

# Beyond Jewellery: Archers' Rings in the Medieval Balkans (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

*At the command of the preceptor, the youthful Arjuna, equipped with leather protector for the finger, his quiver full of arrows, bow in hand, and wearing golden armour, performed the initial rites of propitiation and entered the arena like the evening cloud reflecting rays of the setting sun.*  
(Mahābhārata, Book 1. Ādi Parva)<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the history of jewellery, certain types of rings had a particular function. It is especially true in the case of archers' rings – by their very form, they clearly point to a specific purpose<sup>2</sup>. Yet, that is not all; there are different issues to be considered, especially when it comes to the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages. Although their appearance can be discussed in the context of military history, mainly the history of weapons and methods of warfare, the specific design and archaeological context in which examples are found may also reveal their social meaning.

Despite the complexity and the serious potential, archers' rings have not provoked great research interest, although specimens of rings were continuously published and, as a rule, properly identified (fig. 1). Therefore, the article of Anastasios Antonaras<sup>3</sup> is very important and an inspiration for further study of these rings. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to study the occurrence of this type of ring in a broader context, including its use and meaning in the Balkans, according to indications provided by archaeological findings. In this regard, the territory of Medieval Serbia is particularly illustrative due to its specific background, both political and cultural.

## The Issues of Origin and Use

Creation of an archer's ring was in connection with the invention of a composite (reflex) bow; its origin is, most probably, in Central Asia during the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries<sup>4</sup>. Contact with the Sarmatians and Alans around the Black Sea region may have been crucial to counter the Romans with the composite bow, which was much more efficient compared to the Roman long bow<sup>5</sup>. Composite bows are commonly

associated with the Scythians and Huns, then the Arabs and Avars, then through the late centuries of the Middle Ages with the Cumans and Mongols, and finally with the Ottoman Turks<sup>6</sup>. In these societies, skill in handling weapons was expressed in both warfare and hunting. In addition, it has been suggested that in Avar society the hunt was the privilege of the higher social strata and acted as a kind of military training<sup>7</sup>; the same can be presumed for all other mentioned horse archers. Such a status is confirmed by the visual data: in Persian iconography, the ruler is often represented hunting on horseback with a bow<sup>8</sup>.

There are some advantages that composite bows provide, particularly the longer range and higher speed of fire relative to other types of bow. According to some data, a skilled archer could successfully reach a distance of 300m with the composite bow, although the effective range would be c. 230 m<sup>9</sup>. Since the bow is »loaded« from the right side and held in front of the chest (not to the shoulder as in the case of the long bow), the arrow follows a direct, shorter and flawless path to the string. With these two major advantages, the steppe horsemen gained superiority in archery.

The use of the composite bow meant a special pull-and-release technique where the major work is done by the thumb while the other fingers of the hand are involved in reinforcing the hold – hence the name »thumb release«. Since the thumb suffers the greatest pressure, a special protection was created. The term »archer's ring« should more precisely be »thumb ring« or »drawing ring«, because of the way it is worn, especially the position on the finger, and its function<sup>10</sup>. However, the term archer's ring occurs more often, and it always refers to the thumb ring, hence, »the thumb ring is the most important accessory required by the Turkish archer, for without it he is unable to shoot«<sup>11</sup>.

1 The Mahābhārata 25.

2 This chapter results from the research project of the Institute of Archaeology Urbanisation Processes and Development of Mediaeval Society (no. 177021) funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

