

OBJECT BIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS FROM MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

Petar Parvanov

*National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2 Saborna Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria;
petar.parvanov@abv.bg*

ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of cultural biographies and biographical objects as a methodological framework for understanding the dynamic relationships between material culture, social identity, and historical memory in Early medieval Bulgaria. Drawing these notions together, this discussion traces the evolving significance of artifacts across different social and temporal contexts. Through a close reading of the Story of the Iron Cross—a Slavonic hagiographic text linked to the cult of Saint George—and analysis of some luxury items from the same period, this paper demonstrates how objects both real and fictional were imbued with complex social, political, and sacred meanings. The Iron Cross narrative in particular is rearranged through the stages of the object's biography, emphasizing its manufacture, movement, and accumulation of commodities or status symbols but as active agents in the articulation of power, memory, and sacred economy in the First Bulgarian State. This study underscores the broad applicability of cultural biography frameworks to medieval material culture and invites reevaluation of how artifacts mediate historical experience.

Keywords: material culture, cultural biography, Early medieval Bulgaria

Archaeologists are obsessed with grouping and classifying artifacts; this is the foundational task of our discipline. Thus, it is surprising that one of the most relatable and productive ways to do so based on their “biographical” qualities has been disregarded in connection with objects from the medieval period in Bulgaria. In this article, I propose that the notions of object having distinctive biographies and of objects being used to represent the biography of distinct individuals was well-developed in early medieval Bulgarian society. Furthermore, this concept seems to have been crucial to the interplay between different social actors. It is therefore particularly suitable for understanding of material remains from this time.

In many ways, thinking about objects in terms of lifecycles offers insight into their possible meaning and significance while establishing an imaginative narrative form, so biographical thinking about artifacts should be approached first through an outline of its theoretical basis and critical contributions. After this brief review of the theory behind object biographies comes an intellectual experiment that strikes at the heart of the old disciplinary divisions between history and archaeology. Cultural biographies for objects based on origin, materials, and genealogy can be identified in the works of the medieval author Christodoulos. His rendition of the miracles of Saint George is uniquely grounded in the physical world as perceived by medieval people. This is especially evident

in the biography he creates for the miraculous Iron Cross. A series of rather luxurious archaeological finds are then discussed as examples of biographical objects from an early Bulgar cultural milieu. These objects' biographies vary in function but are unified by their reflection of power dynamics in the First Bulgarian State.

Whose biography? Setting the methodological framework

Constructing cultural biographies for objects is a compelling, dynamic approach to understanding artifacts' roles in society and historical trajectories. Rooted in the intersection of anthropology, archaeology, history, and material culture studies, this framework shifts the focus from viewing objects as static, unchanging entities to recognizing them as participants in complex social processes. By tracing the "lives" of objects—from their creation, exchange, and use to their eventual obsolescence or rediscovery—scholars gain insight into the cultural, economic, and political contexts that shape human societies.

As a methodology, constructing cultural biographies challenges the idea that objects have fixed meanings. Instead, it posits that an object's significance evolves over time and depends on the circumstances of its production, ownership, and interpretation. An artifact may begin as a utilitarian tool, become a symbol of social status, and later serve as a museum piece or a cherished heirloom. Each stage of an object's life reveals layers of meaning that contribute to a richer understanding of both the object and the cultural landscapes in which it exists.

This approach draws inspiration from the sociotechnical *chaîne opératoire* descriptions of material culture. The concept was initially formulated in Arjun Appadurai's seminal work on the social life of things (Appadurai 1986) and Igor Kopytoff's influential essay on things' cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986). Appadurai emphasizes that objects, much like people, have social lives and move

through various regimes of value. Kopytoff further developed this idea by advocating for a biographical approach in which objects are examined not just as commodities but as entities with distinct social trajectories over time.

A related and complementary concept is that of biographical objects. This perspective emphasizes that certain material artifacts come to embody and reflect the life histories of the individuals and communities associated with them (fig. 1). These objects often carry emotional, symbolic, or mnemonic significance and so serve as tangible markers of personal or collective experiences. For instance, a family heirloom may encapsulate generations of memory while a simple object like a diary or photograph might reveal intimate details of an individual's life. Biographical objects thus act as repositories of meaning, connecting the past and present through stories embedded in their materiality.

