the unfinished pieces, suggested a Syrian or Cyprus origin.<sup>7</sup> Gábor Kiss reached a similar conclusion in his study on the gilt bronze belt sets of the Late Avar period. He observed that these pieces often feature ornaments typical to the Vrap treasure and supposed common Byzantine prototypes of both groups.<sup>8</sup> Uwe Fiedler made significant progress by not only tracing parallels in Bulgaria (Velino) but also calling attention to the technical and stylistic differences between the belt buckles from Vrap and Velino on the one hand,

<sup>2</sup> In total, 5600 grams of gold and 1500 grams of silver. WERNER 1986.

<sup>3</sup> The gold chalice decorated with birds; the gold Eucharist chalice bearing the personifications of four cities (Constantinople, Rome, Cyprus, Alexandria); two gold candlesticks; the silver font with countermark; and the silver jug with Greek inscription and Byzantine monograms on the bottom are clearly of Byzantine origin, as indicated by the inscriptions, their style, and the countermarks (WERNER 1986, 12). The gold and silver plates with handles most probably also belong to the art of Byzantine toreutics (BÁLINT 2004, 278–281) and are not to be considered as nomadic products as supposed originally by Joachim Werner (WERNER 1986, 16).

<sup>4</sup> STRYGOWSKI 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the treasure most probably originating from Erseke and containing gold and silver mounts became generally known as an 'Avar Treasure'. Cf. WERNER 1986, 16. The Late Avar parallels of the belt mounts in the Vrap treasure were gathered by Peter Stadler (STADLER 1986, 105–118, Abb. B, Karte 1–6).

<sup>6</sup> WERNER 1986, 64, Fig. 18. 1.

<sup>7</sup> KLANICA 1991.

<sup>8</sup> KISS 1995, 101.

and the late Avar bronze works on the other. In his opinion too, the treasure was of Byzantine origin.<sup>9</sup> Falko Daim did not even doubt the Byzantine origin of the objects and interpreted them as a sign of Byzantine presence around Dyrrachium.<sup>10</sup> Researchers in Bulgaria, on the contrary, have always asserted the proto-Bulgarian origin of the treasure. Stanislav Stanilov emphasized its affinities with the steppe region and considered it as an eastern heritage of the early Bulgarian culture. His reasoning is rooted in the traditional Semperian way of thinking, often recurring even nowadays in the early medieval archaeology of East Europe.<sup>11</sup> As attested by some recent finds, belt fittings belonging to the Vrap group are known from early Bulgarian burials too.<sup>12</sup>

There is a general consensus on the dating of the finds Joachim Werner dated the finds to the last third or the end of the 7th century, and this date has been accepted by Peter Stadler too. Parallels from the Carpathian Basin strongly suggest a date around the first half of the 8th century, the exact date being slightly controversial, since the style might have been current for a long time. Falko Daim dated a belt end in the Velino find to the second half of the 8th century and presumed therefore a longer period of production,<sup>13</sup> while

Uwe Fiedler, considering the great stylistic uniformity of the finds, assumed rather narrow time limits.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, there are two different opinions regarding the place of origin and the frequent usage of this style. Some scholars, in a conventional way, consider this kind of objects as nomadic heritage, while others trace their origins in the Byzantine world. The pieces in the Stara Bulgaria Collection may offer some clues to clarify this controversy. They were mentioned for the first time by Falko Daim (based on the vague information provided by Rasho Rashchev and Boyan Totev) who, however, did not provide a description or interpretation of the items.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Stadler has made a relevant distinction between the finds of Group No. 1, 2, and 3 from Erseke. Group No. 1 included pieces both represented in the Erseke and Vrap treasures; Group No. 2 contained pieces which had no parallels in the Vrap treasure but showed similarities to late Avar finds; to Group No. 3 belonged singular pieces of the Erseke find with no parallels whatsoever.<sup>16</sup> In the following discussion, only group No. 1 will be considered, and the Vrap–Erseke-group will be treated together because of their stylistic and technological similarities and the small distance between the find places.<sup>17</sup>

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VRAP STYLE AND RELATED PIECES OF THE VARNA COLLECTION

The definition of the Vrap–Velino or Vrap–Erseke-group of finds is a controversial issue. The Vrap group can actually be defined on the basis of the belt mounts belonging to this find. Although

the treasure itself shows a great degree of heterogeneity, the decoration of the belt sets is stylistically homogeneous. This decoration is conceived as shallow relief consisting of winding rounded

<sup>9</sup> Among the major differences it deserves to be mentioned that the mounts and belt ends of the Vrap, Erseke, and Velinovo finds are cast from gold and silver; they are carefully worked and chiseled after casting and typically feature central half-palmette compositions, etc. (FIEDLER 1996, 254–255). The assumption of Byzantine origin was repeated in subsequent works by the same author: FIEDLER 2008, 220.