3 Antonaras, Archers' Rings.

4 Bivar, Cavalry Equipment 285; Nicolle, Medieval Warfare 34; Chiriac, Arcului reflex.

5 Bivar, Cavalry Equipment 283.

6 Bivar, Cavalry Equipment 282-283. – Klopsteg, Turkish Archery 19-20.

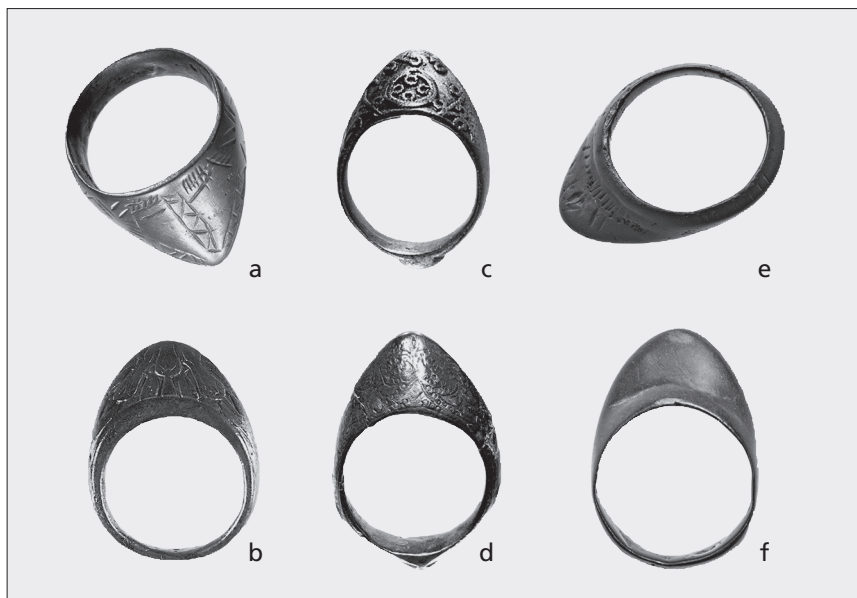
7 László, Avars 153-158.

8 Grotowski, Warrior Saints 83 (including references), and figs 10. 85.

9 Bivar, Cavalry Equipment 283. – Klopsteg, Turkish Archery 15-32.

10 Klopsteg, Turkish Archery 67.

11 Klopsteg, Turkish Archery 68.



**Fig. 1** Archers' rings from museum collections, 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries: **a-d** National Museum, Belgrade, inv. nos 344. 528. 1409. 1908; **e-f** Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, inv. nos 165. 163. – (© Documentations of National Museum, Belgrade, and Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade).

There is no archaeological data on wearing protection for the thumb in Roman times or in the Early Middle Ages; the probable reason is the decay of the material, from which such a protection was made. The famous Arabic manuscript »Arab Archery« (presumably from c. 1500), describes these materials and the requirements for the rings:

»Thumb-tips are often made of the skin of horses or goats, or of other kinds of tanned hides, as well as of silver, copper, iron, bone and horn. The last variety is made b(y) taking a fine horn, large enough to hold the thumb, and cutting it down to the right size; then a piece is carved out to expose the nail and the knuckle of the thumb, and groove for the string is marked on the face of it. The same process is followed in making tips of silver or other metals.

The best thumb-tips, however, are made of leather of moderate thickness, neither too thick lest they interfere with the efficiency of shooting, nor too thin lest they fail to protect the thumb against the action of the string.

Leather tips are superior to those of silver and the other metals because they are soft and flexible and interfere least with the accuracy of shooting. Some archers, however, hold that tips of silver or of other metals are better than tips of leather in competitive and distance shooting. Tāhir al-Balkhi said that for distance shooting thick tips are better, while for accurate target shooting thin tips are superior. This is, in fact, correct«<sup>12</sup>.

There is no doubt that the statements of the citation emphasise the use of leather as the base material for archers' rings. According to the Turkish tradition, it was made of ram's horn<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, the rings made of metal, especially of silver, were very popular during the late Medieval period.