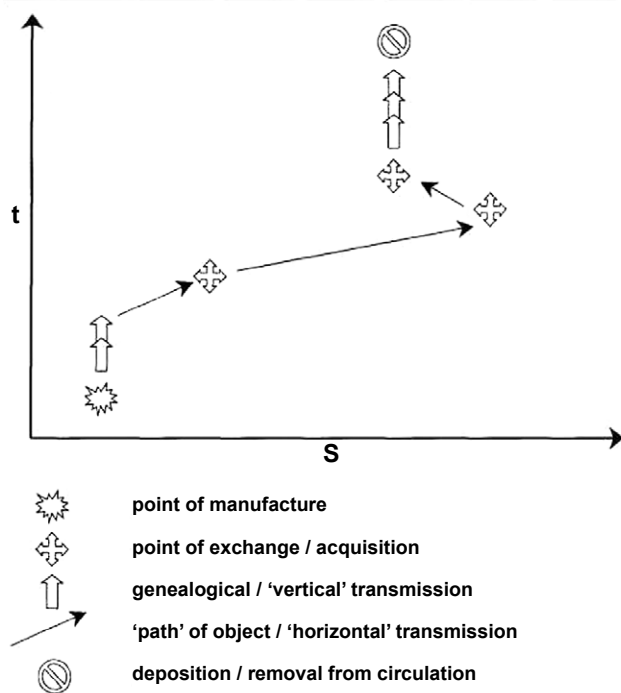


Fig. 1. Diagram suggesting possible trajectories of "cultural biographies" (after Bennet 2004, fig. 5.2)

Обр. 1. Диаграма с възможните стадии в създаването на „културни биографии“ (по Bennet 2004, fig. 5.2)

It is important to note that objects with cultural biographies and biographical objects are not exclusive to any particular culture or stage in societal development. They offer opportunities to read material culture and are often found in fundamentally similar modes across the literature or oral histories of communities ages and miles apart from each other. For instance, John Bennet has persuasively demonstrated the connections between Homeric texts and Late Bronze Age material culture in the Aegean (Bennet 2004). For him, the appearance of these objects in Homer is an element of epic that functions more subtly and pervasively than obvious references (Bennet 2004, 93). In this sense, objects and imagery are less pictures of something in particular than allusions necessary for building an expanded narrative.

The Middle Ages also provide a whole new set of examples for such highly referential forms of display (Williams 2016, 406 – 408). After all, this was a world shaped by constant interaction between spoken oral traditions, the written word, and the ever-present materiality of objects and places (Moreland 2001, 43 – 44). For a number of reasons, not least the preservation of textual evidence and aesthetic choices, elite material culture is easier to recognize and interpret in this manner. To give an example, when Stanislav Stanilov reconsiders the so-called Second necklace from the Preslav treasure, he recovers a new chapter of the cultural biography of this jewel and of the treasure as a whole without explicitly engaging with this intellectual framework (Stanilov 2021). We know elites actively construct and assign meaning to the manufactured world, but it would be misleading to disregard similar attitudes among all members of medieval societies. As Janet Hoskins reminds us, “*imagination works on objects to turn commodities, gifts, or ordinary utilitarian tools into sometimes very significant possessions, which draw their power from biographical experiences and the stories told about these*” (Hoskins 1998, 196).

Constructing cultural biographies for objects is particularly valuable for illuminating the entangled histories of people and things. It foregrounds the agency of objects—their capacity to influence social relations, evoke memories, and carry cultural narratives. Moreover, this approach underscores the importance of context. Objects do not exist in isolation; their meanings are shaped by the environments and networks across which they circulate. By considering factors such as production techniques, trade routes, ownership histories, and display contexts, scholars can reconstruct the complex webs of relationships that imbue objects with significance.

Ultimately, objects’ cultural biographies invite us to rethink the roles that material artifacts play in human societies. Their singular journeys through time and space shape microhistories, contested meanings, and enduring connections between past and present. This approach offers a powerful lens for examining the intricate interplay between people, objects, and cultural memory so far unused for the medieval period in Bulgaria.

Looking for the Iron Cross: an archaeological adaptation of a hagiographic narrative

The Story of the Iron Cross attributed to the monk Christodoulos is a collection of narratives that detail various miracles attributed to Saint George. The compilation is among a number of hagiographical texts from across Europe that supported the saint’s widespread veneration in the medieval period. Although some of the miracles draw inspiration from motifs in other well-known stories, like the miracle involving the captive youth from Paphlagonia (Aufhauser 1913), overall the text appears to be an original Slavonic contribution to Christian religious literature.

The complete ten-chapter collection best known as the Story of the Iron Cross is preserved in six manuscripts dating from the 15th – 17th c. (Ангелов 1978; Калоянов и др. 2007; Турилов 2000; Турилов 2011, 86 – 92). Individual miracles appear in various Slavic manuscripts from aro-

und Eastern Europe, however. The most popular fourth miracle about the Bulgarian soldier, for instance, is recorded in fifteen versions from the 14th – 17th c.

The consensus is that the text comes out of a Bulgarian cultural milieu, probably in the 10th c. (Турилов 2000; Спасова 2007, 171). Yet, attempts to attribute the story's authorship to Tsar Simeon I (Калоянов 2007) appear to overinterpret the evidence. Such a sensational link oversimplifies the complexity of medieval Bulgarian society by placing the spotlight exclusively on the ruler's personality. Nevertheless, these miracle narratives reflect the social realities behind the medieval cult of the saints. One of the possible ways to explore them is by employing a close reading (Bartlet 2017) based on an object biography approach.

