

A Signet Ring with a Bee Emblem

(Vodoča necropolis, end of the XV–XVI century)

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Among the many hundreds of pieces of jewelry unearthed during the archaeological excavations carried out in the necropolis of the *Vodocki Crkvi* complex, in the village Vodoca near Strumica, 70 samples made the first selection and were published as the best preserved, the most significant, or the most characteristic.¹ In this selection, special attention as a result of its appearance and significance was given to the ring bearing an engraved bee, which was briefly described in the Catalogue.²

Bearing in mind the ring's appearance, its morphological features and methods of design, the engraved emblem, as well as its function as a seal, this paper will present a more detailed account of the said ring, with additional notes on information discovered within the context of research.

The ring was discovered in grave 916, during the archaeological campaign in 2000, by the archaeologist Jovan Ananiev, a long-standing researcher of the Vodoca necropolis.³

¹ МАНЕВА, 2007: Catalogue No. 1-70.

² Ibid.: Catalogue No. 49.

³ The first to research the Vodoca necropolis was Vasil Lahtov, who excavated approximately 100 graves in the period 1961-1962. Various archeological interventions were also carried out in 1973-1974 by the art historian P. Miljkovik-Perpek (МИЉКОВИК-ПЕПЕК, 1975: 19-20, illustration 1, 20). From 1979 to 2003, Jovan Ananiev carried out on-going, systematic archeological excavations in the necropolis, coming across over 1000 graves, dated from the late Middle Ages, all the way up to the XX century. The final excavations in this

Grave 916 is located in the quadrant Ao. 16. Like the other graves, it too did not have a tomb marker. Its location is a typical Christian one, in a west-east course, with a slight deviation of 5° to the north (illustration 1).

In the Journal of Excavations, grave 916 is noted as a freely dug pit. The technical documentation makes note of four stones placed around the edge of the pit, namely, one behind the head, two on both sides of the pelvis, and one next to the right foot. (Illustration 1)

The remnants of the decayed wood discovered over the deceased's chest support the existence of a wooden casket (illustration 1/6). The discovery of three iron nails with solid pyramid-shaped forms and flat heads goes to support this statement (illustration 1/3-5).

Two of the nails were discovered on the right and left of the feet (site object no. 2282, with the following dimensions: length – 18.8 mm, head – 16 x 15 x 6 mm, and cross-section – 6 x 6 mm, and site object no. 2284, with the following dimensions: length – 19 mm, head – 18 x 16 x 6 mm, and cross-section – 7 x 7 mm), while the third one was found by the right elbow (site object no. 2283, with the following dimensions: length – 17.2 mm, head – 15 x 13 x 3-4 mm, and cross-section – 6 x 6 mm) (illustrations 6 a-c).

According to the information from the documentation from the site, grave 916 belonged to “an adult male, whose skeleton was approximately 1.68 m in length, wholly preserved, but not in a very good condition, especially in the area of the skull”⁴ (illustration 1).

The damage to the osteological material is probably due to the shallow depth in which the skeleton was found at the moment of its archaeological discovery, namely, by the feet – 0.09 m under the surface, and by the head – 0.17 m.

The deceased was laid flat on his back, with arms crossed; his right arm on his waist, and his left on his chest.

necropolis were carried out by Vane Sekulov in 2004, leading to the discovery of another 23 graves.

⁴ According to the anthropologist D-r Fanica Veljanovska, who is studying the human, osteological material from the Vodoca necropolis, there is no detailed anthropometric analysis of the skeleton in grave 916. Actually, the skeleton belongs to the group of skeletons that were additionally buried with a special church service.

Apart from the iron nails that belonged to the casket, two rings were discovered by the deceased's right hand; however, bearing in mind how damaged the bones of his hands were, there is no information as to which fingers they were worn on (illustration 1/1-6; illustrations 2-6 a-c).

One of the rings (site object no. 2281) is an ordinary hoop made of two braided, bronze wires, with closed, covered edges; with (outer) diameter – 22 mm; (inner) diameter – 16-17 mm; cross-section – 2-3 mm.

In appearance, this ring is reminiscent of a hoop earring made of braided wires, with covered edges, typical for the period of the Middle Ages in this region⁵ (illustrations 4, 5).