<sup>10</sup> DAIM 2000, 106–107. Falko Daim describes them as ‘Vrap-type’, assuming that the belt mounts belonged to the same set (DAIM 2000, 87). This assumption can not be verified according to our present knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> For the genesis and the perils of this kind of reasoning see MAROSI 1996; MAROSI 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Finds from Dividiadovo with the coin of Anastasius II (713–715) (ATANASOV ET AL. 2007, Fig. 2.) and Târgșor (STANILOV 2009, 147, obr. 2).

<sup>13</sup> DAIM 2000, 183–184, Taf. 112.

<sup>14</sup> FIEDLER 2008, 220. This dating has been recently accepted by Gergely Szenthe in his study dealing with the parallels of the Vrap treasure in the Carpathian Basin (SZENTHE 2009, 69).

<sup>15</sup> DAIM 2000, 104, note 51.

<sup>16</sup> STADLER 1991, 195–198.

<sup>17</sup> Some scholars considered the find of Erseke as a forgery (cf. KISS 1986, 144, note 37), but the study by Peter Stadler has convincingly ruled out this possibility (STADLER 1991, 201–202).

leaves and half-palmettes made up of one or two sickle-shaped leaves. The half-palmettes are arranged either radially or along a wavy line.<sup>18</sup> They are most often symmetrical. A further feature of these belt ornaments is that they are made of precious metals, while their counterparts from the Carpathian Basin are gilt.<sup>19</sup> Regarding their manufacturing techniques, they are carefully elaborated, finely smoothed, and occasionally even the drill is applied.

It has been already mentioned that Peter Stadler distinguished three categories within the Erseke treasure. We have decided only to deal with those pieces of the Varna collection that belong to the Vrap–Velino-group according to his criteria.

Among the finds of the collection, there is no exact parallel of the Vrap pieces, whether material or the high technological level of manufacturing are concerned. There are no gold or silver cast items with signs of elaborate cold work (careful dressing or drilling), a characteristic feature not only of the pieces in the Vrap and Erseke treasures but also of those originating from Velino.<sup>20</sup> The most important feature of the Vrap group, the decoration in shallow relief, is clearly recognisable; it is most apparent on the rectangular mount (*Fig. 1. 5a–b*) and the mirror (*Fig. 1. 9a–c*).

The ornamental design shows further similarities. Radially arranged compositions are frequent; in these cases half-palmettes are attached to a central rhomboid panel. This kind of radial composition appears on three types of mounts (rectangular, square, and disc-shaped) in the collection.

Parallels for this type of decoration are found on the strap jackets No. 24 and No. 25, and on the large belt end No. 14 in the Vrap treasure.<sup>21</sup> It is also known from the Erseke find: on two buck-

ler-shaped mounts with hinge-joint pendant,<sup>22</sup> on a number of large belt ends,<sup>23</sup> on two rectangular mounts,<sup>24</sup> and finally on the mounts from Kamenovno<sup>25</sup> and Komárno-Váradího.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, this type of decoration must have been widespread in the given period and appeared as a general motif both in Bulgaria and the Carpathian Basin. The rectangular mount featuring four half-palmettes, radiating from a rhomboid panel (*Fig. 1. 5a–b*), conforms well to the so-called rank-ornament of the Vrap group.

The decoration is similar to that of the strap jacket No. 24 and the rectangular field of the large strap end No. 14 from the Vrap treasure as well as to the rectangular mount of Erseke<sup>27</sup> and the mount of Komárno-Váradího. which all corroborate our assumption regarding the widespread usage of this particular motif. The differences must, however, be emphasized with equal strength. The parallels cited above are all cast from gold or silver. They were elaborated after casting very carefully, which is completely missing in the case of the piece from Varna. An even more important difference is to be noted on the reverse side of the pieces. The Varna specimen does not have a cast fastening spike but a hole in the centre of its upper part, which was most probably meant to serve its fastening.<sup>28</sup>

In the case of the other rectangular mount (*Fig. 1. 6a–b*) the composition is similar to that of the previous piece, the difference being that the decoration is not made up of half-palmettes but of a tiny branch ending in four trifoliate tendrils. A similar decoration is seen on a mount from Erseke,<sup>29</sup> even if the technical differences are considerable: the piece from Erseke is openwork while the mount Б-3168 at Varna is not. These observations lead to the conclusion that the rectangular mount may be

<sup>18</sup> SZENTHE 2009, 62, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the gilt bronze mounts see KISS 1995, 99–126.