The text has an unusually dynamic structure with multiple embedded narratives, retrospection, changing narrators, and hints to everyday objects (Христов, Хрисимов 2019) and popular religious beliefs, alongside elaborate Christian allegories. The main plot device, i.e. the McGuffin of the story, is the so-called Iron Cross, a fictional artifact manifesting the miracle-making capacity of Saint George and the power of God. The Iron Cross appears initially in the third miracle when its healing power helps a pilgrim to Nicea. From then on, its cultural biography becomes explicit as the Cross' movements are tracked throughout the remaining six chapters.

Following the sequence shown above, let us rearrange this narrative into stages befitting a cultural biography and beginning with the manufacture of the Cross. Typically, its luxurious material and exotic provenance are key to this first biographical stage. Miracles four and five describe the supernatural circumstances of its making. As the Bulgarian soldier George was running for his life following a lost battle with the Magyars, his horse broke his foot. Desperate, he prayed for a miracle to his patron Saint George. The horse appeared healed and helped George return to his village. Following the martyr's instruction and upon the horse's death, however, George discovered three iron rings holding the animal's fractured bone together. These three iron rings later healed George's sick wife when he finally returned from the war. Then, and again upon a request from the saint, the local smith made a cross from the rings.

This origin story creates an important link between an otherwise common religious item, a warrior saint, and the newly-converted Bulgarian people. Despite its nominally Christian context, the story contains multiple details and motifs that possibly have pre-Christian origins (Христов 2011). Very important in this respect are the incredible escape from the Magyars and the healing of the horse. Both have parallels in Indo-European traditions, specifically in the so-called Merseburg charms (Beck 2021) in which a similar horse cure and the release of a captured warrior are magically ensured.

Another noteworthy moment is the transformation of the miraculous iron rings into a single cross that unquestionably symbolizes the unity of the divine Trinity. Thus, the object's manufacture underlines its hallowed provenance and remarkable healing and protection qualities (Христов, Kostadinova 2022). Furthermore, the Cross' sacred value grows in two ways: vertically (or genealogically), because the narrative highlights that holy men use the Cross and are saved by it, and horizontally (or geographically), because the narrative follows the Cross' journey by land.

The most essential association in the Cross' genealogical transmission is the one with Saint George and his Bulgarian namesake. Another figure in this spiritual lineage is a hermit named Sophronius who briefly mentors George while he saves a shepherd and a traveler with the Cross' help. Sophronius sends George and the Cross to abbot Peter in an unnamed Nicaean monastery. According to the story, here Christodoulos encounters its miraculous power. Those who receive divine grace through the Iron Cross include various ill men and women and possessed adolescents George encounters on the way to the monastery.

The Iron Cross is entangled in a complex geographical network that contributes to its impressive biography. Yet, the home village of George where the Iron Cross was also made is never explicitly mentioned. The text only states that he lived in a Bulgarian village three days away from the battlefield. Some manuscripts offer an intriguing additional detail when George explains that he had no title and did not live in the same place as the local ruler but “*outside among the common people*” [но в нѣ, в людехъ] (Спасова 2007, 198). This wording may tempt some to identify his village as part of the residential quarter in the Outer City of Pliska. While not impossible, this statement can signify any rural area outside the city, especially since Pliska is explicitly mentioned later in the text when the traveling company reaches Sophronius.

The Bulgarian state’s core territory provides an important starting point for the Iron Cross. Even if relatively vaguely described, the text refers to Madra Pskovska and Madra Drstarska. These sites convincingly have been identified with Pliska and Drastar, two important centers in the region at the time. In his commentary, Ancho Kaloyanov (Калоянов 2007) plausibly suggests that the prefix Madra could mean a fortified palace, thus equating it to the concept of *auls*. Its phonetic similarity to Madara is hard to ignore, especially because the etymology of this toponym is not sufficiently clear. Rasho Rashev is more inclined to seek its meaning in various Greek words that describe its characteristic landscape features. He still considers the complex by Madara to be an organic part of the primary *aul* at Pliska (Рашев 2008, 132).

Another important location for the Iron Cross is the mountain by Vsemera grad, which has been identified as Messembria or present-day Nessebar. The city was located in the coastal zone that was often contested between Bulgaria and Byzantium. This is where Sophronius lives and where the seventh to ninth miracles take place in the narrative. The next location where a miracle occurs is in the outskirts of Constantinople. Often hailed as new Rome and new Jerusalem, the city was associated with imperial grandness all over the Christian world and adds an important geographical marker to the Cross’ biography. Yet, we could cheekily observe that, much like Simeon during his rule, the Cross is never mentioned as entering the Byzantine capital. It therefore escapes any overwhelming association with the city.

Instead, the author chose another final destination. This is the unnamed monastery in Nicaea where the reader initially encounters the enigmatic object. The symbolism in this choice is transparent but noteworthy. The birthplace of the Christian creed and the place of the First Ecumenical Council in 325 AD has immense ecclesiastical authority, especially considering the context of the “newly converted” Bulgar people from whom the Cross originates. Even if the path of the object is geographically complete in this narrative, it is implied that its sacred significance will continue to increase with each new miracle it enables at the monastery.