Some pieces are highly decorative and some are oversized, thus having merely decorative purpose, as on the famous depiction of Sultan Mehmed II smelling a rose (c. 1480)<sup>14</sup>. The circumstances under which the composite bow, as well as the thumb ring, reached the Balkans are unclear. Most theories are based on indirect data from the composition of the army and the types of weapons used in Byzantium and related states. Warfare with the enemies of the Empire and the engagement of foreign troops significantly influenced the Byzantine army, which embraced different weapons very early; confirmation of which can be found in the contexts of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and later<sup>15</sup>. As the standard archery weapon, the composite bow appeared in Byzantium in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 2), as the result of the multi-ethnic composition of the Byzantine army. Among foreign soldiers, the Seljuk, Pecheneg and Cuman horse archers are the ones associated with the use of the composite bow<sup>16</sup>. Thumb rings were used rarely until the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, the composite bow and the bow case with arrows occur as attributes of some martyr-warriors. Although depictions of martyr-warriors entered Byzantine iconography in the Early Byzantine period, they gained increasing popularity during the Macedonian dynasty (from the mid-9<sup>th</sup> to mid-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) due to its expansive military politics<sup>18</sup>. As common attribute, the composite bow became current in the iconography of holy warriors in the Palaiologan period (1261-1453). One cannot be sure what instigated the representation, but it could be in connection with both the actual weapons of the Byzantine army of the time and representations in the art of the Crusades<sup>19</sup>. St Demetrios was often depicted with the composite bow, as

12 Arab Archery XLII.

13 Klopsteg, Turkish Archery 67-68.

14 Carboni, Venice and the Islamic World 296.

15 Haldon, Some Aspects 65-79. – Grotowski, Warrior Saints 369-371.

16 Haldon, Byzantium at War 51.

17 Nicolle, Medieval Warfare 74.

18 Marković, O ikonografiji 571-585.

19 Grotowski, Warrior Saints 371-374.



**Fig. 2** The Siege of Amorium by the Arabs in 838. Illuminated manuscript of the History of John Skylitzes, 12<sup>th</sup> century. – (© Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, Vitr. 26-2, image no. 77, <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?pid=d-1754254>).

well as SS Merkurios and Theodor<sup>20</sup>. In Medieval Serbia, these depictions – taken from Byzantine iconography – were especially popular during the reign of King Milutin (1282-1321), due to his offensive policy in the Balkans and expansion of the Serbian state to the south, at the expense of Byzantium<sup>21</sup>. Particular significance to the holy warriors was given in the paintings of the Morava school: in the Ravanica church – the endowment of Prince Lazar, built between 1376-1377 and 1380-1381 – sixteen of them are depicted<sup>22</sup>. The main reason for emphasising the significance of the holy warriors in the iconographic programme of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century was the threat of Ottoman invasion, which became a reality after the battle of the Maritsa River in 1371.

The occurrence of the composite bow in Serbia is most likely related to the Turks who were mercenaries in the service of Serbian rulers, as well as in direct contact with them from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>23</sup>. Another route could have been from nearby Hungary. As a weapon used in the Serbian region, the »Hungarian bow« (a long composite bow) is mentioned in Dubrovnik in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>24</sup>. As an official weapon, the composite bow entered the Serbian army at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>. Their manufacture was organised in villages, where the wooden parts were made, while the components were assembled into the final product in fortresses and fortified towns<sup>26</sup>. Unfortunately, composite bows are completely lacking in the archaeological record.

The composite bow was also used in tournament competitions and in hunting. These were the essential pastimes of the Medieval nobility, especially in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Balkans. Bertrandon de la Broquière – a famous Burgundian spy and pilgrim – recorded that he found Despot Djuradj Branković (1427-1456) in the hunt, along with three of his sons and about fifty horsemen, in a field by the river near the town of Nekudim, in the area of his capital Smederevo<sup>27</sup>. During the hunt, bow and arrows were used, and findings of archers' rings undoubtedly indicate their use. Also, these rings were worn by men of all ages, as corroborated by their different sizes; although they are mainly massive, with diameters of about 2.5 cm, a few examples are of smaller diameter, probably made for boys<sup>28</sup>.

### Archers' Rings from Medieval Serbia

From the data presented so far, it is reasonable to assume that the use of the bow in Serbia stems from contact with the Ottomans – but whether the same can be an automatically assumed for the rings is less certain. In other words, can all such rings be considered to be necessary accessories rather than jewellery? Bearing in mind the traditional interaction between Serbia and Byzantium, what is the role of Byzantium in this phenomenon? In the core of the Byzantine Empire,

