

ARCADIUS' SIGNET RING FROM NAISSUS

Byzantine emperor and polyhistor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (905-959) in his capital work *De administrando imperio* (53, 251) states that Constantine the Great in an attempt to achieve the loyalty of the inhabitants of Chersonese after his victory donated to their leaders besides many valuable presents also the gold finger rings with his image engraved on the head to use them to seal their letters and petitions addressed to the emperor. This note about the existence of imperial signet rings (*annuli signatorii*) is not clearly and unambiguously confirmed by archaeological finds as the rings with gems with the images of the emperors as well as those with cameos with similar contents or with coins should be understood in the first place as objects of the imperial propaganda. Namely, the signet rings with engraved representation and name of the ruler are known only from the barbarian finds dating from the end of Antiquity and found in the periphery of the Empire or outside of its frontiers. Thus, in the exceptionally rich grave assemblage of the Frank king Childericus (+ 482), discovered in the town Tournai in present-day France in 1653, was also found the signet ring with the image of this king and the inscription *CHILDERICI REGIS*¹ (*Fig. 1*). To the similar category of finds belong also two finger rings with monograms from the site Malaja Peršćepina (*Fig. 2*) in the vicinity of town Poltav in the Ukrainian steppes to the north of the Black Sea. This find, which contains heterogeneous luxurious objects dating from the 7th century was explained as the grave assemblage of Bulgarian khagan Kuvrat and monograms on the finger rings of the Byzantine manufacture were read as name, i.e. the name and patrician title of this nomadic ruler who was in close diplomatic contacts with Byzantium.² The mentioned rings besides being found in the periphery of the Roman-Byzantine world were discovered in the graves of the rulers whose seal they had, so it could not be considered as good illustration of the information of Constantine Porphyrogenitus concerning the imperial subjects as owners of the signet rings intended for their communication with the ruler. It is possible, however, that to this group of objects belongs one silver signet ring found in Niška banja³ in the middle of the 20th century and identified vaguely in academic literature as the

¹ *A l'aube de la France*, 1981, 240-245, nr. 408-410, fig. 179.

² Werner, 1984, 44-45, Taf. 32.

³ Vulić, 1941-48, 117, no. 261.



Fig. 1 – Ring of Childericus, Tournai
Сл. 1 – Хилдериков прстен, Tournai

find from the end of 14th-beginning of the 15th century⁴, and then as Early Christian object,⁵ i.e. the jewelry from the 4th-6th century.⁶

Silver finger ring (R 2.2 cm, weight 8.15 g), housed in the National Museum in Niš (Inv. 110/B), consists of circular band hoop and conical head shaped as oval setting placed above the hoop line (Fig. 3). On the top surface of the head is deeply engraved male image in profile, facing left. Although the face features are schematized, still large eye, long, straight nose, large mouth and strong mandibular bone could be noticed. The hair is combed from the top of the head towards the forehead, which is completely covered with thick locks. On the head is a diadem depicted by the line separating the hair from the face; it is tied on the back of the head and its

end are fluttering like two ribbons behind the neck. Along the edge of the ring's head around the elliptical field with relief representation is running a shallow engraved inscription in italics with the cross at the beginning. Position of letters in relation to the direction of reading the inscription is not uniform (Fig. 4). The inscription has been read as follows:

+ *Iste anulus ART sig ()*

It was suggested that *ART* could denote the owner of the signet ring, person of the name *Artemidorus*, *Artemius* or something similar, while *sig* could be the abbreviation of *sigillum*.⁷ Thus, read in this way the inscription could be translated as:

+*This finger ring is the seal of Artemidorus (Artemius).*

However, we tried to interpret the inscription in a different way after meticulous examination and on the basis of stylistic and typological analysis of the ring itself. Namely, as the shallow engraved letters are arranged in different directions in relation to the field with the image and course of reading and some were written in capital and some, particularly *E*, *G*, *T* in italics, the identification of the name of ring's owner is not entirely reliable. While letters *A* and *R* are relatively clearly engraved and *A* is engraved in the same manner as in the word

⁴ Krušković, 1972, 36, no.52.

⁵ *IMS* IV, 140, nr. 141.

⁶ Kondić, 1994, 341, cat. 305; Drča, 2004, 190, cat. 138.