The absolute certainty in the claim of the researcher of grave 916 from Vodoca that this hoop was worn on a finger on the right hand may be supported with other examples of such “hoop earrings” as rings.⁶

Earrings of braided wires appear as far back as the Classical period, and move into the Middle Ages, while the examples from Macedonia (Crkviste, Demir Kapija, Grobista, Varos – Prilep and Vodoca) show that they can be found even up to the XV and XVI century.⁷

The ring marked as site object no. 2280, found on the same hand, the right hand, is, together with the previously mentioned ring, one of the most striking discoveries excavated in the Vodoca necropolis.⁸ Its weight is 14.92 g, its height is 28 mm, and the inner diameter reaches up to 19 mm. The dimensions of the upper surface of the head, or the seal, are 14 x 12 mm (illustrations 1/1; 2 a, b; 3 a-c). It is cast in bronze and decorated with engravings.

The ring has a polished cross-section, becoming noticeably and characteristically thicker on the bottom. In the flat part of the ring, it expands, taking the shape of a thick, flat oval head, cast from the same material as the hoop.

The outer side of the head has been emphasized with a number of diagonal lines, at the very place where the Byzantium opulent rings from the

⁵ MAHEBA, 1992: 43.

⁶ MAHEBA, 2007: Catalogue No. 3.

⁷ MAHEBA, 1992: T. 13, 31/32aб, 31/101Б, 60/1-3; EAD.: 2007, Catalogue No. 3.

⁸ MAHEBA, 2007: Catalogue No. 49.

XIV century were richly decorated, oftentimes in the niello technique⁹ (illustration 2 b).

The seal is set on the upper surface of the head, with a deeply engraved line. Naively, though rather impressively drawn, there is a bee; a head with feelers, two side lines for the legs, a body with a pronounced sting, and in the upper part, above the body, the wings, represented by gentle strokes. The whole drawing is encircled by a deeply pronounced oval line that follows the edge of the head, i.e., it clearly denotes the seal (illustrations 2 a, b; 3 a-c).

The picture of a bee contains deep symbolism, and has been present throughout the millennia as an original metaphor of the beliefs, traditions and ornamentals of a number of peoples and cultures.¹⁰

The bee has a number of fascinating characteristics which man noticed and admired.

Its metamorphoses, which are indicative of the thread of everlasting life, as well as the cyclical movements in nature, the fertility function it has in the pollination of vegetation, its orientation skills, its discipline, industriousness, the benefits of the products it makes, as well as the fierceness with which it protects itself, no doubt stir up the desire to identify with this delicate, yet, so powerful creature.

The bee may be found in the decoration of various sacral, status, and utilitarian objects, as a synonym of some of the previously mentioned attributes.

⁹ The ring from the third decade of the XIV century that was unearthed in Skopje, made of silver and decorated with niello, is considered to be one of the most striking prototypes of the Byzantium goldsmith's trade. The later, traditional forms were copies made according to this sample, made with cheap materials and techniques (РАДОЈКОВИЋ, 1969: Catalogue No. 44; МАНЕВА, 1992: Т. 96, с/7.).

¹⁰ Concerning the numerous symbolic meanings of the bee in the prehistoric cultures, the Egyptian, Chinese and European antique civilization, in the Hebrew, Muslim and Christian religious teachings, in the beliefs concerning life after death, as well as in the temporal associative comparisons, in the emblems and heraldry, etc. (See: CHEVALIER – CHEERBRANT, 1987: 486-487; КУПЪР, 1993: 174-175; АЦОВИЋ, 2008: 92).

Its presence is a reflection of burial rites, yet it also contains elements of everyday life, symbolizing industriousness, honesty, and the acquisition of material and spiritual “goods”. That is the direction its emblematic and heraldic function is heading up to the very present.¹¹

The nectar, the propolis, the honey and the wax, with all of their healing, elixir-like, almost magical and prophylactic properties, as well as the nourishing and other practical uses that they possess just add to the spectrum of agreeable associations of its symbolism.

