ON THE CHRONOLOGY OF EAGLE-HEAD BUCKLES FROM
THE NECROPOLIS OF BOSPORUS AND SOUTH-CRIMEAN
BURIAL-GROUNDS OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD
(6TH - EARLY 7TH CENTURIES AD)

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Among the antiquities of the Early Medieval Crimea a special place is occupied by so-called eagle-head buckles. They have been recorded both in burials of the Bosporan necropolis at Kerch and in the burial-grounds situated in the mountainous areas of the Southern Crimea. Buckles of this kind are rightly regarded by many scholars as part of the range of decorative elements used in female attire of Germanic origin, which consisted of a large belt buckle and a pair of fibulae worn on the shoulder. Yet, as before, questions as to the origin and chronology of this category of articles remain controversial. Some assume that the production centre for eagle-head buckles was the Bosporus and that it was from there that the buckles spread to the South-west of the Crimea and into the Danube region,1 while others are of the opinion that they originated from the Danube region or the lands of the Gepidae.2 Bulgarian scholars suggest that finds of this kind discovered in the territory of Bulgaria were manufactured by Early Byzantine craftsmen working in the Danube region.3

As for the chronology of eagle-head buckles, opinion is divided: suggested dates suggested vary between the 5th and the 7th century. Nor is there any unanimity when it comes to the question of the connection between finds in the Bosporus and the Southern Crimea: whether they appeared in the given regions at one and the same time and, if not, where they appeared first.

It would seem that when it comes to the resolution of these controversial issues, the elaboration of a detailed typological classification of eagle-head buckles from the Crimea as a whole could play a significant part. At the present time no such research has been undertaken which would provide a graphic diagram for the classification of both individual specimens and also groups of typologically similar articles.

3 Vagalinski et alii 2000, 84.
This does not imply that nothing at all has been done in this field. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Götze defined the main types, while studying eagle-head buckles throughout their whole distribution area. In fact he grouped together in one typological type both Bosporan and South-Crimean finds. Later Rusu singled out five variants of buckles on the basis of certain features. On that occasion Bosporan and Southern Crimean finds were allocated to different variant groups. Rusu did not, however, proceed to identify more detailed categories within those groups. In 1968 Ambroz published his study of buckles from the Southern Crimea, defining three sub-variants on the basis of the length of the buckles’ loops. As for Bosporan buckles, Ambroz confined himself to a description of their features. In a later article devoted to the periodization of South-Crimean burial-grounds of the Suuk-Su type, Ambroz returns again to the typology of the eagle-head buckles, examining not only the length of the fastener loops, but also the decorative presentation of the buckles’ top plates. After defining eight variants of decoration on the top-plates Ambroz pointed out that changes in the loop size or decoration were “parallel and inter-connected and for that reason constituted objective processes.” Ambroz subsequently defined four chronological periods in burial-grounds of the Suuk-Su type on the basis of eagle-head buckles being found with fibulae, small Byzantine buckles and belts sets. Coin-finds were also taken into account. Eagle-head buckles were assigned to the following periods: Period I, which Ambroz dates to the middle or second third of the 6th century AD and which embraces two variants of buckles 2 and 3 (see Sub-group E, Cat. Nos. 14 and 15 and C); Period II is dated to the end of the 6th or beginning of the 7th century embraces Variants 4 and in part 5 (see: Sub-group E, Cat. 44 and Sub-group B); Period III, according to Ambroz, occupies an intermediate position between Periods II and IV and is represented by buckles of Variants 5 and 6 (see Sub-groups B and A) and, finally, Period IV, which embraces the second half of the 7th century and to which three Variants of buckles have been assigned – 7, 8, 9 (see: Sub-group A).

In 1990 Aibabin published a chronology of the burial-grounds in the Crimea of the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods, in which he devoted a paragraph to eagle-head buckles. First and foremost, Aibabin singles out two groups of finds – Bosporan and South-Crimean – pointing out certain differences between them.

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4 Götz 1907.
5 Rusu 1959.
6 Ambroz 1968, 14.
7 Ambroz 1988, 5-12, fig. 1.