

**INSTITUTE OF ART STUDIES**  
**BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES**



**Nona Krasteva Petkova**

**TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM THE BULGARIAN  
LANDS**

(16<sup>TH</sup> – FIRST HALF OF 18<sup>TH</sup> C.)

**AUTHOR SUMMARY**

**OF A THESIS PAPER FOR OBTAINING A PHD DEGREE**

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FINE ARTS, 8.1, THEORY OF ART*

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SOFIA 2019

The Ph.D. thesis has been discussed and approved for public defense on a Medieval and National Revival Research Group meeting held on October 11, 2019.

The Ph.D. thesis consists of 332 pages: an introduction, 5 chapters, conclusion, an album, a catalogue and a bibliography of 288 Bulgarian and 70 foreign titles.

The public defense will be held on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020, 11:00 am, at the Institute of Art Studies.

Members of the scientific committee: Prof. Elena Genova, PhD, Institute of Art Studies – BAS; Corr. Mem. Prof. Elka Bakalova, DSc; Corr. Mem. Prof. Ivanka Gergova, DSc, Institute of Art Studies – BAS; Corr. Mem. Prof. Mila Santova, DSc, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum – BAS; Assoc. Prof. Pavel Pavlov, PhD, Sofia University; Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev, PhD, Institute of Art Studies – BAS, substitute member; Assoc. Prof. Konstantin Totev, PhD, National Archaeological Institute with Museum – BAS, substitute member.

The materials are available to those who may be interested in the Administrative Services Department of the Institute of the Art Studies on 21 Krakra Str.

## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	5
<b>Chapter 1. TYPOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS</b>	8
<b>Chapter 2. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM SOFIA GOLDSMITH CENTER 16<sup>TH</sup> – 18<sup>TH</sup> C.</b>	11
<b>Chapter 3. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM CHIPROVTSI GOLDSMITH CENTER 17<sup>TH</sup> C.</b>	15
<b>Chapter 4. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM VRATSA GOLDSMITH CENTER 17<sup>TH</sup> C.</b>	17
<b>Chapter 5. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM PLOVDIV AND BACHKOVO MONASTERY GOLDSMITH CENTER</b>	21
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	25
<b>CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS</b>	28
<b>LIST OF PUBLICATIONS</b>	29

## INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Christian tradition of embellishing Gospel book covers with precious metalwork dates way back, with the earliest known examples from the 6<sup>th</sup> c. The magnificent gold, silver, jewel, pearl, and enamel decorations are characteristic of the Gospel lectionary covers – books used at the temple altar and carrying the important role of both a liturgical piece and a sacred vessel.

The precious metal bindings have an undoubted utilitarian function, but above all, they reflect the great veneration paid to the Holy Gospel as the repository of God's word and a remarkable symbol of Christ himself. With its defined role in the liturgy practice, the Book of Gospels represents the image of Jesus Christ and conveys the message to worshipers that salvation is only possible through the Incarnation, Sacrifice, and Resurrection of the Son of God. Thus, the liturgical and dogmatic significance of the altar Gospel dictates the practice of adorning its covers with precious materials.

### *Chronological scope and subject of the study*

The subject of this study are the treasure bindings of Gospel books, stored in the monastery collections, museum collections and in the library and archival institutions on Bulgarian territory. The research is focused on the precious Gospel bindings crafted by the major goldsmith centers operating in the Bulgarian lands until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Attention is also drawn towards three bindings representative of the Chiprovtsi goldsmiths, kept in museums in Serbia and Romania.

The chronological scope of the thesis is determined by the fully preserved metalwork covers, with the earliest example being the Krupnik Gospel made in 1577 by Matey – a goldsmith from Sofia. The study introduces bindings crafted in the following two centuries of Ottoman rule by masters from the major goldsmith centers of Sofia, Chiprovtsi, Vratsa, and in the region of Plovdiv and Bachkovo Monastery. The latest dated monument included in the thesis is the precious cover of the Etropole Gospel from 1758.

### ***Overview of the research to date***

In the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the decorated Gospel books attract the attention of Kr. Miyatev, I. Goshev, M. Kovachev, and are marked in their publications as part of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Rila Monastery, the Vratsa Diocese, and the Dragalevtsi Monastery. The studies are later advanced in the works published by S. Georgieva, D. Buchinsky, M. Ivanov, D. Drumev and others. For the first time in 1963, P. Atanasov collects and systemizes information on the works of bookbinding art, considering their affiliation to the respective goldsmithing traditions, and in 1984 M. Santova is the first author to assemble and compile a paper titled "24 Precious Gospel Bindings". Other researchers that focus on or mention the tradition of the Chiprovtsi goldsmithing center in their works are I. Sotirov and E. Genova.

