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BOGOMIL'S DEPICTIONS AND GRAVE SYMBOLISM IN BULGARIA (PRELIMINARY COMMENTS)

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Abstract. The following article takes into account a hitherto ignored art genre of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, namely the drawings and grave symbols of Bogomil content from Bulgaria. The article is only a preliminary report on the ongoing research on the topic. Due to the preserved material findings, only secured monuments are considered as well as the archival sources of the researchers who described and recorded them when they were discovered.

Keywords: Bogomiles; grave symbolism; Art of the Bogomiles; archive; archival research; paleography; Christian sculpture; graffiti

Introduction

Since their rise in the 1960s and 1970s, research into the Bogomils, their nature, history and symbolism has been forgotten in the 21st century. It was only through the Project “*Bogomilism in History and in the Present Day*” (Nr. КП-06-Н80/8 from 08.12.2023) that the topic was discovered again and re-listed by younger researchers and re-evaluated based on new historical and archaeological findings.

The great heretical movement of the Middle Ages attracted the attention of scholars much earlier. Already in the 17th and 18th centuries there was increased interest in this topic on German soil. In the context of the strengthening civil movement and the non-conformism that it represented in the 17th century, the Marburg reformed religious historian S. Andreä published the then respected work “*De Bogomillis*” in 1688. The subject of “history of heretics” became a special discipline within church history. On the part of the Enlightenment thinkers, this new science stood out sharply from the traditional heresology. Because the researchers of heresy up to that time aimed at refuting heresy. The Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, strove for a critical and objective assessment of the history of heretics.¹ At the same time, there were works on descendants of Manichaeism and Neo-Manichean Bogomilism.² A foundation for this was provided in the 17th century by the heretic G. Arnold in the context of a large-scale defense of heresies, which he presented in

his history of primitive and early Christianity and in his heresy theory.³ Here Arnold classifies the Bogomils among “real Christians,” “witnesses to the truth,” and martyrs.⁴ His glorification of the Bogomils and other heretics was formally embraced in the spirit of the Enlightenment right up to Goethe. Arnold’s patron Thomasius praised it as “the most important work in the Bible”.⁵

At the same time, there were numerous counter-writings from confessional, heretical sides. They were brought about by the monumental pro-heretic movement. These include the works of the Greek scholar A. Fabricius (1668 – 1736), which were specifically directed against Arnold’s justification of the Bogomils.⁶ Fabricius carried out extensive research work in Hamburg. There he edited critical editions of Byzantine authors in his “*Bibliotheca Graeca*” series, which are still used in Byzantine studies today. Fabricius had his own academic library and library in Hamburg, which his students were allowed to use freely. The anti-Bogomil standpoint of the Bogomil writings of this circle arose from the theological dependence on Lutheranism.

The first relevant work, supported by Fabricius, was written in Hamburg around 1702. It was presented as a dissertation at the Hamburg high school by A. Winckler (1685 – 1728) and was entitled “*De haeresi et moribus Bogomilorum*”.⁷ It contained information about the history, doctrine and life of the heretics and the anti-Bogomil tendency was already apparent in the chapter headings.

J. C. Wolf (1683 – 1739), professor in Wittenberg from the Fabricius circle, created greater importance and thorough knowledge of the Byzantine sources about the Bogomils in 1712 with his work “*Historia Bogomilorum*”.⁸

This apologetic process is also followed by the next works on the Bogomils in the 18th century.⁹ In the 19th century, Karl Schmidt (1812 – 1895) treated the topic in detail based on written sources.¹⁰ Immediately after its publication in 1864, Franjo Rački used for his research, for the first time, the most important contemporary source about the Bogomils, the treatise of the Bulgarian bishop Kozma from the 10th century.¹¹ Over the next almost 100 years, Bogomils research rode into oblivion.

There was once again a new momentum in research into medieval heretics, including the Bogomils, after the Second World War. One should remember the works of N. M. Petrovskij on the letter of the Patriarch of Constantinople Theophylact to the Bulgarian Tsar Peter (in which he confuses Manichaeans and Paulikians),¹² A. Vaillant and H. C. Puch on Kozmas’ treatise, the published works of S. Runchiman and D. Obolenski, the monographs and studies of D. Angelov on the Bogomils and the works of H. Söderberg and A. Borst on the Cathars.¹³

H. Puech made a thorough analysis and found that the Bogomils are very closely connected with Paulicians, but in some peculiarities they are closer to the Manichean teachings as a direct model. He observed phenomena among the Bogomils that led to Manichaeism. They are: the contempt for marriage and the production

of children, the ritual of spiritual baptism, the preference for the entire New Testament and that of the sun as the creation of the good God. According to his findings, the Manichaean doctrine came from Persia via the Caspian banks to the Slavs on the Danube.¹⁴ From here this teaching should have gained importance and a large number of followers.

Based on the aforementioned letter of Patriarch Theophylkat, A. Soloviev draws conclusions about the emergence and spread of Bogomilism, initially in the area of Philippopol, on the roots of the dualism of the Paulikians.¹⁵ As Petrovsky has already pointed out, Theophylctus confuses the Manichaeans with the Paulicians in this regard.¹⁶

The database of the international project of the University of Sofia on the topic under the direction of Prof. Dr. Ivan Hristov provides a broad spectrum of recent publications on the topic ("Bogomilism in History and in the Present Day", The work was supported and funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund, Project № КП-06-H80/8, 08.12.2023). Here, too, there are no monographs or even publications specifically dedicated to the archaeological study of medieval Bogomil depictions and funerary art.

