



Necklaces or embroidered elements of costume? The functions of multi-bead assemblages in the Middle Byzantine Period (evidence from cemeteries in Bulgaria)

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ABSTRACT

The present article is focused on the issues surrounding the study of glass beads and their various functions. It mainly addresses the large sets of glass beads that have been unearthed in cemeteries in Thrace, which are known to have been used to decorate elements of medieval costumes. The data demonstrate that the beads were predominantly located in the neckline area, with some instances in the sleeves area. It has been observed that they also adorned headscarves, or veils that were wrapped around the head and intertwined in the neck area. The existence of this element of the costume is corroborated by both written sources and images. Graves in which such artefacts have been unearthed unequivocally suggest their association with female juveniles and young adults. The materials found in these assemblages can be dated to the 12th and even the end of the 12th/beginning of the 13th c. AD.

KEYWORDS

Glass beads, medieval costume, the veiling of woman in Medieval period

Introduction

The use of glass beads, which were produced in a range of colours and shapes, is well documented throughout the medieval period. In cemeteries dating from the 11th–12th c. AD, large sets of beads are often found, some of which contained thousands of beads. These elements are frequently interpreted as necklaces and are presented in the form of elaborate strings. However, their substantial number as well as their position in relation to the skeleton indicate a range of possible functions. For this reason, the careful work of excavators, together with their observations and documentation, is crucial for elucidating the functions of the beads.

Glass beads are complex ornaments that are inherently difficult to analyse. Owing to their small size and often considerable quantity, they have frequently been overlooked in scholarly research. In Bulgarian scholarship, a comprehensive study on the subject is still lacking, and in monographs and articles about cemeteries containing beads, a more detailed presentation of this category of finds is often absent. In most cases, beads are published as reconstructed strings (necklaces), intended to illustrate the appearance of medieval neck ornaments (Gatev 1977; 1985; Borisov 1989; Sheileva 1995). The practice of stringing beads into composite ornaments has also been motivated by the need for more convenient storage within museum collections, as well as for their display in exhibition contexts. In certain instances, however, beads and/or pendants originating from different graves have been combined into a single

strand in order to enhance aesthetic appeal. This raises important questions regarding the integrity and authenticity of the necklaces presented in the literature.

A further significant issue concerns the quality of visual documentation. Illustrations, both in earlier and in comparatively recent publications, are frequently presented in black and white, which complicates the identification of bead types and, in some cases, the interpretation of their archaeological contexts. The presentation of images showing the beads *in situ* is rare, creating further difficulties for their interpretation. This is partly due to differing field methodologies and documentation practices. The number of recovered beads also depends on the precision of the excavation process. Another shortcoming is the lack of chemical analyses, which, for various reasons, have not been conducted for a large part of the cemeteries in Thrace.

The factors outlined above hinder the determination of the function of the beads. In the absence of drawings and photographic documentation, this information is most reliably reconstructed from the primary observations of excavators or conservators.

Review of Research and Formulation of a Hypothesis on the Function of Beads

The interpretation of beads uncovered during excavation is closely linked to their arrangement and positioning within specific areas of the skeleton. Information regarding their use other than as components of necklaces has been systematised in an overview table (Table 1).

A review of the available literature indicates that large assemblages of glass beads are primarily documented in Thrace, in cemeteries broadly dated to the 11th–12th c. AD. North of the Balkan Mountains, comparable finds are, at present, known only from Necropolis no. 2 of the fortress Hotalich, near the village of Kormyansko (Sevlievo municipality), dated to the mid and second half of the 13th c. AD (Boteva 2019a, 33; 2023, 408). This chronology has already been challenged (Kirilov 2023, 249–250), while the published data on Graves nos 16, 22, 44, and 51 attributed to this site reveal similarities with assemblages from southern Bulgaria. They will therefore also be considered in the present study.