20 Marković, O ikonografiji 600-625.

21 Marković, O ikonografiji 604-607.

22 Marković, Sveti ratnici 192-195.

23 Petrović, Balkansko oružje 41.

24 Petrović, Balkansko oružje 41.

25 Petrović, Balkansko oružje 31.

26 Petrović, Balkansko oružje 31.

27 Brokijer, Putovanje 131-132. – Krstić, Grad Nekudim 102-103.

28 Premović-Aleksić, Latinska crkva 64.



Fig. 3 Map showing the distribution of archers' rings in Medieval Serbia (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries). – (From Popović, *Cosmopolitan Milieu* fig. 88, mapping by U. Vojvodić).

thumb rings occurred during the 14<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in different contexts<sup>29</sup>, including grave findings, thus suggesting a particular importance for the owner in life. Within the same chronological frame, the rings occurred in Medieval Serbia, where they were certainly used in the same way.

The distribution map of archers' rings is quite eloquent (fig. 3). It is important to point out the equal distribution of findings both in south and central regions, as originally Byzantine territories, and the north region, which is, in a polit-

ical, economic and cultural sense, orientated towards Europe, especially at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, most examples of archers' rings come from private collections, therefore, the precise sites and the contexts of findings are unknown. They are indicative to some extent, mainly due to their quantity, which testifies to their routine use. With due carefulness, the greater concentration of archers' rings can be assumed in the southern part of the Central Balkans. It seems that in western areas, as well as in Medieval Bosnia, the intensity of findings also decreases; however, this could

29 Antonaras, *Archers' Rings* 59-61. – See also the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian ring from Aigion, Peloponnese, in the British Museum (Spier, *Late Byzantine Rings* 51).

be a consequence of the low level of archaeological excavations in the region.

Archaeological findings of archers' rings originate mainly from fortified towns, including mining centres. According to available records, metal rings prevail; however, there are number of examples made of bone, such as from Belgrade (fig. 4)<sup>30</sup> and Novo Brdo, Serbia<sup>31</sup>, Thessaloniki<sup>32</sup>, and Vodoča near Strumica, North Macedonia<sup>33</sup>. With the exception of pieces from Thessaloniki and Vodoča, the bone rings are usually very simply made and undecorated. Moreover, the latter two could be from the same workshop, judging by the unique design of the motif.

In contrast, rings made of bronze and silver are usually decorated (figs 1. 5-7). The decoration is of a rather uniform style, consisting of floral motifs on the head, mostly tulips and foliage, and linear motifs around the edges; unfortunately, many pieces are worn and, the complexity of the decoration cannot be fully perceived<sup>34</sup>. Motifs are executed in different ways, thus revealing different workshops. Due to a combination of Turkish ornamentation, Gothic ivy leaf and a stylised snake, Bojana Radojković suggested that the ring from Golubac, Braničevo District, Serbia (fig. 6), could be the work of a local goldsmith<sup>35</sup>. According to the style, but not in the detail as well, the decoration of the ring has similarities with a group of rings called »Verkantung«, which are all found in the area of southern Serbia and in the region of Skopje (nowadays North Macedonia)<sup>36</sup>. The other example with medallions made of twisted filigree wire (fig. 1c) also points to a specific style of decoration whose elements in the technique of engraving one can recognize on a ring from the vicinity of Skopje (fig. 1d)<sup>37</sup>. There is also a group of rings that have the same floral motifs, but they are relatively large and simply made, without excessive details (figs 5d-f)<sup>38</sup>. In terms of design and overall craft expression, among them stands out a piece from the collection of S. Simonović, which was supposedly purchased somewhere in Kosovo (fig. 7)<sup>39</sup>.

The simultaneous appearance of archers' rings in Byzantium and in the Balkan states of Serbia and Bulgaria, which inherited the Byzantine artistic expression, indicates a process of cultural transfer, which led to the adoption of models into art and artistic crafts. The composite decoration of these rings fully reflects the artistic patterns of that time: a unique mixture of motifs, containing the Byzantine decoration as a base, traditional in the region, which is refreshed with Islamic-Ottoman elements and Central European decoration, such as Gothic leaves and heraldic motifs. That is why it is very



Fig. 4 Bone ring from the Belgrade fortress, 15<sup>th</sup> century. – (© Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

difficult to differentiate the imported pieces, including the Byzantine works, from locally made items.