<sup>20</sup> FIEDLER 1996, 248.

<sup>21</sup> The finds of the Vrap treasure are numbered according to STRYGOWSKI 1917; the system was employed later by WERNER 1986 and DAIM 2000 too.

<sup>22</sup> STADLER 1991, 210, Taf. 1. 1–2. The Vrap treasure contained a piece made in the same mould (!).

<sup>23</sup> STADLER 1991, 211, Taf. 2. 1–3, 6.

<sup>24</sup> STADLER 1991, 211. Taf. 2. 4–5.

<sup>25</sup> STANILOV 1997; DAIM 2000, 104, Abb. 18.

<sup>26</sup> CILINSKÁ 1982; DAIM 2000, 106, Abb. 23.

<sup>27</sup> STADLER 1991, Taf. 3. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Uwe Fiedler mentioned a grave find uncovered in a Danubian Bulgar cemetery (Izvorul 304 child grave) where the mounts were worn as pendants (MITREA 1989, 208, Fig. 48; FIEDLER 2008, 131).

<sup>29</sup> STADLER 1991, Taf. 2. 4–5.

considered as an imitation of a Vrap-style mount with a central composition. The fastening spike and the loops cast together with the mount, typical of Byzantine mounts, are missing, just as in the case of the previous piece, but the fastening hole is present. The level of craftsmanship is much inferior, the craftsman did not intend or manage to achieve something similar to the Erseke mount, which most probably served as his model.

The collection contains four cast horseshoe-shaped hole fittings. They are uniformly characterized by a decoration executed in shallow relief. Two of them are decorated with tendrils (Inv. No. Б-Я 28; *Fig. 1. 1a–b*; Inv. No. Б-3227; *Fig. 1. 2a–b*), while the other ones with a cable pattern (Inv. No. Б-4257; *Fig. 1. 3a–b*; Inv. No. Б-0033; *Fig. 1. 4a–b*). The tendrils on the first pieces are rendered quite summarily and they are also heavily worn, but it is clear that the person who manufactured the mount Inv. No. Б-Я 28 (*Fig. 1. 1a–b*) intended to use the flat tendril decoration in shallow relief, a characteristic feature of the Vrap group. On the other hand, this piece is quite different in its form from the mounts belonging to the Vrap treasure because the protruding part on its arch is trapezoid, while in the case of the Vrap pieces these parts are square or rectangular. The decoration, however, is identical with that of the horseshoe-shaped hole fitting found at Someşeni.<sup>30</sup> Differences are only observed in the mount type because in the Varna collection there are pieces with spikes cast together with the fitting (*Figs. 1. 1a–b and 3a–b*), pieces with holes (*Fig. 1. 4a–b*) as well as pieces combining the two methods (*Fig. 1. 2a–b*).

The mounts with moulded upper parts and loop pendants are both present in the Vrap<sup>31</sup> and the Erseke<sup>32</sup> finds. Their geographical distribution was analysed by Peter Stadler who paid due at-

tention to the occurrences in the Carpathian Basin too.<sup>33</sup> The pieces coming from an Avar context can be dated to the turn of the 7th and 8th centuries, but similar pieces are also known outside the Avar territories on the East European steppe, along the Lower Danube, and from the graves of the Albanian Koman culture.<sup>34</sup> The Vrap treasure contained a piece made of gold; in every other case, including the specimen at Varna, the mounts were made of bronze. An interesting parallel comes from a Slavic tumulus at Szamosfalva (Someşeni, Ro) where a similar mount with loop-pendant, though made of silver, was found.<sup>35</sup>

The bronze mirror of the Varna collection is of particular importance because to date, it is the only mirror decorated in the individual Vrap-style. Its significance is comparable only to that of the round mount from Romanovskaâ Stanica, which has been shown to belong to the Vrap group by Falko Daim.<sup>36</sup> Both the high level of craftsmanship and the ornamental decoration contribute to the outstanding importance of this piece in the Vrap–Velino-group.