The number of articles from foreign researchers on the subject is relatively limited, with T. Velmans' studies on the evolution of Byzantine precious covers playing an important role. Of particular interest are the works on the Romanian and Serbian goldsmithing traditions published by C. Nicolescu and B. Radojkovic, the studies published by M. Fraser and E. Kitzinger on the earliest preserved metal fittings, as well as

publications on individual manuscripts and its bindings by P. Hetherington, Y. Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, G. Popov, A. Saminski, and I. Sterligova. Unlike the studies of orthodox icon metal furnishings by A. Grabar, I. Sterligova, or K. Loverdou-Tsigarida, the similar furnished book covers have not been comprehensively researched.

### ***Objective and methodology of the research***

The main purpose of the thesis is to examine the covers of the Gospel books from the 16<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the Bulgarian goldsmithing traditions. The aim is to expand the image of the respective goldsmith ateliers by gathering additional historical evidence from archival resources and identifying the typical features of the Gospel fittings they produced.

To help analyze the preserved Bulgarian treasure bindings, a preliminary typological systemization of Byzantine and post-Byzantine precious bookbindings is presented in the thesis; another important element is the economic and cultural aspects that determine the flourishing of the goldsmithing traditions in Sofia, Chiprovtsi, Vratsa and Plovdiv during the era; summarizing and illustrating the distinctive iconographic, stylistic and ornamental characteristics of the Chiprovtsi goldsmithing tradition is vital for clarifying both the typology and the specifics of each precious bookbinding examined here; a catalogue of all the researched bindings is presented as well.

The methods of formal, iconographic and comparative analysis are used for description, classification, and interpretation, as well as an understanding of the historical context of the respective works of art.

## **Chapter 1. TYPOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS**

### **I. Typology**

Systemizing by typological features is one of the main methods used so far for studying Gospel bindings, with this thesis proposing additional divisions and subdivisions to the typology already recognized by scholars.

The interpretation is based on Byzantine and post-Byzantine binding examples that originated in the Balkans and the wider geographical area of Byzantine influence that includes Armenia, Georgia, and Russia. A thorough examination and comparison of the treasure Gospel bindings showed that there are three main types of decorated covers – covers crafted from single large sheets of metal (called for the purpose of the research single-structured covers), covers crafted from separate fittings and metal furnishings (multi-structured covers) and box-bindings, with the latter two types additionally divided into sub-types.

#### ***1. Single-structured covers***

Single-structured covers are crafted from partially or fully gilded single silver sheets, with the decoration chased from the front and/or hammered from the backside of the metal plate. The earliest known treasure binding covers are from the Early Christian treasures discovered in Kaper Koraon, Syria, and from Kumluca, near Antalya in Turkey and are dated from the 6<sup>th</sup> c.

Pictured on the covers of the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. Gospels, are the iconographic schemes of the Crucifixion of Christ, Deesis, and Descent into Hell. These scenes require a lot of visual space to be lavishly depicted, space only present in book covers adorned with large metal sheets. This is a tradition practiced by the Sofia and Chiprovtsi metalworkers and goldsmiths.

## **2. *Multi-structured covers***

The decoration of multi-structured covers is shaped by various metal furnishings, whose names we find in the scribal and monastic archival records. The most commonly used fittings are the following: a center piece, most often cross-shaped; corner pieces in the shape of the Greek letter Γ (*gamma*), known as „gammi” or „gammati”; as well protruding elements with protective function – bosses with a decorative shape (almond, lily, etc.) or shaped as simple hollow or solid hemispheres.

The two subtypes are determined by the distribution and negative spaces left on the book covers in-between the metal furnishings. In the first instance, the pieces do not cover the boards in their entirety and the leather or textile cover plays a significant role in the overall aesthetic and visual impact of the finished bookbinding. The second most common technique of fixing the separate pieces to the boards aims to mimic a single metal sheet, where the furnishings are mounted on the boards close to each other. This is the preferred method used by the goldsmiths from Plovdiv and Bachkovo Monastery.