As for the jewellery workshops in Medieval Serbia, our knowledge stems from written documents and analyses of items, especially their decoration. At that time, the jewellery was made in Dubrovnik, Kotor (Adriatic coast of Montenegro) and Venice, as well as in inland, next to mines and fortified towns, such as the Serbian towns Brskovo, Brvenik, Trepča, Rudnik, Novo Brdo, Prizren, Skoplje, Smederevo<sup>40</sup>. Workshops were differentiated on the basis of the method of jewellery making in general and also of chosen motifs. Thus, the jewellery from Kosovo and the Metohija region skilfully combine oriental and Gothic motifs, while elements of Byzantine art, primarily from Thessaloniki, can be recognised more clearly further southwards, in Macedonia<sup>41</sup>. Judging by the presented distribution of motifs and designs, archers' rings confirm the craft trends. For examples made of bronze, it can be assumed that production took place either in local

30 Popović/Bikić, *Mitropolija* 97-98 fig. 57/68.

31 Zečević, *Nakit* cat. no. 93.

32 Antonaras, *Archers' Rings* 50.

33 Cvetanov, *Vodoča* sl. 4.

34 Radojković, *Nakit* sl. 151. – Bajalović Hadži Pešić, *Nakit* cat. no. 659. – Milošević, *Nakit* cat. no. 181-187. – Ivanić, *Prstenje* sl. 24. – Đurović, *Srednjovekovni nakit* cat. no. 81-82.

35 Radojković, *Nakit* 207-208.

36 Milošević, *Nakit* cat. no. 118-122.

37 Milošević, *Nakit* cat. no. 184. 187.

38 Milošević, *Nakit* cat. no. 185. 186. – Ivanić, *Prstenje* cat. no. 84 sl. 24. – Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, unpublished, inv. no. 10184.

39 Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, unpublished, inv. no. 4439.

40 Radojković, *Nakit* 55-56.

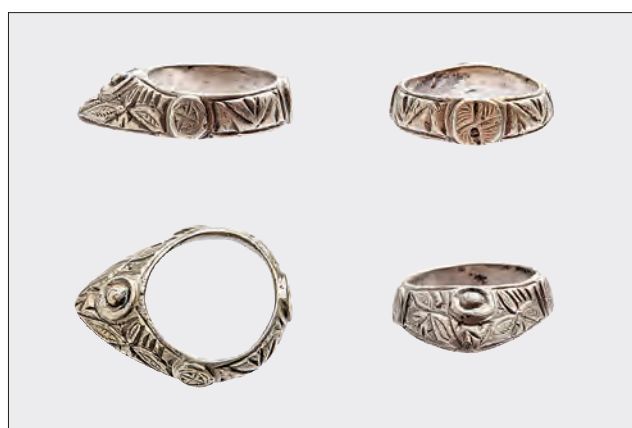
41 Radojković, *Nakit* 55.



**Fig. 5** Archers' rings from museum collections, 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries: **a-b** National Museum Kragujevac; **c** Belgrade City Museum (inv. no. I 2120); **e-f** Museum of Applied Art (inv. no. 164, 10184). – (© Documentations of National Museum Kragujevac, Belgrade City Museum, and Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade).



**Fig. 6** Archer's ring from Golubac, Serbia, late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, inv. no. 4438. – (© Documentation of Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade).



**Fig. 7** Archer's ring, late 14<sup>th</sup>-early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, inv. no. 4439. – (© Documentation of Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade).

workshops or by travelling goldsmiths. These could have been made by sample, where greater attention was paid to the shape, rather than decoration. One of them with linear decoration (fig. 1a) is very similar to the group of rings from north-west Bulgaria, possibly indicating the region of production<sup>42</sup>.

### Status Symbol of the Nobility

Everything said so far leads to the question, what meaning did the archer's ring have in the late Medieval Balkans? From the above, it appears clear that archers' rings represent a unique mixture of elements: the Byzantine cultural milieu, with all its manifestations, and the chivalric culture of central Europe, and oriental elements, that is the transformation of the old motifs of Islamic art in the Ottoman Empire (which

is the force that conquered the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries). In a sense, the archer's ring illustrates current trends in the arts and crafts; at the same time, it reflects the multi-ethnic and multicultural society of the late Medieval Balkans.