When talking about the ring from Vodoca depicting a bee, it needs to be pointed out that the choice of this motif may have been due to some of the previously mentioned characteristics. However, insisting on a clear-cut interpretation of the symbolism would mean moving in an intuitive, i.e., subjective direction in dealing with this issue, and thus it would be better to leave a trace of uncertainty in connection with the meaning in this case.

Concerning the temporal and cultural aspects of the bearer of this interesting artifact and its characteristic features, there are, nevertheless, several probable answers.

Grave 916 from Vodoca, from the aspect of stratigraphy, belongs to the later phases in the existence of the necropolis. The shallow depth, as well as the existence of a wooden casket hammered down with nails (illustration 1/1-6), preclude its belonging to the late Middle Ages stratum of the XIII-XIV century.

Bearing in mind their basic typological characteristics, it would be quite difficult to set both rings found by the right hand later than the XVI century,¹² this being especially true in the case of the signet ring with the bee.

Namely, according to its shape, that ring is typical of the later, simplified imitations of the distinguished, luxurious, Byzantine representations from the XIV century.¹³

The external protrusion in the ring in the section across the head is intended, with the purpose to have the seal of the ring facing the palm, for

¹¹ In the coat of arms belonging to S. Petkovski from Kumanovo, the blazon is represented with a blue base on the shield, on which there is a corrugated ermine belt among three golden bees...etc., while the motto says: *Effort Blessing Honor. Macedonian Armor* 3, 2009, 28.

¹² Cf. n. 5-8.

¹³ Cf. n. 9.

which there are detailed propositions in the written sources from that time.¹⁴

The volume and size of the inner diameter of the ring, as well as the gender characteristics of the deceased in grave 916, indicate that it belonged to a man.

In many things, this same ring from Vodoca with a similar provenance, as a continuation of the Byzantium tradition (in terms of the shape and the style of decoration), but bearing the motif of a scorpion as a seal is dated around the end of the XIV and the first half of the XV century. That ring is described as the ring of a male, an officer – a seal whose emblem is connected to being a warrior – a member of the unit trained to carry out sieges – the scorpions.¹⁵

The fact that the ring bearing the emblem of a bee is bigger and more massive in comparison with the one with the scorpion may be representative of the better financial state of its bearer, while the lower quality in craftsmanship, as well as the pronounced stylization in its workmanship reveals its later dating, towards the end of the XV and in the XVI century.¹⁶ In any case, both rings were made in local workshops.

The mentioned period in the Vodoca necropolis is testified to being populated by a rather well-established social class, people who could allow themselves richer material goods.¹⁷ Besides the archeological findings, this is also supported by the written sources and the information from the detailed Turkish census notebooks, in which there is data on the village of Vodoca, its social composition, as well as the financial state of its Christian-inhabitants in the XVI century.¹⁸

¹⁴ МАНЕВА, 2007: Catalogue No. 60, with cited bibliography.

¹⁵ МАНЕВА, 2009: illustration 1, 2 а-с, 3.

¹⁶ In the context of the Byzantine influence, in the neighboring regions rings bearing an engraved bee appeared in the Middle Ages and post-Middle Ages, with some differences in the motif, and with different typological characteristics. See: ring from the XIII century and ring from the end of the XV-XVI century; the second one also containing an illegible text engraved around the bee motif, as well as characteristic features of the late Gothic period (МИЛОШЕВИЋ, 1990: p. 61, Catalogue No. 15, p. 144, Catalogue No. 225).

¹⁷ МАНЕВА, 2007: Catalogue No. 1, 10, 22, 24, 25, 27-30 42-44, 49, 52, 56-60.

¹⁸ *Турски документи*, Volume V, Book III, 80, 81, 648, 657.

In connection to this, there is even a list of no less than 16 *bashtinari* (heirs of estates), descendants of the medieval *pronijari* (the *pronoia*), noblemen of lower rank and heirs of state land that correspond to the Turkish *çiftlik-saybis*.¹⁹

The question that remains open is whether any one of them is also a bearer, apart from the other testified emblems and/or coats of arms from Vodoča²⁰, of this ring with a bee, or whether the owner of this ring owes his financial status to a profitable business activity.

The ring bearing an engraved bee undoubtedly had a sphragistic function. It represented a seal with which its owner identified himself.