Of course, the Iron Cross remains a literary device from a medieval hagiographic text. As far as archaeology is concerned, writing down this story can be considered the final material transformation in the biography of a fictional object, thus fulfilling its narrative potential. Nevertheless, such stories exemplify the narrative potential of objects as a way to read material culture (Bennet 2004, 92) and confirm that medieval people conceptualized their possessions in a somewhat similar framework. If we take the overlapping materiality and ascribed value away from the textual references, this notion is still applicable to the social context of certain objects recovered from Early medieval Bulgaria.

Rings of power? Connecting objects and people

If objects can acquire biographies through their association with notable people, the opposite is certainly possible. Prestigious objects with cultural biographies, even if we are incapable of



Fig. 2. The cup of Sivin, great zhupan of Bulgaria, NAIM–BAS, inventory No. 4881, dimensions: 5.2 x 9.2 x 5.2 cm (after Daskalov et al. 2017, 120 – 121)

Обр. 2. Чашата на Сивин, велик жупан на България, НАИМ–БАН, инвентарен № 4881, размери: 5,2 x 9,2 x 5,2 cm (no Daskalov et al. 2017, 120 – 121)

restoring the details of those biographies, played a role in the presentation of individual status and identity. In other words, these objects actively contribute to creating biographies for individuals. Furthermore, the possession and performative use of such items explicitly signify that an individual is involved in important events, past or present. These objects are thus closely tied to personal identity.

In this sense, the biographical character of these now identifiable objects weave together personalities and the historical process even if individual names are lost from written accounts. The objects that will be discussed below all could be explored through the lens of cultural biography with further detailed material analysis. At this point, though, we will reverse this perspective by emphasizing their capacity to prompt memories or narratives about a single person's life and achievements.

One textbook example for a biographical item like this is the cup of Sivin from the collection of the NAIM–BAS (fig. 2; Daskalov et al. 2017, 120 – 121). The richly-decorated silver cup was discovered in a mid-9th c. grave from Veliki Preslav. The inscribed Greek text names the deceased and clearly establishes his elite Christian credentials: *Κ(ύρι)ε, βο(ή)θη + Σήβην ζουπάνος μέγας ής Βουργαρηάαν* [Lord help + Sivin Great Zhupan in Bulgaria]. The message is visually highlighted by decorative elements resembling the floral style known from other prestigious goods. Moreover, the cup was attached to the deceased's belt, which stresses its personalized character and indicates its special use for feasting.

Even without tracing details involving the manufacture of the cup or its acquisition by Sivin, we can already pinpoint its performative and most likely recurring use in very particular social settings. Sivin must have been a member of the royal retinue in Early medieval Bulgaria. This social group is mentioned in several early Bulgar inscriptions as *δρεπτοι άνθρωποι*, the “fed people” who shared a table with the ruler (Степанов 1999, 92 – 94). One indicative example is the so-called inscription 58 in which Khan Malamir (831 – 836) is described celebrating the construction of a new water fountain (Бешевлиев 1979, 225, № 58). According to the text, he often gave the Bulgars



Fig. 3. Golden ring with inscription, RHM–Shumen, inventory No. 16030, diam. 1.7 cm (after Georgiev 2017, fig. 5)
 Обр. 3. Златен пръстен с надпис, РИМ–Шумен, инвентарен № 16030, диам. 1,7 см (по Georgiev 2017, fig. 5)

food and drink and big gifts to the boils and bagains, the two most common aristocratic groups. As elsewhere in medieval Europe, feasting offered an opportunity for the Bulgar elite to showcase their social standings, which underscores the political importance of these events in personal life (Grozdanova 2017, 58 – 59).

Perhaps the most famous such feast is depicted in a miniature in the Vatican manuscript of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses, which dates to the 14th c. (Дуйчев 1962, № 51, 145'). The image depicts Khan Krum (803 – 814) celebrating his victory over the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros I (802 – 811) with Bulgar nobles in 811 AD. Admittedly, Krum takes the idea of object biographies to an extreme by making a cup from the skull of his vanquished enemy. Nevertheless, the story continues to illustrate a comprehensive adaptation of this particular attitude toward material culture. Objects are made to intentionally evoke memories about concrete historical episodes, probably in the living memory of their communities.

Clearly the material demonstration of immediate, personal proximity to power and access to wealth went beyond mere internal competition between members of the elite. As some other finds confirm, the distribution of items traceable to the ruler through some form of gift-giving was customary among the Bulgars. Written evidence traces this practice at least up to the time of the triumphant entry of Tervel (700 – 721) into Constantinople. Arguably the most telling example, though, is a golden ring from Pliska that bears the inscription *Ταῦτα τ(α) δακτύλι(α) δίδ(ει) (ο) ἄρχ(ων)* [the ruler gives these rings] (fig. 3; Григоров 2007, 57 – 58).

