

Ancient Jewellery



During the time of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic period that followed, Macedonia possessed a huge wealth thanks to its military might. Through participating in many military campaigns its citizens became rich. Archaeological findings, particularly in necropoli and tombs which contain expensive jewellery made of gold, silver and bronze imported from many different regions, bear testimony to the wealth of Macedonians from that period. Not only precious metals, but different additions of precious stones, chromatic mass and glass paste were used in the manufacturing of the jewellery. Researchers analysing the jewellery have managed to classify it by origin and other characteristics. The

jewellery comes from famous centres of the ancient world or the special workshops that served local tastes. They have also identified the major motifs: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and floral.

One of the most precious necklaces found in the proximity of Demir Kapija is made of golden leaf. The gold is beaten into thin wire in the shape of twisted eights. The necklace ends up on both ends with a representation of a lion. Similar findings stretch from Thessaly to the Adriatic coast, and even further to Southern Russia. But Russian artefacts also show techniques of granulation and filigree, which the Demir Kapija jewellery lacks. This absence speaks of the antiquity of the necklace dated before the IV century BC, as the techniques of filigree and granulation became dominant only one century later, in the III century BC. In the Ohrid necropolis a similar necklace of twisted eights was found. But the Ohrid necklace has a different zoomorphic element: its ends have the shape of a cow. The presence of the cow, bull and calf speak of the importance of these animals to the different cultures in the region. Similar necklaces were found in the Greek part of Macedonia as well as in the tombs excavated in Budva, Montenegro.

Another Ohrid finding is one of the best examples of ancient necklaces. Its background is the same golden leaf structure. But the lace is enriched by a pattern of rings made of red and brown painted stones. Another even more sophisticated necklace speaks of the taste of both the jeweller and the owner. Here

the golden rings alternate with gemstones of contrasting colours. Later this type of jewellery evolved into rich polychromatic necklace such as was discovered in Epirus. The later developments in style suppressed the gold in favour of the coloured stones.

The earrings have various interesting shapes. Most of them have a basic circular shape with conic or spiral extensions. The earrings are decorated with granules, filigree, or leaves. The lion mouth is used as a clip for the earrings. The lion is realistic while its hair is a bit schematic. The eye holes of the lion in some variants are filled with coloured paste. One of the findings from the Ohrid necropolis includes a combination of a lion and gryphon or a lion with horns. This variant is considered a Persian influence on the local workshops. But curiously enough, in the Ohrid region and further westwards representations of the local animals such as dogs and lynx have been found. The older animal earrings were usually made from gold and only rarely from silver. But later, in the post-alexandrine period, Ohrid workshops made bronze imitations of the lion rings for wider use.

Very rare anthropomorphic earrings were found only in the Ohrid-Struga region. The earrings have the usual ring-like shape which ends with a spiral representation of curly African hair. Another variant of this earring style has a golden wire twisted around the bronze structure that widens into the head made of a brown glass



paste. Similar earrings have also been found on the Adriatic coast, but the Ohrid specimens are distinguished by superior style and greater detail. The African images are considered a direct influence of the Hellenistic art as they represented the nations Alexander had conquered.

Of course, the highlight of antique Macedonian earring collection is the pair of the doves made of beaten golden leaf and set in golden rings found in Trebeniste. The bodies of the doves are made from filigree imitating the feathers and the birds' legs. The backs of the birds are crafted from drop-like dark-red stones. The birds' necks are shaped with filigree wire and drop-like pseudo-granulation. The colouristic effect has been strengthened by setting each coloured stone in a bed framed with "wolf's teeth". This motive was often used by Hellenistic craftsmen to create the illusion of wings or feathers. It is believed that the image of the dove is connected with the cult of Aphrodite.

The jewellery of the Hellenistic period is distinguished by a variety of motifs and more elegant execution from the later heavier pieces. Examples of ancient jewellery can be easily seen in the permanent collections of museums throughout the country.

The text has been adapted from a major study of Hellenistic monuments in Macedonia by Prof. Vera Bitrakova Grozdanova