The significance of the objects presented here lies primarily in the fact that they show some features of the Vrap–Velino-group, even if in most cases only in a simplified form. The Stara Bulgaria Collection of Varna seems to corroborate the conclusion that the elite culture represented by the Vrap find was present in a certain way in Bulgaria as well but cannot be regarded as a widespread phenomenon, since the ornaments of the Vrap group were applied to simple bronze imitations only in a quite simplified form. The impact of the Vrap–Velino-group is most clearly discernible in the choice of the shallow relief, in the form of the palmettes, and in certain compositional principles. All these features appear on a new kind of object, i.e. on a bronze mirror.

<sup>30</sup> MACREA 1958, 351–370.

<sup>31</sup> WERNER 1986, No. 29, Taf. 24. 29a–30.

<sup>32</sup> STADLER 1991, 212, Taf. 3. 8.

<sup>33</sup> STADLER 1991, 214, Karte 1.

<sup>34</sup> For their distribution cf. GARAM 1997, 27.

<sup>35</sup> MACREA 1958, 351–370; WERNER 1986, Abb. 4.

<sup>36</sup> DAIM 2000, 105, Abb. 20.

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## A VRAP–ERSEKE-KÖR LELETEI A VÁRNAI STARA BULGARIA MÚZEUMI GYŰJTEMÉNYBŐL

A várnai Stara Bulgaria Múzeumi Gyűjtemény Északkelet-Bulgáriaiából származó, többségében 7–11. századi, fémről készült „apró leletekből”, főként öv- és lószerszámveretekből, csatokból álló gyűjtemény, amely közel másfél évtizedes gyűjtőmunka eredményeként jött létre. 2007-ben egy bolgár–magyar régészeti projekt keretében valamennyi lelet restaurálásra, fotózásra és leírásra került, a kötet kiadása folyamatban van. Jelen dolgozatunk a gyűjteményben található, a Vrap–Erseke-körhöz hasonlóságot mutató leleteket foglalja össze és értékeli a lelethorizontra való tágabb kitekintéssel.

Az 1901-ben Vrap falu mellett mezőgazdasági munkálatok során előkerült, 41 tárgyából álló leletegyüttes nemcsak a nagy mennyiségű nemesfém, hanem a tárgyak művészeti értéke és kidolgozása miatt is a 8. századi Balkán egyik legkiemelkedőbb tárgyi emléke. A kincs több bizánci nemesfém edényt is tartalmaz, amelyek az aljukon található görög kontrollpecsétek alapján 659 előttre datálhatóak, de igazi jelentőségét a benne talált aranyból készült, öntött és lemezes övdíszek adják. Az övveretek nem alkotnak egy garnitúrát, valószínűleg több különböző együtteshez tartozhattak. Az övdíszeket már első publikálójuk, Josef Strygowski a Kárpát-medencei 8. századi bronzöntvényekkel vetette össze, és a kincs korai kutatását az avar eredet elmélete határozta meg.

A balkáni párhuzamok felgyűjtése már Joachim Werner munkájában megkezdődött, aki a vrap-i és az ersekei (Avar Treasure) leleteket egy körként kezelte, és kapcsolatba hozta velük a bulgáriai Zlatareból előkerült bronzcsatot is. A kincs bizánci eredetének lehetősége már Zdenek Klanica munkájában feltűnt, aki kifejezetten bizánci, szíriai vagy ciprusi termékként írt a kincsről a félkész termékek alapján. Hasonló eredményekre jutott Kiss Gábor a késő avar kori öntött, aranyozott bronz övgarnitúrák elemzése kapcsán, amikor kimutatta, hogy azokon gyakran fordulnak elő a vrap-i lelethez jellemző ornamensek, és ezek alapján bizánci előképekre következtetett. A leletegyüttes kutatásában Uwe Fiedler munkája jelentett áttörést, aki a lelet további bulgáriai párhuzamai (Velino) mellett kimutatta a vrap-i és velinói övvereteket a késő avar bronzművészettől elválasztó technikai és stílusi különbségeket is. Az övvereteket ő is bizánci készítményeknek tartotta. Falko Daim már egyértelműen bizánci termékeknek tekintette ezeket a tárgyakat, és a Dyrrachium környéki bizánci jelenlét emlékeként értékelte a leletegyüttest. A fentiekkel szemben a bolgár kutatás egyértelműen a kincselet protobolgár eredetét fogalmazta meg. Stanislav Stanilov a vrap-i kör sztyepei háttérét hangsúlyozva ezen emlékeket a korai bolgár tárgyi hagyaték keleti elemeiként értékelte.

