GREEK INSRIPTION ON GOLDEN FINGER RING
FROM NATIONAL MUSEUM IN BELGRADE

Abstract. – In the Collection of Late Roman and Early Byzantine material culture and art of the National Museum in Belgrade there is an octagonal golden finger ring, dating from the VI–VII century, registered under inventory number 113/IV. The ring has an engraved corrupted greek inscription, which should, according to the authors of this paper, be translated as follows: (Me) God forbid stomachache to occur. This object is a fine example of the so called prophylactic amulets. Its purpose was to protect its owner from stomachache that troubled him.

Key words. – Ring, greek inscription, prophylactic amulet, golden jewelry.

In the Collection of Late Roman and Early Byzantine material culture and art of the National Museum in Belgrade there is a golden finger ring from the unknown site in Serbia or Macedonia, acquired in 1908 and registered under inventory number 113/IV¹ (Fig. 1). The outer surface of the ring is of octagonal shape and inner surface is of spherical shape. Size of the ring is 2.4 x 2.2 cm, width of the hoop with inscription is 0.4 cm, while its weight is 9.05 gr. Size of the ring suggests that it was intended for a man. Finger rings of this shape with various votive inscriptions appear in the end of the 2nd century at many sites in the Central Balkans and in Pannonia² and they were also used during Late Roman–Early Byzantine period.³ It is logical that rings of this shape had inscriptions, first of all dedications to deities, because in the open out plane could be read the message of more complex contents. Inscription on the ring was very precisely executed, deeply engraved with fine goldsmith’s punch. Letters were emphasized and slightly elongated by triangular serif.

Spread out inscription on the outer surface of the ring is arranged in seven rectangular planes (Fig. 2):

ΘΕΟ/ΣΚΑ/ΙΛΕΥ/ΩΜΗ/ΦΥΙΝ/ΚΟΛ/ΩΠΟ/ΝON
Divided in words inscription would read:
ΘΕΟΣ ΚΑΙΛΕΥΜ ΦΥΙΝ ΚΟΛΩΠΟΝON

Orthographic mistakes, typical for this period in the Balkans are obvious so we can actually read the inscription like this:

Θεός κελεύω μή φένειν κολωπόνον.

Θεός could be nominative or vocative case singular, depending whether the owner of the ring is addressing a deity. In any case this indicates votive or apotropic character of this piece of jewelry. So, translation could be (Me) God or O God.

Κέλευω, verb meaning to exhort, command, order and with infinitive and negation also to forbid is here used in the first person singular of indicative present active. It should be translated as I prohibit and that indicates that Θεός is nominative. Mistake in writing καλεύω instead of κελεύω is obviously the result of poor education of the master, which engraved the inscription. Namely, diphthong ου and vocal ι have in medieval Greek the same sound value: e.

¹ Thanks to the kindness of Mrs Jelena Kondić, counselor in the National Museum this finger ring with other gold jewelry was studied by Dr Ivan Popović, scientific counselor of Archaeological Institute in Belgrade. It was published in I. Popović, Late Roman and Early Byzantine Gold Jewelry in National Museum in Belgrade, Belgrade, 2001, cat. 29.


Mή is negation typical for the infinitive, that is grammatical construction of accusative with infinitive that follows.

Φύειν is infinitive present active of the verb φύω, meaning to be, to become or transitive: to bring forth, to produce. Mistake in writing φύειν instead of φύειν resulted from the fact that in Early Byzantine time difference in reading between ει and ι (ι) disappeared.

Main problem in reading and interpretation of this inscription creates word κολασέων. It is obvious that it is accusative singular of compound word of which second part is ὁ πόνος – hard work, toil, labor, effort, pain and the like. In more than ten dictionaries of classical and medieval Greek that we consulted this compound word is not mentioned. First part of it, as it seems, should be looked for in the word τὸ κόλον – the colon or part of the bowels. Although, as we said there is no confirmation for the word ὁ κολασέων (κολασέων) in classical and medieval Greek authors, the Dimitrakis’ dictionary of the Greek language mentions nevertheless one similar word from everyday (demotic) language. It is word ὁ κολάσιον that means acute stomach pain. Due to the limited space for inscription engraving and possibly because of poor literacy of the author it was possible that omicron (ο) was lengthened into omega (ω) and the word shortened in the form of κολασέον meaning stomachache.

Complete inscription in that case could be translated as:

(Me) God forbid stomach ache to occur.

On the basis of everything mentioned above it could be concluded that finger ring was of apotropaic character. Such rings with representation of phallus, Hercules’ knot or Asclepius’ snake were very widely distributed in the Antiquity. There are often rings with inscriptions wishing happiness and long life or good health. Some-thing that distinguishes this inscription, if we understand it as apotropaic, from the others is its length and the fact that it relates to certain specific kind of illness i.e. pain. If we accept this reading, then the purpose of the ring was to protect its sick owner from stomachache that troubled him.