Besides artistic style and craftsmanship, this kind of ring carried a certain social message. There are examples in both fresco painting and archaeological data that eloquently testify to this. There is quite a remarkable depiction of rings on a fresco in the church of the Monastery of Veluče near Trstenik (central Serbia) which was erected in 1377-1378 and was decorated with frescoes shortly afterwards<sup>43</sup>. It shows a young man holding a composite bow in his left hand and a quiver of arrows in his right hand; the picture is completed with four rings that are painted with hoops facing outside (fig. 8). Although the male figure is depicted in the style of the martyr-warriors, he is actually a nobleman called De(j)an.

42 Milošević, Nakit 130.

43 Todić, Prilog 73-75.

**Fig. 8** Monastery Veluče (1377/78), portrait of young nobleman on the north wall of narthex. – (Photo M. Marković).



As one of four sons of the patron of the monastery, his high socio-economic status is represented by the lavish clothes that he wears<sup>44</sup>. In such a context, the four rings certainly indicate his superb archery skills. One can perhaps go a step further and recognise in such a depiction an aspect related to the

representation of a ruler or nobleman – the Persian model, which is transferred via Byzantium into Serbian society.

Archaeological indicators of the social status of persons who wore archers' rings are also very clear and they are related mainly to the funeral contexts. In a church in the area

<sup>44</sup> Petković, *Manastir Veluče* 49 sl. 8. – The remains of the gilded clothing were confirmed in graves in the church narthex: Ljubinković, *Manastir Veluče* 123.



**Fig. 10** Archer's ring from the site of the Latin Church in Postenje, 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. – (From Premović-Aleksić, *Latinska crkva*, T. V/3, 4).



**Fig. 9** Archer's ring from Rudnik, 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. – (From Radičević/Bulić, *Prilog*, T. 5/4).

of the mining town of Rudnik (Central Serbia), a male was buried with an archer's ring (fig. 9). As such, it was an item that describes his hunting skills in a proper way. According to the grave position – in the western part of the nave – it is presumed that he was the founder and one of the benefactors of the church<sup>45</sup>. A similar funeral context is noted in a church at the site Postenje near Novi Pazar (southwest Serbia). A boy buried in a garment embroidered using golden and silver threads had an archer's ring on each hand (fig. 10); both rings are small, made to fit someone of his age, and made of silver, with one additionally being gold plated<sup>46</sup>. It should also be noted that one of the previously mentioned bone rings was positioned on the left side of the chest of the deceased<sup>47</sup>.

In such a context, it should be recalled that according to King Dušan's »Code« (1349), there are four main symbolic possessions of the Serbian nobleman: his horse, his weap-

ons, his surcoat and his belt<sup>48</sup>. However, archaeological data indicate an additional phenomenon, which is the burial itself (position and type of construction of the grave/crypt), as well as related items, especially clothing, jewellery and vessels, primarily those made of silver and gold<sup>49</sup>.

The issue of archers' rings is very complex and cannot be considered independently of the history of weaponry; however, there are indications that one can go beyond that to think about the ideal image of the warrior ruler. The aforementioned ring of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, with its excessive size, sends a clear message about his »military achievements and his skill as a hunter«<sup>50</sup>. The same message can be read from the examples of rings and their archaeological context from the Balkan sites. Consequently, it is not a coincidence that this image, transposed into the programme of holy warriors, becomes topical during the reign of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1372-1389) and also of his son and successor to the throne, Stefan Lazarević (prince 1389-1402, despot 1402-1427)<sup>51</sup>, due to the close and immediate threat from the powerful (Ottoman) conquerors.

On the other hand, the overall appearance of archers' rings indicates their wider significance, not only in arts and crafts, but also in social and symbolic terms. The archaeological contexts of graves of members of the Medieval Serbian nobility unambiguously favour such a conclusion. Archers' rings can be considered as one of the symbols of nobility, primarily as an item that has a clearly defined use and meaning, and as jewellery whose decoration reveals the aesthetic criteria of the nobility. Hence, it becomes a recognisable symbol of the Medieval society of the Balkans.