Overall, rings from all times and cultures are especially likely to serve gifts and as a visible sign of wealth (Calvarin 2025, 161). One reason for this is that rings can be mass produced and personalized relatively easily but adding particular, usually luxurious elements. The English king Henry III (1216 – 1272), for instance, gifted 2769 rings over a period of only 7 years between 1245 and 1252 AD (Carpenter 2020, 395). Medieval rings are also understood as embodiments of status, power, or religious affiliations and so ultimately as vehicles for self-representation (Renou 2021, 13 – 29; Jasperse 2025, 4).

The recent find of another ring (fig. 4; Българска археология 2022) seems to be quite relevant to this discussion. The ring is made of gold, immediately opening the question about the possible provenance and ownership of such a luxurious item. The archaeological context of the find is also noteworthy. It was discovered in a posthole, part of the foundations for the so-called Early Wooden Building north of the palatial center in Pliska (Aladzhov 2024, 184 – 186). Excavations of the wooden building in the immediate vicinity of the Round Pavement site are still underway but its is already more than 3,400 m². The building is oriented according to the cardinal directions and has



Fig. 4. Golden ring with human image from Pliska, diam. 2.7 cm, weight 27 g (Photo: P. Parvanov)

Обр. 4. Златен пръстен с човешко изображение от Плиска, диам. 2,7 см, тегло 27 г (Снимка: П. Първанов)

been connected to an underground passageway in this sector. According to current information, the structure is dated to the first half or middle of the 9th c.

A commemorative solidus of Emperor Theophilos (fig. 5) issued between 830 – 840 AD (Grierson 1973, 79, 408 – 412) confirms this dating. It was found in another posthole from the same structure. The imagery on the coin shows the emperor with his second son and co-emperor Michael. Similar coins of Theophilos have been discovered in Veliki Preslav preserved in contexts from the 10th c. (Костова, Попконстантинов 2011, 421).

The perfect condition of the coin from Pliska suggests that it has not been in intensive circulation. Perhaps the two golden objects were part of a foundational deposit for this sizeable building in the very center of the Bulgars' seat of power. If this is indeed the case, their individualized biographical value could have been symbolically transferred to the wooden building.

The ring has a relatively thick band and an engraved circular bezel. The surface generally appears smooth with occasional marks. The split at the back and the slightly bent and thinned ends indicate that the ring may have been resized or adjusted. Either way, this technical detail reveals the potential for interpersonal exchange through prolonged use and, by extension, the accumulation of a cultural biography.

The visual motif on the bezel shows a stylized human face surrounded by decorative elements such as floral or geometric patterns. The face appears somewhat abstract, with deep-set eyes and a long nose ending in a slightly open mouth. While the portrait exhibits elements of Byzantine style, the engraving appears more rudimentary and linear compared to the refined intaglio work of Byzantine goldsmiths. For now, it seems likely that this is a local imitation rather than direct import. Despite its schematic representation, the depiction clearly shows a figure wearing ceremonial embroidered clothing (possibly a *loros*) and what appears to be a headband or even a crown.

The first parallel that comes to mind for the ring is the gold medallion of Khan Omurtag (814 – 831) that is currently in the exhibition of NAIM-BAS (fig. 6; Йорданов 2001, 24 – 26). The khan's posture in his portrait and the precious material of the medallion clearly match two key aspects of the ring. The similar outline of the face on both medallion and ring makes the similarity even more evident. The insignia, however, is considerably different in how Omurtag's representation



Fig. 5. Solidus of Emperor Theophilos, diam. 1.9 cm, weight 4.9 g (Photo: P. Parvanov)

Обр. 5. Златен солид на император Теофил, диам. 1,9 см, тегло 4,9 г (Снимка: П. Първанов)



Fig. 6. Medallion of Khan Omurtag, NAIM-BAS, inventory No. 325, diam. 2.2 cm (after Йорданов 2001, 24 – 26)

Обр. 6. Медальонът на кан Омуртаг, НАИМ-БАН, инвентарен № 325, диам. 2,2 см (по Йорданов 2001, 24 – 26)

borrowed heavily from Byzantine iconography. For instance, he is wearing a cross scepter and *akakia* as well as a crown with a cross. The Christian symbols are clearly used to convey an ideological challenge rather than reflect the Bulgar khan's personal conversion. Perhaps the conspicuous absence of these symbols from the image on the ring simply reflects the local manufacture of the object.

The ring certainly depicts a high-status individual, which establishes a recognizable link between their identity and the object. The lack of an inscription leaves any identification of the individual to decoding the insignia and figuring out the particular social context of the ring's appearance. Even so, the ring's decoration serves exactly the same purpose as the iconography on the medallion or inscribed rings given by the khan. It is a relatively safe guess that this is indeed a depiction of the ruler or at least a member of his household. Thus, this ring clearly belongs to the material network that underlay the redistribution of power among the early Bulgar elite in very personal terms.