More specific data can be derived from sites published with full catalogues that include location of artefacts. Among the largest of these are Kovachevo and Dyadovo. However, they provide somewhat contradictory evidence. The catalogue of the Dyadovo cemetery indicates that, despite the large number of beads recovered from the graves, they were all found in the neck area (Borisov 1989, 340–368). The catalogue of Kovachevo, presents different data (Gatev 1985, 109–123). According to the publication, glass beads were recovered around the neck, on the chest, or in the area of the skull. In Graves nos 35, 42, 60, 66, 74, 79, 80, 94, 98, 151, and 167 (i.e. 12 out of the 15 graves in which beads were found), they are recorded as being positioned in the head region. While the occurrence of beads around the skull may, in some cases, be attributed to necklaces, the possibility that some were used as decoration sewn onto a veil or cloth is suggested by the distribution observed in Grave no. 70 – ‘beneath the skull, around the earrings, extending to the shoulders, but not on the chest...’ – as well as in Grave no. 60: ‘around the head, on the chest (with some scattered as far as the scaphoid bone of the left arm)...’ (Gatev 1985, 114–115).

The data about head accessories decorated with sewn beads is supplemented by D. Aladzhov’s observations on the cemeteries of southeastern Bulgaria. He reports a large number of glass beads, stating that “not all of them are from necklaces. A significant part of them are from trimmings on diadems or hats, sleeves, or other parts of clothing” (Aladzhov 1973, 155–156).

Of great importance are also the observations of G. Sheleva on the graves from necropolis no. 1 near the village of Iskritsa. According to her, not all beads belong to necklaces, “but were used to deco-

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cemetery, grave	beads' location	number of beads (total)	sex	age
Pomorie, grave no. 95 (Chokoev 2019, 240–241, figs 5–6)	“in the disturbed soil in front of the skull (to its east), many glass beads were found, but without any noticeable arrangement. In one fragment of this soil (approximately 90 × 65 mm), lines formed by the beads could be discerned. An arrangement of beads is also observed in the soil adhering to the right half of the upper jaw of the fragmented skull. Beads were also found beneath the cervical vertebrae.”	in the skull area, about 200; and in the soil, about 100	f	15
Kovachevo, grave no. 35 (Gatev 1985, 112)	around the skull	350	f	6–8
Kovachevo, grave no. 42 (Gatev 1985, 112)	around the skull	405	f	30
Kovachevo, grave no. 60 (Gatev 1985, 114)	“around the head, on the chest (with some scattered as far as the scaphoid bone of the left arm)...”	690	f	6–7
Kovachevo, grave no. 66 (Gatev 1985, 115)	around the skull	150	f	5
Kovachevo, grave no. 70 (Gatev 1985, 115)	“beneath the skull, around the earrings, extending to the shoulders, but not on the chest... they were probably used to adorn the chin strap, from which the ear pendants were suspended”	2730	f	30
Kovachevo, grave no. 74 (Gatev 1985, 116)	around the skull	2200	f	5
Kovachevo, grave no. 79 (Gatev 1985, 116–117)	around the skull	165	f	20
Kovachevo, grave no. 80 (Gatev 1985, 117)	“around the head, a necklace made of 5–6 rows of glass beads”	860	f	13–14
Kovachevo, grave no. 94 (Gatev 1985, 118)	around the head area	1450	f	13–14
Kovachevo, grave no. 98 (Gatev 1985, 119)	around the skull	1320	f	unknown
Kovachevo, grave no. 151 (Gatev 1985, 121)	“in the area of the head and on the chest”	304	f	6
Kovachevo, grave no. 167 (Gatev 1985, 122)	“in the area of the head and on the chest”	810	f	16–18
Chitashka Mogila, grave no. 20	in the skull area	327	f	20–25
Chitashka Mogila, grave no. 27	in the skull area and thorax	1145	f	20–25
Vratitsa, grave no. 12	in the lumbar area (?); between the ribs on the right side of the skeleton	?	unknown	unknown
Vratitsa, grave no. 16	“A significant number of beads were recorded in the chest region, deriving from an ornament or, more plausibly, from embroidery. They were preserved in situ, maintaining their original configuration – around the neck and extending downward over the chest area in six rows”	?	unknown	16–18/ 20
Vratitsa, grave no. 33	1) Around the skull. 2) Scattered beads were discovered around the pelvis and the left arm	?	unknown	30–35
Vratitsa, grave no. 48	Red beads were found at the wrist bones of the left arm, while a large red bead was located near the left arm bones. From the cervical vertebrae down to the leg bones, single-component and composite beads	?	f	20–25