If we observe more closely the preserved specimens of antique and medieval jewelry with apotropaic inscriptions in Greek language, we shall see that finger ring from National Museum in Belgrade represents an extraordinary example of so called prophylactic amulets. Belief in their efficiency was so deeply rooted in the superstition not only of common, lower class people, but also of educated social elite that not even Christianity succeeded in uprooting the tradition of wearing the jewelry of this kind. Even church councils considered it appropriate to bring up this question and condemn this practice, but with no result. Inscriptions in the course of time only became adapted to the new Christian attitude.

The inscription text on the ring does not offer possibility to determine with complete certainty whether it should be ascribed to pagan or Christian tradition. However, mentioning of God without denoting his specific name, attribute or representation indicates that it is not a pagan deity, but the God of monotheistic Judeo-Christian religion. In favor of Christian provenance of this jewelry speaks also the fact that in territory of modern

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4 Δ. Δημητράκος. Μέγα λεξικόν τῆς Ελληνικῆς γλώσσας, τόμος πέμπτος. Αθήναι, 1939, s.v. κολασέων.
5 Besides many specimens with inscription Utiae felix, should be mentioned finger ring with inscription valiatis, probably corrupted of valeatis, meaning good health to you. Cf. C. Johns, The Jewellery of Roman Britain: Celtic and Classical Tradition, London, 1996, 60.
Serbia and Macedonia, where it was most probably found, are very scarce longer inscriptions in Greek prior to the Early Byzantine period. Rare Greek inscriptions on the jewelry represent either personal name of the owner or an acclamation.

From paleographic point of view type of writing used for the inscription on the ring belongs to the Greek monumental capital type that we encounter on epigraphic monuments of the 5th–6th century. Among examples of this kind of writing on the objects of precious metals found at the sites in Serbia should be mentioned the inscription from silver lamella placed during fifth decade of the 6th century in the foundation of the north base of tribunal of basilica D at Caricin Grad. Paleographic characteristics of the inscription on the ring from National Museum in Belgrade confirm suggested dating. They also indicate that this jewelry was in possession of a person living in some administrative or religious center established in the course of Justinian’s restoration of the limes and hinterland. If we assume that this exceptional jewelry piece was product of local craftsman from Illyric, terminus ante quem for its manufacture is determined by the Avarian destruction of the Danube limes in 615. Therefore, finger ring from National Museum is, most likely, Christian and was produced during 6th century or in the first two decades of the 7th century.

As a pagan parallel to our ring we can quote octagonal ring with representation of Asclepius and rather long, partly incomprehensible, magic inscription. One of clearly legible engraved words is YTTA (instead of ύγευσα), meaning health, and that unambiguously indicates its function as amulet for maintaining good health of the owner. This finger ring is probably originating from East Mediterranean, dating from the 2nd–3rd century and today is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia.

In the people superstition occurs with introduction of Christianity an interesting conglomeration of earlier tradition and new, now official and only religion of the Roman Empire. Good example of adaptation of pagan beliefs to Christianity is offered by octagonal finger ring with representation of god Chnoubis assumed to date from the 7th–8th century. Chnoubis was deity having rather specific and very limited apotropaic function. He was protecting just from the abdominal pain in general and hence from the stomachache. He is known from representations on jewelry, primarily Egyptian–Hellenistic gems. He was depicted as a creature with serpent’s body and lion’s head with nimbus and rays. Christian character of this jewelry is confirmed by engraved inscription. It is the verse from the Psalms of David. So it is an object, which in every respect represents close parallel to the ring from National Museum in Belgrade.

Our assumption that finger ring from National Museum in Belgrade was an amulet against stomachache is supported by Byzantine physician Alexander from Trallus. In his medical handbook he recommended just wearing of octagonal rings as a remedy against colics, that is spasms in the abdomen.

These are only two examples of jewelry, one pagan and one Christian that we quoted in order to show that wearing of amulets against just one specific kind of pains — colics, i.e. abdominal spasms was not unusual. It had, even more so, the long and highly evolved tradition and that makes the above cited reading of the inscription from finger ring from National Museum in Belgrade even more probable.