Ring-giving among the Bulgars perfectly fits a pre-monetary economic model defined by simple commerce and ceremonial gifts that was found across Europe and understood almost entirely through Germanic precedents and warrior ideology (Moreland 2010). There is a danger in automatically imposing its universal applicability onto economic relations on the Lower Danube. As the coin of Theophilos or the iconography on Omurtag's medallion attest, an object's meaning can shift greatly in different temporal and cultural contexts. Still, the existence and appreciation of objects with clear biographical characteristics plays a role in the creation of value in the political and sacred economy of the First Bulgarian State.

The spatial proximity of the palace to the location where this ring was finally deposited and ultimately uncovered makes this link even more obvious. If we accept that the placement of the ring and coin is deliberate, this represents a highly symbolic transformation. An individualized display of commodified wealth is integrated into an architectural demonstration very much aligned with the Inner City's urban landscape at the time. These two strategies, one centered on large-scale construction and another focused on luxury objects, work in tandem and constitute an important element in an unspoken social contract.

Conclusion

In conclusion, application of the cultural biography framework to both fictional and material artifacts reveals the intricate ways in which objects actively participated in the social, political,

and religious life of early medieval societies. Analysis of the Iron Cross from the Story of the Iron Cross, alongside actual everyday items like drinking cups or rings, demonstrates that material culture served not merely as a backdrop for historical processes but as an integral component in the articulation of identity, authority, and collective memory. Whether real or imagined, objects accrued complex biographies that were continually reshaped by their makers, users, and interpreters.

In the context of medieval Bulgaria, the deliberate association of objects with elite individuals and sacred narratives underscores their role as dynamic agents within political economies. By attending to the biographical trajectories of objects, the processes through which material culture mediated social relationships, constructed historical consciousness, and reinforced systems of power and belief are better grounded in historical reality. Hopefully this approach will invite more nuanced understandings of the material past and prompt more interconnected reconstructions of life in the past.

Acknowledgments

This article has been a long time in the making; some aspects of it were presented at conferences in Nicosia, Cyprus and Shumen, Bulgaria. I am grateful for the comments I received from engaged audiences on both occasions. When it comes to cultural biographies, I am especially grateful to Alice Choyke for our in-depth discussions on the topic. I am also thankful to Andrey Aladzhov for sharing the opportunity to work and present on some of our many fascinating discoveries from Pliska.

References/Цитирана литература

- Aladzhov 2024: A. Aladzhov. Two wooden buildings and the Arena of Pliska. – *Studia Academica Šumenensia*, 11:1, 2024, 184 – 192.
- Appadurai 1986: A. Appadurai. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, 1986.
- Aufhauser 1913: J. Aufhauser. *Miracula S. Georgii edidit Joannes B. Aufhauser*. Leipzig, 1913.
- Bartlet 2017: R. Bartlet. Medieval Miracle Accounts as Stories. – *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 82(2), 2017, 99 – 112.
- Beck 2021: W. Beck. *Die Merseburger Zaubersprüche: Eine Einführung*. Petersberg, 2021.
- Bennet 2004: J. Bennet. Iconographies of value: words, people and things in the Late Bronze Age Aegean. – In: J. Barrett, P. Halstead (eds.). *The emergence of civilisation revisited*. Oxford, 2004, 90 – 106.
- Calvarin 2025: J. Calvarin. As a seal or a sign: Bishops' rings and their metaphors. – In: J. Jasperse (ed.). *The Social Lives of Medieval Rings*. Leeds, 2025, 161 – 188.
- Carpenter 2020: D. Carpenter. *Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule, 1207 – 1258*. New Haven, 2020.
- Daskalov et al. 2017: M. Daskalov, Sn. Goryanova, M. Raycheva, G. Grozdanova (eds.). *Pagan Bulgaria. Power and society*. Sofia, 2017.
- Georgiev 2017: P. Georgiev. Society and state in Bulgaria (the end of the 7th – the middle of the 9th century). – In: M. Daskalov, Sn. Goryanova, M. Raycheva, G. Grozdanova (eds.). *Pagan Bulgaria. Power and society*. Sofia, 2017, 14 – 26.
- Grozdanova 2017: G. Grozdanova. On luxury, nobility and everyday life in pagan Bulgaria. – In: M. Daskalov, Sn. Goryanova, M. Raycheva, G. Grozdanova (eds.). *Pagan Bulgaria. Power and society*. Sofia, 2017, 55 – 63.
- Grierson 1973: P. Grierson. *Byzantine Coins*. Berkeley, 1973.
- Hoskins 1998: J. Hoskins. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*. New York, 1998.
- Hristov, Kostadinova 2022: Ya. Hristov, D. Kostadinova. Disease, Healing and Medical Knowledge in an Old Bulgarian Collection of Miracle Stories. – *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe*, 12, 2022, 95 – 117.
- Jasperse 2025: J. Jasperse. Introduction. Exploring the social life of things: Motion, gender, and preservation. – In: J. Jasperse (ed.). *The Social Lives of Medieval Rings*. Leeds, 2025, 1 – 32.
- Kopytoff 1986: I. Kopytoff. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. – In: A. Appadurai (ed.). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, 1986, 64 – 91.
- Moreland 2001: J. Moreland. *Archaeology and Text*. London, 2001.