## **3. *Box-bindings***

The least common type of precious bindings, box-bindings, are specially designed for the treasured Gospel text and bear similarity to a reliquary. They are ornate silver boxes with a complex hinge system, which provides very good mobility of the metal plates that cover the edges of the text block and protect them completely. The preserved examples adorned with such covers have two distinct types – the first being an individual box that holds the bound text block inside, and the second one where the perception of a box was visually attained, with the silver plates mounted to the leather-wrapped wooden covers of the Gospel book. These books are attributed to the goldsmith center of Plovdiv and Bachkovo Monastery.

## **II. Main iconography**

The themes depicted on the precious bindings were initially developed through an extremely limited number of figures, emphasizing their symbolic value. Later, the iconographic scheme shifts towards depicting scenes that represent the dogmatic significance of the cover layout. The most common compositions in Byzantine art since the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. are the ones illustrating the synthesized idea of Salvation – the Crucifixion of Christ, Deesis, and Descent into Hell. From the 14<sup>th</sup> c. the Crucifixion of Christ is traditionally presented on the front cover of the Gospel, with Descent into Hell on the back. This iconographic scheme remains leading in the post-Byzantine iconography as well. Framing the central composition with images of the Great Feasts, apostles, prophets, and saints, becomes popular in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, with further development of the iconographic program made primarily in the post-Byzantine era.

## **Chapter 2. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM SOFIA GOLDSMITH CENTER 16<sup>TH</sup> – 18<sup>TH</sup> C.**

Some of the most representative works of post-Byzantine goldsmithing have been preserved from the production of the Sofia goldsmith ateliers. The iconographic distinctiveness, style, and quality of this small group of 6 books provide evidence that Sofia was a large and significant goldsmith center with numerous ateliers and probably a diverse production with an overall appearance difficult to reconstruct.

The city became the center of the largest and most important Ottoman Eyalet – Rumelia, and quickly became a cosmopolitan settlement with a very diverse population. It was also a metropolitan center, as well as a significant spiritual center for the Orthodox community throughout the period. This chapter examines in detail the historical, economic and cultural prerequisites for the prosperity of Sofia and the flourishing of the Sofia goldsmithing traditions during this era, by bringing to light Ottoman-Turkish archival documents from the collections of the Bulgarian National Library. Dated from 1550 until 1722, they reveal new insight on the goldsmiths that worked in Sofia.

The covers of these Gospels are entirely handcrafted of entire silver sheets. They are characterized by a common structural and plastic design and iconographic and stylistic closeness to the traditions of Byzantine art. The main compositions of the Crucifixion of Christ and the Descent into Hell, as well as those of individual images, showcase the knowledge and mastery of the artists of icon-painting, mural or manuscript decorations.

The various generations of goldsmiths that produced these covers retain and retell, with remarkable persistence, the iconographic program originally introduced in the Sofia Gospel covers. With one exception (that of Dragalevtsi Gospel by the goldsmith Velo, 1648), metalworking traditions from this area exhibit the distinctive absence of floral and

geometric decorations in their design, a feature that differentiates their work from the goldsmithing of the period.

The most distinguished monument among the Sofia treasure bindings is the earliest one - the Krupnic Gospel (1577) crafted by goldsmith Matey. It easily becomes a model for the next generations of goldsmiths with its exquisite craftsmanship. Its artistry is extremely precise in every aspect: from the design of the iconographic program, through the right choice of silver sheets' thickness and the exquisite drawing; the precise proportions and the correct anatomical construction of the figures, to the skillful treatment of the volumes and the attention to detail and quality of the gilding. The thesis also presents new information from different archival materials that mention a goldsmith named Matey.

### **Chapter 3. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM CHIPROVTSI GOLDSMITH CENTER 17<sup>TH</sup> C.**

The research done on Chiprovtsi, and in particular on Chiprovtsi as a goldsmith center, gives the impression that the two topics are well studied, and their individual aspects have been fully understood. The extensive historical analysis presented in this chapter shows, however, that there is a significant gap between the historical facts and the interpretations given in the past. This new information determined the methods used to analyze the specific features of the Chiprovtsi metalworking traditions. While they have no claim for completeness, they provide the necessary research base to analyze and study the treasure bindings produced by this goldsmith center.

The observations showed that Chiprovtsi guild masters adhere to several basic principles when it comes to crafting precious Gospel bindings: they always use large metal sheets

that completely cover the boards; they also prefer multi-figure compositions and complex iconographic solutions. The iconographic program is also designed in consideration of the desires of the ktetors and the church that ordered the Gospel. That way, the metalworkers expand the iconography by adding the scenes of the Annunciation of the Mother of God, the Ascension of God, and the unique for this era scene of the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

The goldsmiths use the visual space in a balanced way, with the figures, the ornamental decoration, and the detailed inscriptions, having a completely equal role in the layout. These works of art are undoubtedly outstanding with the high quality of goldsmithing techniques.