A Vrap–Velino- vagy Vrap–Erseke-kör meghatározása nem egységes a szakirodalomban. A vrap-i kör a leletegyütteshez tartozó övveretek alapján határozható meg. Bár a kincselet viszonylag nagyfokú heterogenitást mutat, az övgarnitúrák díszítése jelentős stílusbeli egyezéstről árulkodik. A díszítés síkreliefes kialakítású, legtöbbször esetben kisméretű, körleves lapos indából és egy vagy két sarló alakú levélből álló félpalmatták alkotják. Az említett félpalmatták vagy centrális kompozícióba, vagy hullámvonalra illeszkednek. Legtöbbször esetben szimmetrikusak. A tárgyalta övdíszek további közös jellegzetessége, hogy általában nemesfémből készültek, vagy a Kárpát-medencei hasonló darabok esetében aranyozottak voltak. Technikailag pedig a gondos utándolgozás, a finoman lecsiszolt felületek és helyenként a fúró alkalmazása volt jellemző.

Peter Stadler három kategóriát különböztetett meg az ersekei lelet eredetiségével kapcsolatos tanulmányában: (1) a vrap-i és ersekei leletben egyaránt meglévő tárgyak, (2) a vrap-i leletben párhuzammal nem rendelkező, de a késő avar anyaggal rokonságot mutató tárgyak, (3) csak az ersekei leletben meglévő tárgyak. Munkánk során alapvetően azokat a tárgyakat válogattuk ki a várnai magángyűjteményből, amelyek – Peter Stadler kritériumrendszerét követve – a Vrap–Velino-körhöz köthetőek.

A magángyűjtemény tárgyai között technikai színvonaluk és nyersanyaguk alapján a vrap-i lelet pontos párhuzamaként értékelhető lelet nem található, így nincsenek meg a nemesfémből öntött és gondosan utánvésett, esetleg fűrt technikával készült példányok, amelyek nemcsak a vrap-i és ersekei tárgyak esetében jellemzőek, hanem a velinói öntvények esetén is megfigyelhetőek voltak. A gyűjtemény kevés emlékeként volt megfigyelhető a vrap-i és ersekei övdíszek jellegzetes felerősítési módja, az egybeöntött nittszegek nyoma. A vrap-i körhöz sorolható tárgyak legfontosabb jellemzője a síkreliefes kialakítású



díszítés is ritkán tűnik fel, jelen gyűjteményben is mindössze az egyik téglalap alakú veretre és a tükörrre jellemző.

A magángyűjtemény e tárgyainak jelentőségét leginkább az adja, hogy a Vrap–Velino-kör egyes elemei megtalálhatók benne, ugyanakkor sok esetben már megváltozott, leegyszerűsített formában. Úgy tűnik, hogy a vrap-i leletben is tükröződő elitkultúra bár jelen volt Bulgária területén, de mégsem tekinthető széles körben elterjedtnek. A Vrap–Velino-kör hatása leginkább a díszítés síkreliefes kialakításában, a palmetták formájában és a kompozíciós elvekben érhető tetten. A stílus új, korábban nem ismert tárgytípuson, egy bronztükrön is megjelenik.

Úgy tűnik, hogy a szerényebb kivitelű darabok vizsgálata további lehetőségeket is rejt, mint annak eldöntése, hogy a kincsleletek mintakincse bizánci vagy keleti eredetű-e. A bronz emlékek ugyanis önmagukban több minőségi csoportra oszthatók. A csoportosítás révén megállapítható, hogy a vrap-i-kör szélesebb társadalmi közeget fogott át, amely leletkör akár egyfajta frontier-divathatásnak is tekinthető.



Fig. 1. 1–4: Hole fittings; 5–6: Belt fittings; 7: Belt fitting with loop-pendant; 8: Strap end; 9: Bronze mirror  
 1. kép. 1–4: Lyukvédő veretek; 5–6: Övveretek; 7: Karikacsüngös övveret; 8: Szíjvég; 9: Bronztükör