- Moreland 2010:** J. Moreland. *Archaeology, Theory, and the Middle Ages. Understanding the Early Medieval Past*. London, 2010.
- Renou 2021:** J. Renou. *Rings of Power: The Interpretation of Early Medieval Objects of Adornment*. – In: Ch. Fletcher (ed.). *Everyday Political Objects: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary World*. Abingdon, 2021, 13 – 29.
- Stanilov 2021:** S. Stanilov. *The second necklace in the Preslav treasure*. (National Archaeological Museum. Catalogues, 22). Sofia, 2021.
- Williams 2016:** H. Williams. *Viking Mortuary Citations*. – *European Journal of Archaeology*, 19:3, 2016, 400 – 414.
- Ангелов 1978:** Б. Ангелов. Сказание за железния кръст. – Из старата българска, руска и сръбска литература, 3, 1978, 61 – 98. [Angelov 1978: B. Angelov. *Skazanie za zhelezniya krast*. – *Iz starata balgarska, ruska i srbska literatura*, 3, 1978, 61 – 98]
- Бешевлиев 1979:** В. Бешевлиев. *Първобългарски надписи*. София, 1979. [Beshevliev 1979: V. Beshevliev. *Parvobalgarski nadpisi*. Sofia, 1979]
- Българска археология 2022:** К. Бояджиев, Г. Грозданова (ред.). *Българска археология 2022. Каталог към изложба*. (Национален археологически музей. Кatalozi, 26). София, 2023. [Balgarska arheologiya 2022: K. Boyadzhiev, G. Grozdanova (red.). *Balgarska arheologiya 2022. Katalog kam izlozhba*. (Natsionalen arheologicheski muzey. Katalozi, 26). Sofia, 2023]
- Григоров 2007:** В. Григоров. *Метални накити от средновековна България (VII – XI в.)*. (Дисертации, 1). София, 2007. [Grigorov 2007: V. Grigorov. *Metalni nakiti ot srednovekovna Balgariya (VII – XI v.)*. (Disertatsii, 1). Sofia, 2007]
- Дуйчев 1962:** И. Дуйчев. *Миниатюрите на Манасиевата летопис*. София, 1962. [Duychev 1962: I. Duychev. *Miniatyurite na Manasievata letopis*. Sofia, 1962]
- Йорданов 2001:** И. Йорданов. *Корпус на печатите от средновековна България*. София, 2001. [Yordanov 2001: I. Yordanov. *Korpus na pechatite ot srednovekovna Balgariya*. Sofia, 2001]
- Калоянов 2007:** А. Калоянов. *Българските чудеса в Сказанието за Железния кръст*. – В: А. Калоянов, М. Спасова, Т. Моллов. „Сказание за железния кръст“ и епохата на цар Симеон. Велико Търново, 2007. [Kaloyanov 2007: A. Kaloyanov. *Balgarskite chudesata v Skazaniето za Zhelezniya krast*. – V: A. Kaloyanov, M. Spasova, T. Mollov. „Skazanie za zhelezniya krast“ i epohata na tsar Simeon. Veliko Tarnovo, 2007]
- Калоянов и др. 2007:** А. Калоянов, М. Спасова, Т. Моллов. „Сказание за железния кръст“ и епохата на цар Симеон. Велико Търново, 2007. [Kaloyanov i dr. 2007: A. Kaloyanov, M. Spasova, T. Mollov. „Skazanie za zhelezniya krast“ i epohata na tsar Simeon. Veliko Tarnovo, 2007]
- Костова, Попконстантинов 2011:** Р. Костова, К. Попконстантинов. *Манастир на чъргубиля Мостич, м. Селище, Велики Преслав*. – *Археологически разкопки и открития за 2010 г.* София, 2011, 419 – 422. [Kostova, Popkonstantinov 2011: R. Kostova, K. Popkonstantinov. *Manastir na chargubilya Mostich, m. Selishte, Veliki Preslav*. – *Arheologicheski otkritiya i razkopki za 2010 g.* Sofia, 2011, 419 – 422]
- Рашев 2008:** Р. Рашев. *Българската езическа култура VII – IX век*. София, 2008. [Rashev 2008: R. Rashev. *Balgarskata ezicheska kultura VII – IX vek*. Sofia, 2008]
- Спасова 2007:** М. Спасова. *Сказание за Железния кръст (превод)*. – В: А. Калоянов, М. Спасова, Т. Моллов. „Сказание за железния кръст“ и епохата на цар Симеон. Велико Търново, 2007. [Spasova 2007: M. Spasova. *Skazanie za Zhelezniya krast (prevod)*. – V: A. Kaloyanov, M. Spasova, T. Mollov. „Skazanie za zhelezniya krast“ i epohata na tsar Simeon. Veliko Tarnovo, 2007]
- Степанов 1999:** Ц. Степанов. *Власт и авторитет в средновековна България*. София, 1999. [Stepanov 1999: Ts. Stepanov. *Vlast i avtoritet v srednovekovna Balgariya*. Sofia, 1999]
- Турилов 2000:** А. Турилов. *К изучению Сказания инокa Христодула: датировка цикла и имя автора*. – В: А. Турилов (сост.). *Florilegium. K 60-letiyu B. N. Flori*. Moskva, 2000, 412 – 427. [Turilov 2000: A. Turilov. *K izucheniyu Skazaniya inoka Khristodula: datirovka tsikla i imiya avtora*. – V: A. Turilov (sost.). *Florilegium. K 60-letiyu B. N. Flori*. Moskva, 2000, 412 – 427]
- Турилов 2011:** А. Турилов. *От Кирила Философа до Константина Костенецкого и Василия Софийнина. История и култура славян IX – XVII вв.* Москва, 2011. [Turilov 2011: A. Turilov. *Ot Kirila Filosofa do Konstantina Kostenetskogo i Vasiliya Sofiyannina. Istoriya i kultura slavyan IX – XVII vv.* Moskva, 2011]
- Христов 2011:** Я. Христов. *Щрихи към „Сказание за Железния кръст“*. Благоевград, 2011. [Hristov 2011: Ya. Hristov. *Shtrihi kam „Skazanie za Zhelezniya krast“*. Blagoevgrad, 2011]
- Христов, Хрисимов 2019:** Я. Христов, Н. Хрисимов. *Аспекти от всекидневния живот в старобългарския агиографски цикъл „Сказание за железния кръст“*. – *Дриновский збірник*, 10, 2019, 110 – 120. [Hristov, Hrisimov 2019: Ya. Hristov, N. Hrisimov. *Aspekti ot vsekidnevniya zhivot v starobalgarskiya agiografski tsikal „Skazanie za zhelezniya krast“*. – *Drynovs’kyj zbirnyk*, 10, 2019, 110 – 120]