However, it is not certain whether by choosing the bee as his seal, the owner identified himself, up to a point, with some of its features (which is typical of the family or personal emblems, the complete or reduced heraldic symbols) or whether with this signet ring he was actually guaranteeing the quality of something that was connected to bees and/or their products.²¹ This second idea would have been typical of the ring bearer's professional capacity, a symbol of his social class, corporation or investiture.²²

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¹⁹ СТОЈАНОВСКИ, 1989: 241-249.

²⁰ МАНЕВА, 2007: Catalogue No. 1, 10, 40-47; Ead.: 2008/1, 169-183; Ead.: 2008/2, 397-406 etc.

²¹ In the historical sources from the XVI century (CAVALLI, 1560), apart from goats, wax was one of the most important export products from these regions. It was exported across Lissus to Ancona and Venice (МАТКОВСКИ, 1991: 180).

²² DERVIEUX, 1924: 56.

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Summary

Прстен – печатник со амблем на пчела

Некропола Водоча – крај на XV-XVI век

Гробот 916 од пространата некропола Водоча кај Струмица припаѓал на возрасен маж погребан во дрвен ковчег закован со железни клинџи. (сл. 1; сл. 6a-b)

На десната рака откриени се два прстена. Едниот е од впредени бронзени жици и е истоветен со наушниците кои на овие простори се во употреба од антиката, преку целото средновековие сè до XV-XVI век. (сл. 4, 5)

Другиот прстен претставува печат со врежана пчела (сл. 2a-b, 3a-b) како амблем или редуциран грб или пак како професионална ознака на сопственик чија работа е поврзана со пчелите и нивните производи.

Според своите морфолошки карактеристики овој прстен е подоцнежна, симплифицирана имитација на византиските прототипови и бил изработен од локални мајстори кон крајот на XV или во XVI век.

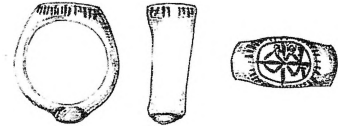
Во ова време во Водоча се забележува постоење на „баштинари“ – виден општествен слој меѓу христијанското население, поседници на наследен имот и потомци на пронијарите – поситното средновековно благодорништво. Тие, веројатно имале доволно голема економска моќ за да си дозволат релативно маркантни артефакти од материјалната култура.