cemetery, grave	beads' location	number of beads (total)	sex	age
Hotalich, necropolis no. 2, grave no. 16 (Boteva 2023, 412)	"in the chest area and beneath the skull"	3433	f (?)	unknown
Hotalich, necropolis no. 2, grave no. 22 (Boteva 2023, 410–411)	"All the beads begin high beneath the chin and tightly encircle the neck of the young woman. Upon lifting the lower jaw, curved lines of beads of identical size and colour clearly emerged... A large quantity of them had spilled on both sides of the shoulders. Beads were found down to the middle of the chest. Several features can be observed: the large beads of rock crystal and carnelian are not concentrated around the neck. They are found from the neck to the middle of the chest."	more than 1500	f	unknown
Hotalich, necropolis no. 2, grave no. 44 (Boteva 2023, 411)	found in the upper part of the skeleton	more than 8084	unknown	5–8
Hotalich, necropolis no. 2, grave no. 51 (Boteva 2023, 412–413)	"The black beads extend further downward to the middle of the chest, while the coloured ones are concentrated higher up... the beads are positioned very high on the neck."	3480	f	25–26

Table 1. Data on beads used in the decoration of the medieval costume

rate headscarves or ribbons that held the hair of the buried, as they are most often found in the head and chin area, and not just on the body" (Sheyleva 1995, 251). Information about the presence of beadwork is also provided by the secondary burials inserted into tumulus no. 1 of the Roman necropolis near the village of Vratitsa, Kameno municipality (Stoyanov, Nikov 2004; Stoyanov et al. 2016) and in the Chitashka Mogila, village of Bratia Daskalovi, Stara Zagora region (Dimitrov 2011). The two sites have only been partially published. Nevertheless, some of the documented in situ contexts allow for certain observations regarding medieval dress. First, both cemeteries confirm the aforementioned evidence for the use of beads in the decoration of medieval costume. In Grave no. 16 from the cemetery at Vratitsa, the beads are arranged in the chest area, which could also be interpreted as part of a neck ornament. However, the manner in which the rows are organised, forming regular arcs, rather suggests their use as embroidery decorating the front of the garment (fig. 1). It is noteworthy that they form an almost regular circular arrangement extending from the neck/shoulder area to the chest, where six rows of beads can be reconstructed. In the central part, a rectangular element composed of a further ten rows can be observed descending downward. Its presence provides additional support for the interpretation that the beads were not strung as a necklace but rather formed decorative accents on the garment. Evidence for the presence of beads in the torso area is also provided by Graves nos 12, 33, and 48, although in these cases the decoration cannot be fully reconstructed. In Graves nos 12 and 48, beads were also found on the arms, which may suggest the embroidery of beadwork onto the sleeves – around the wrist – or the use of bead ornaments worn in this area (figs 2–4).

The cemetery at Vratitsa also provides evidence for the presence of beads in the area of the skull, similar to the data known from Kovachevo and Iskritsa. This evidence is further supplemented by the data from Grave no. 20 at Chitashka Mogila. According to the field documentation, the glass beads discovered there were positioned around the skull and are not attested in the neck or torso areas. They are arranged in arcs on both sides of the skull, which may suggest their use as decoration on an element of dress covering the head, descending along both sides and likely meeting in the neck area. On this basis, it may be assumed that the beads were sewn onto a scarf or head covering. Comparable information is