45 Radičević/Bulić, *Prilog* 126. 130 T. 5/4.

46 Premović-Aleksić, *Latinska crkva* 60. 64 T. V/3, 4.

47 Cvetanov, *Vodoča* 123.

48 Dušanov zakonik 85. 166.

49 Popović, *Ktitorske sahrane* 44-45.

50 Carboni, *Venice and the Islamic World* 296.

51 Marković, *Sveti ratnici*.



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## Summary / Zusammenfassung

### Beyond Jewellery: Archers' Rings in the Medieval Balkans (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

Characteristic rings for the thumb were the archers' rings, especially designed for the pull-and-release technique of a composite bow. They have a long history, but also a different meaning for various peoples who have used them. For nomadic horsemen, it was just a utilitarian object; its shape and material (mainly bone and leather) were adapted to protect the thumb from the strong friction which occurs when the bowstring is released. Later on, during the Middle Ages, such rings were made of silver and bronze, and decorated with various motifs, thus becoming items that carried enhanced social and cultural meaning.

The distribution map points to a greater concentration of archers' rings in the southern part of the Central Balkans, as originally Byzantine territories. However, several examples were found in the north region, along the Danube River, which is politically, economically and culturally regarded as orientated towards Europe, especially at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The composite decoration of these rings reflects the artistic patterns of that time: it is the unique mixture of Byzantine motifs, traditional in the region, with the Islamic-Ottoman floral elements and Central European decoration, such as Gothic leaves and heraldic motifs. Given that the composite bow was used in tournament competitions and in hunting, archers' rings are interpreted as one of the characteristics of the Serbian nobility in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The different sizes of the rings indicate that they were worn by men of all ages, including young boys. Depictions on frescoes corroborate their role as status symbols.

### Jenseits von Schmuck: Bogenspannrings auf dem mittelalterlichen Balkan (14.-15. Jahrhundert)

Charakteristische Ringe für den Daumen waren die Bogenspannrings, welche speziell für die »pull-and-release«-Technik von Kompositbögen entwickelt worden waren. Sie haben nicht nur eine lange Geschichte, sondern auch unterschiedliche Bedeutungen für die verschiedenen Nutzer. Für nomadische Reiter waren sie nur ein Gebrauchsobjekt; so waren Form und Material (zumeist Knochen und Leder) angepasst an ihre Funktion als Schutz des Daumens vor hoher Reibkraft, welche beim Lösen der Bogensehne entsteht. Im weiteren Verlauf des Mittelalters wurden solche Ringe aus Silber und Bronze gefertigt und mit verschiedenen Motiven verziert, wodurch sie zu Objekten mit einer gesteigerten sozialen und kulturellen Bedeutung wurden.

Die Verbreitungskarte deutet auf eine höhere Konzentration von Bogenspannrings im südlichen Teil des mittleren Balkans hin, welcher ursprünglich byzantinisches Gebiet war. Jedoch wurden mehrere Beispiele in der nördlichen Region entlang der Donau gefunden, das in politischer, wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Hinsicht nach Europa orientiert war, besonders im frühen 15. Jahrhundert. Die zusammengesetzte Dekoration dieser Ringe spiegelt die künstlerischen Motive jener Zeit wieder: eine einzigartige Mischung von byzantinischen Motiven, traditionell für diese Region, sowie islamisch-osmanischen floralen Elementen und mitteleuropäischer Dekoration wie gotischem Blattwerk und heraldischen Motiven. Da Kompositbögen bei Turnieren und auf der Jagd verwendet wurden, werden die Bogenspannrings als ein Merkmal des serbischen Adels im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert verstanden. Die verschiedenen Größen der Ringe deuten darauf hin, dass sie von Männern aller Altersklassen getragen wurden, einschließlich junger Knaben. Darstellungen in Fresken bestätigen die Rolle der Bogenspannrings als Statussymbole.