⁷ *IMS* IV, 140, nr. 141. Such reading was used also in the catalogues of exhibitions on which the ring was displayed, cf. Kondić, 1994, 341, cat. 305; Drča, 2004, 190, cat. 138.

anulus, in this inscription the last letter, read as *T* could in our opinion be *C*, as its top and bottom end is arched and thus it differs from *T* in the word *iste* in this inscription. If we accept this suggestion then the inscription would read:

+ *Iste anulus ARC sig*

In this case the inscription could be read and interpreted in this way:

+ *Iste anulus Arcadii sigillum* in translation + *This ring is Arcadius' seal*



Fig. 2 - Rings of Kuvrat, Malaža Peršćepina

Сл. 2 – Кувратово прстење, Малажа Першћепина

The suggested reading of the inscription

would indicate that ring did not belong to any private person, but to Flavius Arcadius (383-408), the elder son of Theodosius I, who ruled with his younger brother Flavius Honorius from 393 and after the death of Theodosius in 396 Arcadius became the ruler of the eastern and Honorius of the western part of the Empire. In favor of such determination of the silver finger ring speaks not only the suggested reading of the inscription, but also the representation of the male image with diadem on the head that certainly indicates that it was a person of the imperial rank. The stylistic and typological characteristics of the ring also speak in favor of such interpretation. Namely, finger rings with narrow circular band hoop and prominent head appeared in greatest quantity in the second half of the 4th century and remained in use also in the beginning of the 5th century.⁸ On the other hand, motif of engraved volutes, i.e. the stylized Ionic capitals on the shoulders of the ring, is the simplified variant of rich decoration executed by engraving, embossing and openwork that appears on the expanded shoulders of the massive Roman finger rings in the 3rd century⁹, that became even more lavish by using the filigree and granulation in the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century¹⁰ and after that they became extremely simplified and

⁸ Popović, 2001, 20; 168, cat. 18, 19.

⁹ Popović, 1992, 16; 66, cat. 51-57.

¹⁰ Popović, 2001, cat. 8; Popović, 2005, Cat. 23.



Fig. 3 – Signet Ring, Niška banja
Сл. 3 – Печатни прстен, Нишка бања

† I S T E X I V L V S T B T Z I G

Fig. 4 – Inscription on Signet Ring, Niška banja
Сл. 4 – Натпис са печатног прстена, Нишка бања

stylized.¹¹ However, male image represented within small oval medallion on the ring's head is exceptionally schematized like some representation on the gem, which could had been the model. Thus, this representation does not show much similarity to the precisely executed image of Arcadius on the solidus of this emperor minted in Thessalonica in 387/88¹² (Fig. 5), although both male images have long straight nose and hair combed in the same manner, like a cap, that was the male hair style characteristic of the seventies and eighties of the 4th century.¹³ This characteristics could be recognized on the portrait of Arcadius from Constantinople (Fig. 6).

Therefore, typological characteristics of the finger ring, stylistic traits of the ornament on its shoulders and the representation of the male image on its head support the dating of this jewelry in the final decades of the 4th century. This also speaks in favor of the suggested interpretation according to which the inscription on the edge of the setting denotes this finger ring as the seal of Arcadius. However, a question could be asked how this finger ring reached the territory of *Naissus*, considering the fact that it does not belong to the imperial grave assemblage. Answer to this question could be found in the complex historical circumstances of that very epoch. Namely, as the sons of Theodosius were young in the moment of his death, the elder one, Arcadius, according to his father's wish got Rufinus as his mentor and care for the younger son, Honorius, was taken by Stilicho who was *magister utriusque militiae*. This ambitious com-

¹¹ Popović, 2005, 69-70, Cat. 24.

¹² *RIC IX*, 184, nr. 51.

¹³ *Spätantike*, 1983, 447.

mander of the barbarian descent carried out pro-German policy using barbarians for achieving his goals. As he did not want to agree that the dioceses Dacia and Macedonia should be the parts of the eastern Empire, he came into conflict with Rufinus who made the alliance with Alaric, leader of the Goths. Stilicho resisted the Goths pursuing them as far as Thessaly, but was ordered by Arcadius to leave the Illyricum. However, the emperor eliminated Rufinus certainly under the influence of Stilicho, who did not waive his ambitions to influence the policy of the eastern part of the Empire and secured the autonomous status for the dioceses Dacia and Macedonia. Despite the fact that this military commander conducted negotiations and made alliances with the Goths, Alaric broke into Greece. After the attempt to expel him and his troops from Illyricum Stilicho made alliance with the Goths and also with Arcadius, according to which Alaric got the position of *magister militum per Illyricum*. But, the ambitious commander continued his policy of secret alliances and intrigues, thus coming into open conflict with Eutropius, the commander of the eastern part of the Empire. As Eutropius was in coalition with the Goths who were more and more dangerous for the Empire. Arcadius in 399 had to get rid of him, but that did not help Stilicho to achieve the primacy at the court in Constantinople because Aelia Eudoxia, the wife of Arcadius, was proclaimed *augusta* in AD 400. Arcadius had to expel the barbarians from the state administration and army and that was met with resistance and resulted in new con-