In the course of consultations with philologists and epigraphists in the attempt to solve the meaning of the text another idea about possible interpretation of the text on the ring was suggested to us. This idea was already

9 V. Popović, Грчнi натписи из Царичиног града и питање убикације Првe Јустинијанe, Глас САНУ ССЦЛ, 1990, 53–108, сл. 2, Т. II.
12 About Chnoubis cf. ibid., 75–77.
14 This possibility of interpretation was suggested by Professor Milena Milin, Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and we wish to express our gratitude once again.
suggested when this object was published earlier.\(^{15}\)
Although this idea due to its complexity seems to us less probable it, nonetheless deserves to be mentioned here. In its favor speaks the Christian character of the ring that we think to be indisputable.

Namely, compound word κολλωπόνος, that is its first part, which determines the meaning of complete word could be explained in a different way. According to this interpretation in the root of this word is Greek verb κολλάω or in contracted form κόλλω. Fact that it is on the ring written with one and not with two lambdas (λ) in no way dismiss suggested reading. It is quite possible that the person engraving the inscription because of his insufficient education or because of limited space made this, not at all, unusual contraction. Basic meaning of the verb κολλάω is to glue, to join together, unite. But as it is recorded in the Bible the word could also denote bodily, that is sexual joining.

In St Paul’s Corinthians it is said: ὁ κολλωπόνος τῆς πορνῆ ἐν σομά ἐστιν\(^{16}\) (he which is joined to an harlot is one body). Having in mind this biblical quote, κολλωπόνος might be translated as effort in debauchery or effort in adultery. Along with mentioning of God and His direct interdictions the inscription could be related to one of Ten Commandments: Do not indulge in adultery.

In that case the translation would be like this:

(\textit{Me}) God forbid an effort in debauchery to happen (an adultery to happen).

Such interpretation of inscription gives to the ring entirely new function related, possibly, to the wedding ritual. Longer inscriptions, either Latin or Greek are infrequent on betrothal rings. We can encounter inscriptions like parum te amo,\(^{17}\) vivas in Deo,\(^{18}\) ὀμόνοια,\(^{19}\) ζήσεις\(^{20}\) or the like, but always short and as a message to the owner or an acclamation. Similar meaning has, for instance, spread out Greek inscription on the golden finger ring from Hamilton Collection in the British Museum in London.\(^{21}\) It is impossible to draw strict border between magic and wedding rings. These few listed formulas are characteristic for wedding rings. However, they primarily state wishes for good health and well being of the owner, thus they not differ essentially by the meaning from inscriptions on amulets. In the early Christian time wedding rings in addition to their ceremonial function acquired more often the function of amulet or charm.\(^{22}\) It is only natural as the wish for the fertility of wedlock i.e. for descendants is expressed in the concern for the health of persons united in marriage. It is interesting to mention that betrothal rings, first of all those with representation of joined hands (dextrarum iunctio), are most often of octagonal shape as well as most of the specimens of prophylactic character and that confirms close connection of these two groups of jewelry.

Finger ring from National Museum in Belgrade, either understood as apotropaic or betrothal and regardless of the way we interpret the inscription on it, represents an extraordinary example of Early Byzantine jewelry. In this short work we only offered possible interpretations of this precious object. We think that it is worthy of attention also of future investigators, who will perhaps offer another explanation and function by the help of certain closer analogies with its inscription.

Translated by: Mirjana Vukmanović

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\(^{15}\) I. Popović, \textit{op. cit.}, (note 1), 31, 179, cat. 29.

\(^{16}\) \textit{I Corinth.}, 6, 16.

\(^{17}\) F. H. Marshall, \textit{op. cit.}, cat. 652.

\(^{18}\) Cf. I. Popović, \textit{op. cit.}, (note 1), cat 20 (with cited literature).

\(^{19}\) Such inscription is most often used with representation of joined hands (\textit{dextrarum iunctio}). Cf. I. Popović, \textit{op. cit.}, (note 10), cat. 7,8 (with cited literature).

\(^{20}\) About mening and role of this inscription on pagan and Christian monuments cf. F. Baratte, Un médaillon d’argent du Bas-Empire à Sirmium, \textit{Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome, Annuity}, 87, 1975/1, 111–118. For inscriptions of this type from the Balkan area cf. I. Popović, \textit{op. cit.}, (note 1), cat. 24 (with cited literature).

\(^{21}\) This inscription could indicate the betrothal character of the ring and could be translated as: one, who is distinguished for virtue, intelligence and wisdom. F. H. Marshall, \textit{op. cit.}, cat. 575.

\(^{22}\) G. Vikam, \textit{op. cit.}, (note 13), 163.
ГРЧКИ НАПИС СА ЗЛАТНОГ ПРЕСТЕНА
ИЗ НАРОДНОГ МУЗЕЈА У БЕОГРАДУ

У Зборници за касиоантичку и ранивизантијску материјалну културу и уметност Народног музеја у Београду чува се златан прстен са непознатог локалитета у Србији или Македонији, открићен 1908. године и завезан под инвентарским бројем I 113/I-UV (сл. 1). Спољна страна прстена је очетогоналног облика, а унутрашња је кружна. Димензије прстена су 2,4 х 2,2 cm, ширина траке са натписом је 0,4 cm, док његова тежина износи 9,05 г. 