НЕКРОПОЛА ВОДОЧА

ГРОБ 916 ♂



1-ѝрстѝен; инв.бр. 2280



0 1 2cm

2-ѝрстѝен; инв.бр.2281



6-дрво

Illustration 1. Vodoca necropolis, base of grave 916

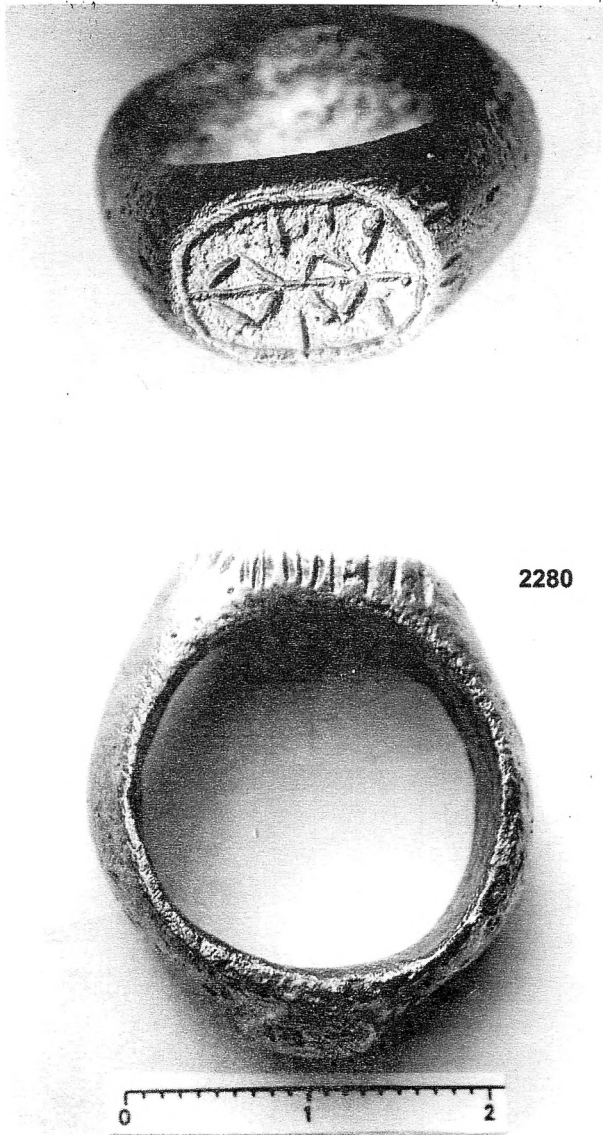
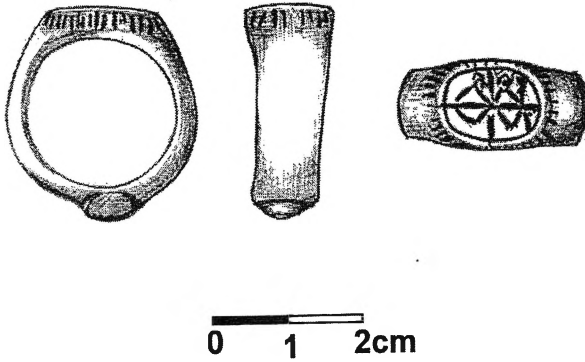
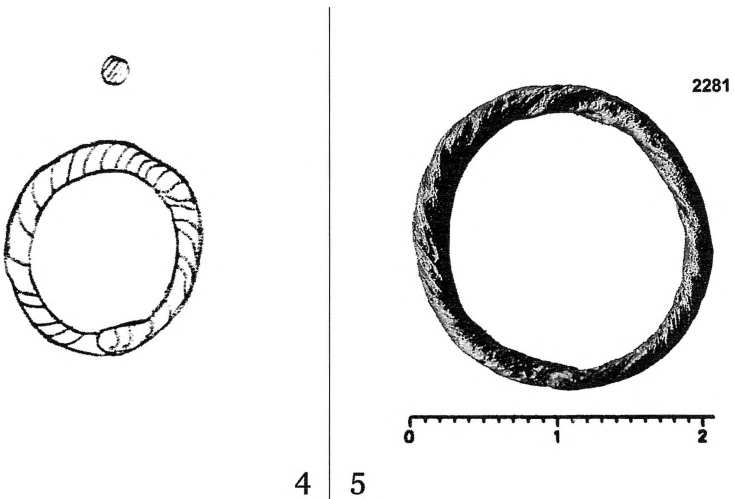


Illustration 2 a, b. Ring with a bee emblem



3



4 | 5

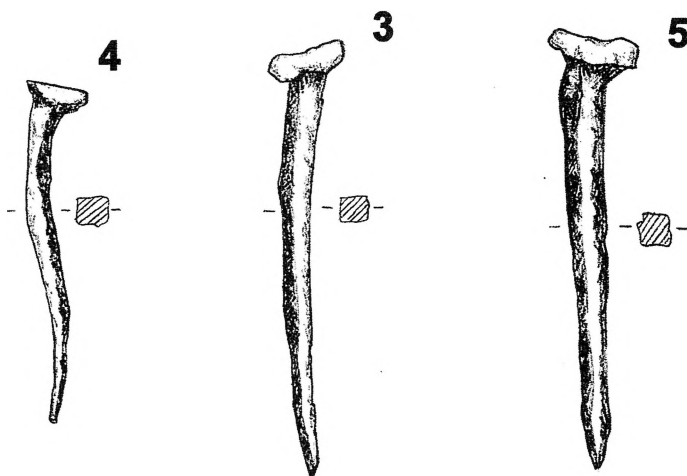
Illustration 3 a, c. Ring with a bee emblem (drawing: D. Spasova)

Illustration 4. Ring – hoop of braided wires (drawing: D. Spasova)

Illustration 5. Ring – hoop of braided wires

НЕКРОПОЛА ВОДОЧА

ГРОБ 916



0 1 2cm

3-железен клинец,
4-железен клинец,
5-железен клинец,

Illustration 6 a-c. Iron nails from a casket