Fig. 5

Сл. 5

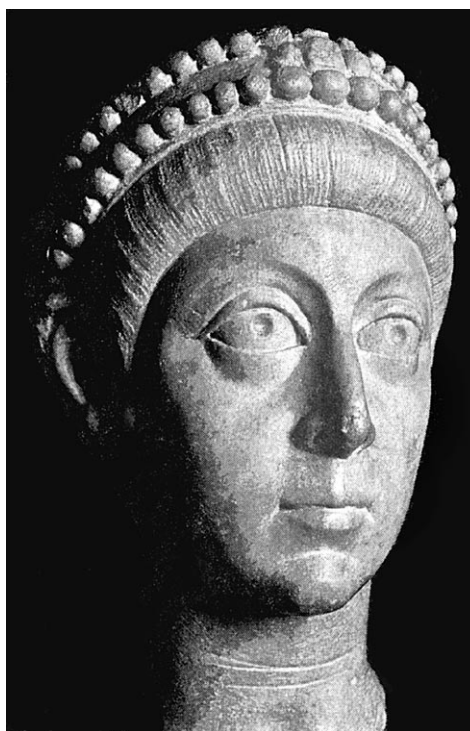


Fig. 6 – Portrait of Arcadius, Archaeological Museum, Istanbul

Сл. 6 – Аркадијев портрет, Археолошки Музеј, Истанбул

flicts.¹⁴ In this complex historical circumstances when the Empire was definitely divided in two parts (*partes*), East and West, and when the decisive conflicts between military commanders, *de facto* rulers in the name of weak emperors Arcadius and Honorius took place in the area of the eastern Balkans along with secret and open agreements with barbarians, we should look for the reasons, which could result in appearance of the Arcadius' signet ring in the territory of *Naissus*. Silver signet ring, whose inscription confirms that depicted image was that of Arcadius, could had been given to some of barbarian leaders as confirmation of alliance and means of communication. *Naissus* was the most important town in the region, so it is logical to expect that activities of that character took place just there. After all, this town was also the birthplace of emperor Flavius Constantius – Constantius III¹⁵, husband of the Arcadius' half sister Aelia Galla Placidia. However, judging by the schematized representation of the male image and the use of decoration characteristic of the expanded shoulders of the rings from the earlier epochs on a thin, usually undecorated hoop, it is possible that this finger ring was made in the barbarian milieu in order to secure legitimate position of its owner. In any case, the signet finger ring from Niška banja viewed in the light of the mentioned circumstances confirms the claim of Constantine Porphyrogenitus that there were finger rings with imperial image in possession of the barbarian leaders whose loyalty was important to secure.

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¹⁴ Stein, 1968, 225-247.

¹⁵ FHG, IV, 66.

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Ивана Поповић

АРКАДИЈЕВ ПЕЧАТНИ ПРСТЕН ИЗ НИША

Византијски цар и полихистор Константин Порфирогенит (905-959), у свом капиталном делу *De administrando imperio* (53, 251), наводи да ја Константин Велики, да би, после победе, обезбедио лојалност становника Херсонеса, њиховим првацима, поред бројних вредних поклона, даривао и златно прстење са угравираним својим ликом, којим би они печатали своја писма и захтеве упућене цару. Овај запис о постојању царског печатног прстења (*annuli signatorii*) није јасно и недвосмислено потврђен археолошким налазима (сл. 1, 2). Ревизија читања натписа са сребрног прстена из Нишке бање (сл. 3) отвара могућност да тај накит представља печатни прстен цара Аркадија (383-408), чији је лик приказан на његовој глави. Курзивни натпис на ободу главе овог прстена (сл. 4) протумачен је на следећи начин:

+ *Iste annulus Arcadii sigillum*. односно у преводу: + *Овај прстен је Аркадијев печат*

Предложено читање, као и стилско-типолошке особине самог прстена, лика на његовој глави и орнамента на његовим раменима, омогућују одређење овог примерка као Аркадијевог печатног прстена, иако приказани лик показује само извесне сличности са портретом овог цара на новцу (сл. 5). Налаз овог прстена у Нишкој бањи може се објаснити у светлу сложених историјских догађаја, када је Царство дефинитивно подељено на две *partes*, Исток и Запад, и када су се у области источног Балкана, уз тајне и јавне споразуме са варварима, одвијали одлучујући сукоби војних заповедника, *de facto* владара у име слабих царева Аркадија и Хонорија. Сребрни печатни прстен, чији натпис потврђује да је приказани лик Аркадијев, могао је да буде дат неком од варварских вођа као потврда савеза и средство комуникације. *Naissus*

је био најзначајнији град у региону, па је логично очекивати да су се активности те врсте управо овде одвијале. Уосталом, тај град је био и родно место цара Констанција III, мужа Аркадије полусестре Гале Плацидије. Међутим, судећи по схематизованој представи мушког лика и примени орнаментa, карактеристичног за проширена рамена прстења из ранијих епоха, на танкој, обично неукрашеној алци прстена, могуће је и да је прстен настао у некој варварској средини, с циљем да се обезбеди легитиман положај његовог сопственика. У сваком случају, посматран у светлу поменутих околности, печатни прстен из Нишке бање постаје потврда навода Константина Порфирогенита о постојању прстења са царским ликом у поседу варварских старешина чију је лојалност требало придобити.