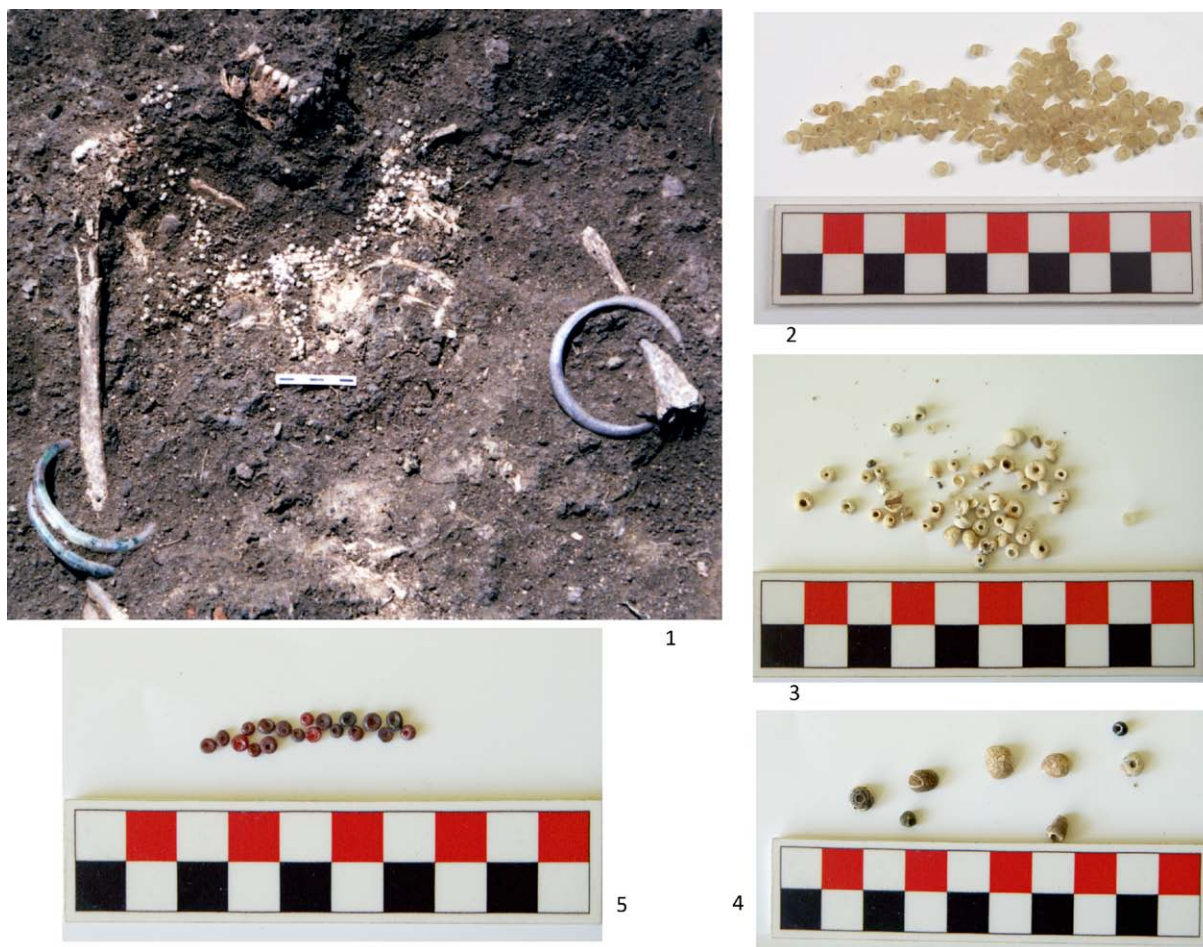


Fig. 1. Grave no. 16 from the cemetery near the village of Vratitsa. 1. Beads used in the embroidery decorating the frontal part of the garment (photo T. Stoyanov, D. Stoyanova); 2–5. Beads found in the grave (3–5, found under the jaw and in the chest area, photos T. Petkova)

also provided for Grave no. 29 from the same necropolis.

The study and analysis of garment elements, where such evidence is preserved, require a specific methodological approach, in which the work and observations of conservators are of particular importance. Unfortunately, such publications remain limited. Of notable contribution in this respect are the observations of I. Chokoev, who has undertaken a detailed analysis and reconstruction of techniques for decorating garments with pearls (Chokoev 2014). With regard to glass beads, his analysis of the material from Grave no. 95 in the medieval cemetery in Pomorie is especially significant. As gold thread was identified in the area of the cervical vertebrae, the skull was lifted together with the surrounding soil. According to the conservator's observations, cited in Table 1, the presence of linear bead arrangements was recorded, allowing for the reconstruction of their overall composition. Based on the position of the beads in relation to the vertebrae, I. Chokoev concludes that 'the preserved embroidered area derives from the back of the garment' (Chokoev 2019, 236–244, figs 5–10). At present, the evidence for decoration on the back of the garment cannot be directly compared with data from the other cemeteries under consideration. Its presence, however, corresponds well with the broader evidence for bead embroidery on the front of the garment and on the sleeves.