Only two of the six metal bindings from this area have an inscription confirming their provenance – the Cherepish Gospel, made by goldsmiths Nikola and Pala (1612), and the Gospel crafted by Franco Markanich for the Bistrița Monastery (1642). The remaining four Gospels studied in this chapter show many of the distinctive stylistic, iconographic and decorative features of the Chiprovtsi goldsmithing traditions.

#### **Chapter 4. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM VRATSA GOLDSMITH CENTER 17<sup>TH</sup> C.**

The land around Vratsa city is rich in iron, zinc, lead, copper and silver ores, and some of the rivers are gold-bearing. These natural resources play an important role in the economic and cultural development of the village. After the incorporation of the northwestern Bulgarian lands within the limits of the Ottoman Empire, Vratsa became the center of the kaza and gradually expanded in the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> c. At that time, it was also a bishopric center under the jurisdiction of the Turnovo Metropolitanate and a major center

of Slavic literary activity. All of this determines the need for a comparison between Vratsa and Chiprovtsi in this part of the thesis.

The metalworks created in Vratsa goldsmith center have been the object of study of many scholars, and most of them present them in the context of the Chiprovtsi goldsmithing tradition – a valid approach, given the proximity of both ateliers, and with Vratsa being the second most important metalwork center after Chiprovtsi. However, there are certain differences between the works of art of both centers.

This chapter brings forward five Gospels from the 17<sup>th</sup> c. done by goldsmiths from Vratsa or the region (such as the goldsmith Mavrudi), with three of them specifically ordered by the local church. The precious bindings are multiple-metal component covers with several main elements: center piece depicting an iconographic scene, corner pieces with the images of the Evangelists, and decorated frames, mounted on boards covered in velvet. The use of positive matrices (*baskii*) with the metal leaves hammered to achieve the desired form, is a common technique for this center first used in the earliest cover of a Gospel book (1623) from the temple St Nicholas in Vratsa.

Another precious cover from this goldsmithing center is the one crafted by Mavrudi from the village of Kameno pole for the church Ascension of the Christ in Vratsa (1642). It is composed of several silver and gilded pieces, made by two goldsmiths. We consider that Mavrudi made the plate depicting the Crucifixion mounted on the lower board, as well as a part of the corner pieces. All of them showcase a distinctive shape rendering and a tight outline. The remaining pieces are most probably from another cover but were mounted at a later point to this particular Gospel book. The metalworker that crafted them is not known, but there is a resemblance between them and the corner pieces of the Suceava Gospel (1656) by Ivan Yanov. The pieces made by Mavrudi bear semblance with

the Chiprovtsi goldsmithing practice – especially in the depiction of human figures and faces, and the background decoration adorned with a network of twisting floral decorations.

The five works testify to a continuous tradition in the production of Gospel covers in Vratsa – certainly this atelier (or a goldsmith center) had a completely different artistic approach to the one used in Chiprovtsi.

## **Chapter 5. TREASURE GOSPEL BINDINGS FROM PLOVDIV AND BACHKOVO MONASTERY**

A study object in this chapter is a group of treasure Gospel bindings made by a goldsmith center that operated from the 30s of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. until the third quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. The metalworkers there created objects that were intended for the religious purposes of Bachkovo Monastery – treasure bindings, tabernacles, chalices, etc. One of the most characteristic features that set them apart from other examples of liturgical utensils, is the use of filigree enamel. The inscriptions on the studied metalwork lack information about the origin of the goldsmiths or the place where they worked. These inscriptions do not show the origin of the works of art or the exact place where they were produced.

Eight covers are presented in this chapter with five of them made specifically for the Bachkovo Monastery. The two earliest works are from the 17<sup>th</sup> c. and from 1686, but the names of the goldsmiths are not mentioned in the inscription texts. The latest cover among the 8 covers is the one from the Plovdiv Gospel (1743). Besides the bindings produced for Bachkovo, there are three more with identical typological features, but they are linked to the towns of Koprivshitsa, Etropole, and Samokov.

The covers from this area are of the multi-structured type with the separate fittings mounted very close to each other to mimic the look of an entire metal sheet, using various metalworking techniques. This determined the need for introducing additional typological division in the thesis.

The first group consists of three covers, created mainly by separate metal casted fittings. The decoration focuses on representing the Great Feasts on square shaped plates, and on medallions with images of the Evangelists, all cast using the same matrices.