Развијен натпис на спољној страни прстена, распоређен у осам правогутаоних поља, је слелеће садржине (сл. 2): 
ΘΕΟ/ΣΚΑΛΑΙΕΥΔΗΜΗ/ΦΥΙΝ/ΚΟΛ/ΔΠΘΟ/ΝΟΝ
Раздвојен на речи, натпис би гласио:
ΘΕΟΣ ΚΑΛΑΙΕΥΔΗ ΜΗ ΦΥΙΝ ΚΟΛΩΜΟΝΩΝ
Ортографске грешке, типичне за тај период на Балкану су очигледне, па нам допуштају да натпис прочитајемо на следећи начин:
Θεός καλαιεύω μή φειν κολοκόνων.

Главни проблем при читању и интерпретацији овог натписа заједно је реч κολοκόνων. Очињено је да је у питању акузатив јединке сложене чији други део чини реч πόνος - ιχθυς, бор, муха и сл. У десетак најпознатијих речника античког и средњовековног генре тега које смо консултовали, ова сложеница није забележена. Њен први део, како нам се чини, треба потражити у речи το κόλον - ιχθυς, бор, смах. Премда, како смо споменули, за реч κολοκόνων (κολοκόνως) нема потврде код античких и средњовековних грчких писаца, ипак, Димитриевс већ речник грчког језика бележи једну слину, из народног језика, односно димитовке. То је реч κολοκόνως, која означава οίνηαρ βολ στομακу. Због недостатка простора за урезивање натписа, а можда и због недоволне писмености аутора натписа, лако је могло доћи до дужега омикрона (о) у омету (ο) и скраћивања речи κολοκόνως, са значењем бозл στоμακу.

Читан натпис би тада у преводу гласио:
(Јa) Бол забрављају да насују бор би смоаку.
Ако прихватимо овакво читање, онда је прстен имао за циљ да свој богов синови заштитити од болова у стомаку који су га тешити. Када се мало одбиво у сачуване примере античког и средњовековног накита са апогонском натписима на грчком језику, видимо да прстен из Народног музеја у Београду представља изванредан пример такозваних профилактичних амалгија.

У палеографском смислу, писмо којим је натпис на прстену изведен, припада врсти грчке монументалне капитале, коју срећемо на епиграфским споменицима V-VI века. Дакле, прстен из Народног музеја је, по свој прилици, хришћански, и израђен је то ком VI или у првом децемби V века.

Наш претпоставки да прстен из Народног музеја у Београду представља амалгију против бола у стомаку поткређује и византијски лекар Александар из Грала. У свом медицинском приручнику он препоручује управо пошеће осмоугаоног прстена као средство против колика, односно стомачких грева.

Током консколијација са филолошима и епиграфичарима, у покушају да одговоаремо садржај натписа, наметнула нам се још једна идеја о могућем значењу текста на прстену, која је поуздана приликом приложни библиографије овог предмета. Премда нам се због своје компликованости чини мање вероватно, она заслужује да ове неизвестно био споменута. Њој у прилог ид и хришћански карактер прстена, који нам се чини непобитним.

Наме, сложена реч κολοκόνως, односно њен први део од кога зависи значење читаве речи, могла би се растумачити и на други начин. Према том интерпретацији, у корену речи би стајао грчки глагол κολλάω, или, у свом контексту облику, κολλάω. Чиненица да је он на прстену забележен са једном уместо две ламбде (λ), нисушло не исказује овакво читање. Лако је могуће да је особа која је гравирала натпис, из своје недоволне учености, или због скучега простора, начинила ово нимало неубицајено скраћење. Глагол κολλάω има основно значење στομακαί, стомаκαί, прирежени. Реч се, како је то и у Светом Писму забележено, може применити и на теслицо, односно секундарно стајање.

У Павловој посланици Коринтима сматри: κολλάω-

(Јa) Бол забрављају да дође до вируса око блуживца, ако се спасати у везу са једном од Божињих заповести: Не чини бол.

Превод би тада гласио:
(Јa) Бол забрављају да дође до вируса око блуживца (да се доживи престанак). Било да златни прстен из Народног музеја сматрато као профилактичку амалгију, било као вероватан прстен, што се, уосталом, у ранивизантијском периоду не може јасно разграничити, он у сваком погледу представља веома инте- ресантан пример латарства те епохе.

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