As already noted, evidence for the sewing of beads onto elements of costume is also provided by the excavations at Hotalich. In some of the female graves in Necropolis no. 2, large assemblages of glass beads have been recovered, 'up to 15,000, and sometimes more'. According to the direct observa-

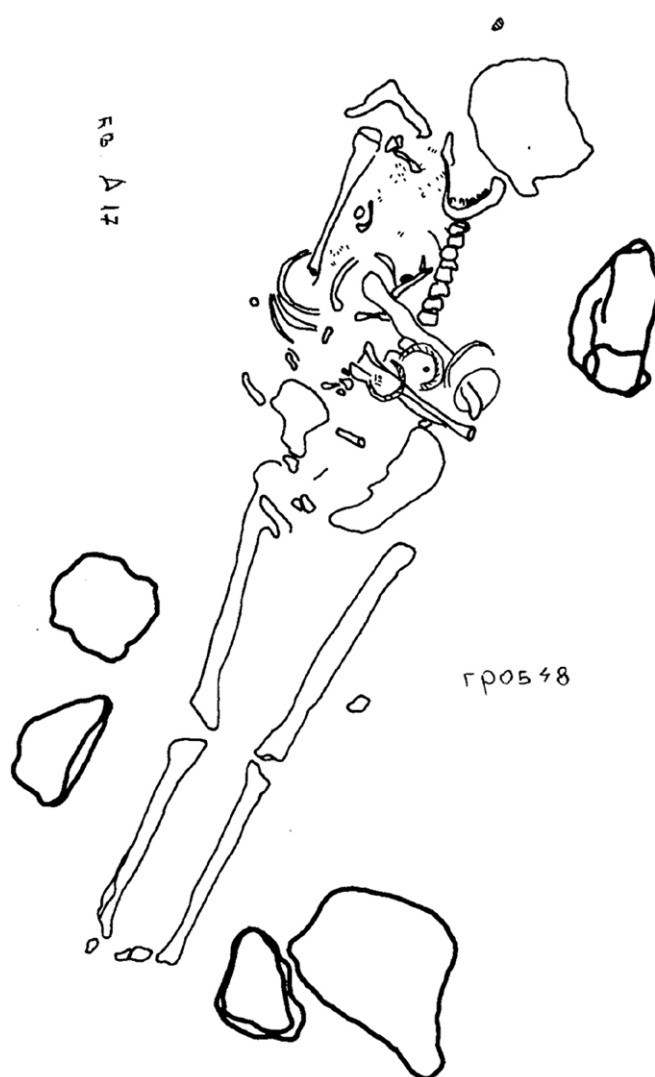


Fig. 2. Grave no. 48 from the cemetery near the village of Vratitsa (authors T. Stoyanov, D. Stoyanova)

tions of N. Boteva, ‘these beads undoubtedly begin high on the neck, almost beneath the lower jaw, and extend to the middle of the chest, and are arranged according to colour. The evidence from Graves nos 16, 22, 44, and 51 leads the researcher to suggest that they formed part of veils or collars which, in her view, covered the neck in a manner comparable to representations known from ktetors portraits (Boteva 2019b; 2020; 2023). The ornaments recovered from the graves listed in Table 1 indicate a distribution in the 12th c. AD, while some types – such as earrings with biconical beads and glass bracelets decorated with a red thread – are characteristic of the late 12th to early 13th c. AD. On this basis, it may be assumed that the use of beads in embroidery falls within this chronological range. This appears to have been a relatively short-lived phenomenon, as there is no evidence for the deposition of glass beads in graves after this period. These observations suggest a revision of the dating of Necropolis no. 2 at Hotalich. Its general chronology has been placed in the mid to second half of the 13th c. AD, however, the published material from the graves with beads considered here shows distribution in the 12th and the late 12th to early 13th c. AD. This raises the question of whether the graves containing beads may indicate the presence of an earlier horizon within the cemetery, without challenging the chronology of assemblages dated by coins.