The second group is represented by four treasure bindings with metalwork hammered on positive models (*baskii*). The decorations follow a slightly different design that includes a center piece and a frame made by chased plates decorated with filigree enamel and laced metal.

The third group is significantly different from the previously mentioned covers. It belongs to the rarest type of book covers – the jeweled box-bindings. The two precious covers made by the goldsmiths John and George (1701), and the other one – by John, son of Atanas (1731) – are all fitted with proper box-bindings, while the imitative box-binding supposedly from Samokov (c. 1750) is missing and was studied thanks to previous researches and archival photographs.

The Bachkovo box bindings are slightly different from the typical examples of treasure boxes, with the main characteristic being the two narrow strips of metal that cover the fore-edge and form a box that closes in the middle of the edges, instead of it being a box with a hinged lid without borders.

The iconographic scene of Descent into Hell is invariably present on the front cover, and its usual place on the back cover is occupied by the Crucifixion – a typical modification of iconographic program present in the covers from this geographic region.

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> a decline in the quality and artistic values is visible, a pattern that goes hand in hand with a longer and more comprehensive process in the Balkans - the general trend of the disappearance of medieval traditions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The treasure Gospel covers produced by the large goldsmith centers in the Bulgarian lands from the Ottoman period are relatively few. This thesis has revised and summarized the discoveries of previous generations of researchers and has provided new information on archival and historical resources. A brand-new typological reference has been added to aid future studies, and to better systemize the arts and crafts of metalworking in Bulgaria under Ottoman rule.

These precious bindings are not only an artistic phenomenon but are also an important testimony of the historical and cultural context. They are closely linked to the prosperity, needs and wealth of certain members of society. This determines the need for a large portion of the thesis to focus on these factors as well, and to pay special attention to the development of each of the villages in the Ottoman empire.

Another contribution of this dissertation is the first characteristic of Chiprovtsi goldsmithing and jewelry traditions outside the context of bindings. This analysis brought forward the main features of the goldsmith center and offered a new systemization, which comments and even refuses some of the past attributions of certain objects of art as Wallachian.

The precious bindings are presented in chronological order, grouped in the context of the tradition they follow. A valuable addition to this research is a catalogue with visual

and descriptive information on the studied book-covers. It also marks the different types of inscriptions found on these objects of art and religion.

One of the main challenges in studying objects of goldsmithing art is recognizing and pinpointing the exact techniques used by the gilders and craftsmen. Even though there are numerous theoretical researches published on the matter, they often contradict each other and make it difficult to obtain a precise idea of the combination of diverse techniques used by the artists.

We hope that this research will prove to be a solid basis for further study of earlier precious bindings or covers from an expanded geographical region, objects of similar make kept in monasteries, museums or libraries in modern-day Bulgaria, or even the affiliation and preferences of art patrons of the time.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- For the first time, treasure Gospel covers produced by the main goldsmith centers in the Bulgarian lands from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> c., are subject to a thorough analysis.
- The first typological systemization of Gospel covers has been proposed, using three main types with additional subtypes.
- For the first time, Ottoman archival documents have a major presence in a study of the goldsmithing practices and traditions in the Bulgarian lands.
- The signed goldsmithing works of art from Chiprovtsi have been systemized by a complex study that takes into account the metalworking techniques, layout, and design of the objects themselves, as well as the iconographic references, the decorations, etc. This is extremely useful for achieving better attribution of objects that were not signed.
- The Gospel bindings analyzed in the study are characteristic for the goldsmith tradition, and their materials, metalworking techniques, iconographic and decorative preferences are representative for the work of the major gold and ore-mining centers in this era on the Bulgarian lands. This thesis complements and enriches the research done so far on these subjects.
- The catalog of twenty-five Gospel covers gives information on the dating, dimensions, materials, and techniques used in the production of treasure bindings. The provenance or origin, the artist, as well as the inscriptions found on each binding are now well documented in this new contribution.

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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4. On the Systematization of Byzantine Gospel Covers: About a Rare Type of Precious Box Bindings. – Niš and Byzantium XI (ed. Miša Rakocija), 2013, Niš, 475–484. – ISBN 978-86-6101-086-6.
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7. Към типологията на византийските обкови на евангелия. – Проблеми на изкуството, 2, 2011, 32-38 [Kam tipologiyata na vizantiyskite obkovi na evangeliya. – Problemi na izkustvoto, 2, 2011, 32-38]. – ISSN 0032-9371.