БИОГРАФИЧНИ АРТЕФАКТИ И АРТЕФАКТИ С БИОГРАФИИ ОТ СРЕДНОВЕКОВНА БЪЛГАРИЯ

Петър Първанов

Национален археологически институт с музей, Българска академия на науките, ул. „Съборна“ № 2, София 1000, България; petar.parvanov@abv.bg

РЕЗЮМЕ

Настоящата статия разглежда приложимостта на понятието „културна биография на предметите“ към материалната култура на Ранносредновековна България. Подходът, развит от Арджун Ападурай и Игор Копитов в контекста на антропологията и историята на материалната култура, предлага разбиране за артефактите не като статични обекти, а като активни участници в социални и политически процеси. Чрез проследяване на жизнения цикъл на предметите – от тяхното създаване и употреба до прехвърлянето им, преинтерпретацията или забравата им – изследването очертава допълнителни възможности за реконструкция на миналото.

В първата част от текста е представен теоретичният фундамент на понятието, като се акцентира върху неговата способност да свързва материални артефакти с човешките биографии и социалната динамика. Особено внимание е отделено на разликата между „предмети с културна биография“ и „биографични предмети“, които придобиват значение чрез личната или колективна памет.

Един от основните примери произхожда от неочакван източник. Това е т.нар. „Сказание за Железният кръст“, старобългарски религиозен текст, в който измисленият свещен артефакт – Железният кръст – придобива културна биография чрез поредица от чудеса, свързани със Св. Георги. Анализът проследява митологизираната изработка на предмета, както и вертикалното (генеалогично) и хоризонталното (географско) натрупване на сакрална стойност. Историята на кръста е пример за начина, по който въображаема материална култура може да бъде използвана за легитимиране на духовни и културни послания в рамките на конкретен исторически контекст.

Във втората част от изследването се разглеждат реални археологически находки като примери за биографични предмети. Сред тях се открояват сребърната чаша на великия жупан Сивин от Велики Преслав, златен пръстен с изображение на високопоставено лице от Плиска и други. Тези предмети се интерпретират не само като индикатори на социален статус, но и като активни участници в процесите на изграждане на власт, идентичност и колективна памет. Те са свързани с практики на даряване, пируване и сакрално освещаване на пространството в контекста на Първото българско царство.

Заключението подчертава, че подходът на културната биография предлага нова перспектива към изследването на средновековната материална култура. Независимо дали става дума за въображаеми или реални предмети, тяхната биография съдържа информация за сложните взаимоотношения между хора, обекти и властови структури. Така този подход може да служи като ефективен инструмент за по-нюансирани и интердисциплинарни анализи на миналото.

Ключови думи: материална култура, културна биография, Ранносредновековна България