Fig. 3. The use of beads to decorate the sleeve of a garment found in Grave no. 48 from the cemetery near the village of Vratitsa (photos T. Stoyanov, D. Stoyanova, T. Petkova)

An important question concerns the form of the beads and whether it is related to their use in the decoration of garments. The available data does not permit firm conclusions to be drawn. Descriptions of beads are difficult to compare, even within the same sites, as not all of their characteristics – such as colour and form – are consistently recorded. The synthesis of data from different sites is even more problematic, given the very small size of beads from this period, the lack of precision in their manufacture, and the largely subjective nature of determining their shape and colour. On the basis of the material from Vratitsa, it may be suggested that beads used for garment decoration tend to be small in size and of more regular form – typically cylindrical or spherical (figs 1, 3–4). These are comparable in shape to the published examples from Hotalich, although the different colour range (Boteva 2019a, 34–35, figs 41–42; 2019b, 45; 2020, 54). Their form seems well suited for incorporation into embroidery and for the creation of decorative motifs, as their surfaces are relatively regular. Among the material considered, there is also evidence for composite beads, as well as beads produced by inlay or made from semi-precious stones and minerals. At present, however, there is no clear evidence as to whether these types were incorporated into embroidery.

The examples provide, albeit limited, insight into the costume of girls and young women (data

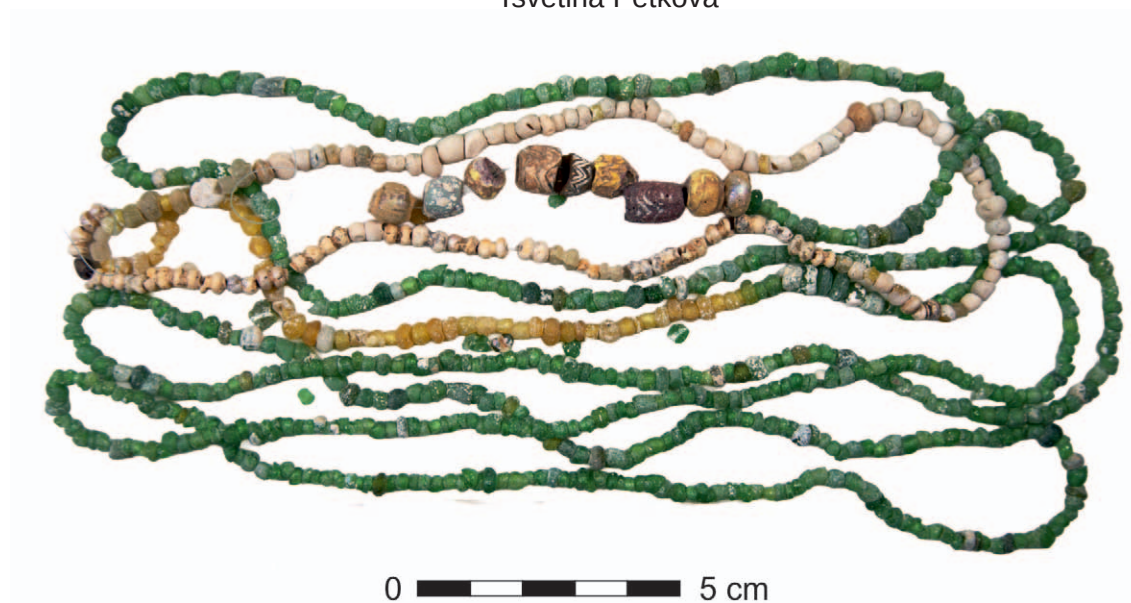


Fig. 4 Beads from the garment's hem, discovered in grave no. 48 from the cemetery near the village of Vratitsa (photos T. Petkova)

on the age of the deceased are presented in Table 1). Within the cemeteries examined, such finds do not occur in graves of individuals over 35 years of age. In summary, two principal functions of beads may be identified, distinct from their use in necklaces. The first is their application in the embroidery of garment elements in the neckline and sleeve areas. There is also isolated evidence for scattered beads in other parts of the skeleton, suggesting that such decoration may have been applied to various areas of the clothing. Glass beads were also used in the decoration of another important element of costume – headwear. On the basis of the data discussed concerning the position of beads in Grave no. 16 at Chitashka Mogila, as well as evidence from Kovachevo and Hotalich, it may be suggested that they formed part of a cloth, scarf, or veil covering the head and likely fastened or gathered in the neck area.