Materials findings

The material legacy of the Bogomils with their similar heretical ramifications has not yet been precisely determined in research. At the same time, they have been little researched and are therefore not easy to recognize. The problem comes primarily from the interpretation model that threatens to arise from incorrect attempts at interpretation. Above all, it is the unrecognized and unexplored inventory of monuments, which can be very diverse and from different genres and located in different places

So far, only A. Soloviev has expressed conjectures about the symbols and gravestone hypotheses, which he assigns as Bogomil to various locations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Monte Negro without direct sources and without chronological and geographical parallels.¹⁷ E. Roll even said that Bogomil art and culture never existed in Bulgaria and Macedonia or is completely lost.¹⁸ Archaeological findings on these monuments are also lacking. Even Soloviev relies on incorrect interpretations by Bosnian excavators, which later no longer appear in archaeology.¹⁹

Another contribution is offered by G. Wild's monograph "Bogomils and Cathars in their Symbolism" (1970), which repeats Soloviev's statement in many points and even overtakes it in the interpretations of the spread of Bogomil art to Western Europe in the period after late antiquity and the influence on art development in Europe since the early Romanesque period.²⁰

In Bulgaria, Bogomil-type monuments are suspected in the sepulchral area, so-called gravestones and under the graffiti. The examples obtained are in the research phase. It is said that they have not been fully documented, classified and scientifically evaluated in their historical context, so these monuments cannot yet offer an objective representation.

The following briefly reports on the current state of research and the preliminary scientific work on the topic: "Bogomil depictions and grave symbolism from Bulgaria".

A. Graffiti

The earliest ones so far are from the 10th to 12th. Century in Dobrudza²¹ and in the area of the city walls of the second Bulgarian capital Preslav. They are all carved into stone and can therefore be classified as stone graffiti. Some inscriptions from Dobrudza could also be classified as gravestones, but should rather be determined as anti-Bogomil.²² They were created for a period of about 120 years during the creation of Preslav and its destruction by the Byzantines and Kiev Rus around 972. Even after the city's destruction, some of the city's premises and the area were inhabited until the 12th century.

The graffiti show equestrian figures that were on the stones of the city walls of Pliska and Preslav during the 10th – 11th centuries. Jhs. had been carved. These graphic representations are from the years 1927 – 1940 by Ivan Goschev (1886 – 1965), professor of Christian archeology at the University of Sofia and head of the Ecclesiastical History and Archaeological Museum in Sofia. His prosopographical information was already recorded as part of the "Prosopography for Christian Archeology" project (2007 – 2012).²³

In addition to hundreds of Glagolitic and Cyrillic inscriptions on the plaster remains and building stones from the Round Church of Preslav, Goschev also documented many graffiti on the wall stones of the two capitals from the 10th and 11th centuries. These graffiti often depict male equestrian figures with Bulgarian armor. The equestrian figures appear in different places on the city walls of Pliska and Preslav, but always in one Human-sized from 150 to 200 cm high. According to more material knowledge, it can be composed of one to four or even five rider figures. During the time they were documented, over 20 figures of this type were discovered. These drawings are preserved in the scientific archive of researcher I. Goschev in descriptions, sketches and photographs.²⁴ They have already been scientifically processed, but their further stylistic and iconographic assessment still needs to be analyzed chronologically and geographically with other thematic examples and evaluated in their correct historical context. Parts of this archive documentation were published in Volume 2 of the periodical "Christian Archeology and Art".²⁵

In parallel to the Bulgarian graffiti, graffiti from Bosnia and Herzegovina can be used for comparison. What would be problematic for a correct assessment is that the existing treatises in the previous limited editions²⁶ have not been correctly evaluated either stylistically or chronologically. Her description also seems extremely unrealistic. It is absolutely necessary to reassess these finds from the Western Balkans so that an objective assessment of all art monuments as "Bogomil" or "created under Bogomil influence" can be viewed and further analyzed.

B. Gravestones

From the sepulchral area, numerous decorated gravestones are known from the region of Kyustendil in western Bulgaria and Panagyrishte in central Bulgaria. Due to the locations where they were found and the condition of the preserved monuments, which are equally compromised, assigning and dating them would not be easy. The gravestones are grave crosses carved in relief. They vary in size and are made from local stones, especially granite and limestone, rarely from reused marble blocks. Their relief decoration is flat and very simple. The special thing about this group is the stylized cross, inscribed in a round medallion or rectangular frame.

The problem with identifying and chronologically and iconographically assigning all of the surviving examples is their stylistic inconsistency and the subsequent inscriptions from later times.

While the decoration points to a medieval way of working, the palaeographical features of the grave inscriptions reveal the late medieval writing style after the 16th century and especially from the 18th to 19th. Century. The old relief decoration in most of the older examples has not been handed down in the best condition.

Parallels to the group of gravestones of presumably Bogomil origin would be some examples from Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁷

As with the examples of “Bogomil” graffiti mentioned above, the brief information about the gravestones in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not enough to conclude a stylistic, iconographic or chronological connection. Her description also seems extremely unrealistic. It is absolutely necessary to reassess these finds from the Western Balkans so that an objective assessment of all art monuments as “Bogomil” or “created under Bogomil influence” can be viewed and further analyzed.

Conclusions and summary

The above takes into account a hitherto ignored art genre of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, namely the drawings and grave symbols of Bogomil content from Bulgaria. Due to the preserved material findings, only secured monuments are considered as well as the archival sources of the researchers who described and recorded them when they were discovered.

The article is only a preliminary report on the ongoing research on the topic. In the following explanations, the stylistic, iconographic and chronological analyzes are given in comparison with other monuments in the Balkans and evaluated and dated in their historical context.

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