The covering of the hair/head during the Middle Ages is attested by a variety of sources. Recommendations for such practice during prayer are found in the First Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians; however, scholars remain skeptical as to the extent to which this was observed outside an ecclesiastical context (1 Cor. 11:4–16; Stoychev 2021). A prayer known from several manuscripts, intended for the ritual of the first covering (or binding) of the hair of young women, is also attested. A detailed analysis of its textual tradition has been undertaken by G. Radle, who concludes that this act was probably not associated with marriage, but rather took place at an earlier age. This interpretation is supported by a range of written sources and visual evidence (Radle 2019).

The covering of the female head in a later period than that of the sites under consideration is well attested in ktetor portraits, although these provide evidence primarily for aristocratic costume (Mavrodinova 1969; 1995; Mavrodinov 1972; Atanasova 2016; Adashinskaya 2020). Two principal figures within these representations allow for the reconstruction of head adornment. The first are the ktetors' wives, who are invariably depicted with their heads covered by a hat and/or veil. These coverings often extend downwards and are sometimes arranged around the neck. Such accessories are frequently decorated with small dots, which may represent ornamentation in pearls or beads; to some extent, this also applies to the decoration of garments. A review of graves containing large assemblages of beads shows that they predominantly belong to children and young women. For this reason, particular importance should be assigned not so much to the depictions of ktetors' wives as to those of their daughters. Such images are known from the churches at Kalotina and Dolna Kamenitsa (Vasilev 1960; Mavrodinova 1969, figs 2, 21; 1995, fig. 72; Adashinskaya 2020, fig. 2.15, 17). In these cases, the head adornment is less elaborate

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than that of their mothers; nevertheless, the hair is covered with a headscarf or veil descending behind the shoulders. The best-preserved examples are the wall paintings from Dolna Kamenitsa (Mavrodinova 1969, figs 2, 21). There, the ktetor's daughter is depicted with her head covered by a white veil falling behind the shoulders, while a necklace is worn closely around the neck. Beneath it, another element – closely resembling a necklace – is indicated. It is rendered as rows of small dots, which may represent pearls or beads. The function of this element was likely to secure the hair beneath the veil, in a manner comparable to a diadem. A similar, though more elaborately rendered, feature is visible in the portrait of the ktetor's wife. Despite this iconographic evidence, there is currently no archaeological data attesting the presence of beads in the cranial area during the 14th c. AD, to which the wall paintings discussed here are dated.

Conclusions

The beads documented in situ at Vratitsa contribute to the discussion of the various ways in which beads were used in female costume during the Middle Ages. They demonstrate their application in the decoration of garments – particularly in the neckline and sleeve areas – a hypothesis that has been discussed in the literature but only rarely illustrated in published works. Although numerous cemeteries have been investigated, the available data – especially for those in south-eastern Thrace – remain accessible primarily through overview articles (Aladzhov 1969; 1971; 1973; 1984; 1997), while even published monographs often lack drawings and photographs of beads recorded in situ. It is unlikely that the full extent of this information can be recovered, as many of the sites were excavated in earlier periods, when the available recording techniques did not permit the production of sufficiently informative photographic documentation. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence exists to demonstrate the use of glass beads sewn onto textiles. They appear to have been applied both in the decoration of garment elements and on head accessories – such as headscarves or veils covering the head. Judging from the anthropological data, such adornments were used primarily by girls and young women.

During the period under consideration, the use of beads for the production of necklaces likely continued, as indicated by the presence of more distinctive beads made of glass, semi-precious stones, and minerals. Their number within graves is, however, considerably smaller compared to that of the small spherical or cylindrical beads. The clarification of the diverse functions of beads in medieval female costume remains a subject for future research.

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