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Devoted to the Past, Looking to the Future

Thirty Steps of the Be-JA Road

The ‘Persian’ Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

Strahil Panayotov ^a

^a Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria; strahil.panayotov@gmail.com

Here they come to snuff the rooster

Yeah here come the rooster

Alice in Chains

ABSTRACT

The National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia houses a remarkable golden ring. It features a meticulously crafted rooster in Persianising style – an interpretation introduced for the first time in this study. It presumably originates from the Kukuva burial mound of the Duvanli necropolis. This article delves into the ring’s detailed examination, exploring the image of the rooster and its broader context to unveil new insights into its origins and significance. Crafted possibly by East Greek artisans during the Achaemenid period in the Mediterranean, the ring was among the luxurious gifts exchanged by Persians with the local Thracian elite, symbolising loyalty and allegiance. The image of the rooster, a representation of Auramazda, was part of the Achaemenid high-life, accompanied by amphorae, phialae and alabastrons, and adopted by subjects and political allies across the Persian Empire.

KEYWORDS

rings, roosters, jewellery, Persianising style

Introduction

According to Bogdan Filov, the golden rooster ring (inv. no. 6129, figs 1–6)¹ comes from the Kukuva tumulus, which contains the burial of a woman and dates back to the first half of the 5th c. BC (Филлов 2000, 231, 438). More precisely, the burial mound possibly aligns with the reigns of Darius I or Xerxes, a period when European Thrace² faced Persian military operations after Darius I’s Scythian

1 Pictured also in Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 203, fig. 4, and Ivanova et al. 2023, 28.

2 The Greek concept of Thrace only partially overlaps with the Persian notion of Skudra (Rollinger 2023, 899). Scholars often confuse the two by attempting to equate the Persian term with the Greek one. In the context of European Thrace, scholarship has traditionally identified the region as a distinct satrapy (literature and discussions in Brosius 2010, 31ff. and Vassileva 2015, 322). However, the idea of Skudra as own satrapy is misleading, as there is no substantial evidence from Persian sources to support this (Boteva 2021, 649). Galya Bacheva (2012) convincingly argues that even comparative archaeology suggests that settlements in Bulgaria, which might have temporarily been part of Skudra, did not form a separate satrapy (Sarakinski 2010). Instead, Skudra might have been included under the satrapy of Lydia (Brosius 2010, 31f.). This is unsurprising, given that Skudrians also included Phrygians (see below). Importantly, information from the Persepolis Fortification Archive is crucial in showcasing the Achaemenid perspective. Skudrians were a collective designation for diverse ethnic groups. They were the most numerous foreign group of workers in the Achaemenid heartland, with records indicating at least 6,298+/78 workers, as meticulously analysed by Henkelman, Stolper (2009, 275ff.). Издимирски 2009 shows similar data based on the texts in

campaign in 513/12 BC³. At the onset of Xerxes' reign, the region appeared stable (Boteva 2021, 651), although Xerxes was more active in coastal Thrace⁴. However, following the Persian defeat at Plataea in 479 BC, Xerxes focused on consolidating previously conquered territories (Potts 2023, 460). This strategic shift, coupled with further Persian defeats in Greece, destabilised European Thrace (Boardman 1994b, 183f.; Vassileva 2015, 324), leading to the abandonment of Persian garrisons to Greeks and Thracians (Boteva 2021, 651f.). The brief Achaemenid control of European Thrace, lasting around 35 years, likely hindered the formation of strong political ties with the local elite (Brosius 2010, 34). Nonetheless, the Persianised style left a significant mark on jewellery found in Thracian burials, exemplified by luxury objects like the golden rooster ring.

On 15th January 1925, locals from the village of Duvanli⁵ – in the Plovdiv region of Bulgaria – looted the nearby situated Kukuva tumulus. Authorities from Plovdiv were alerted to the incident and conducted raids on the homes of Duvanli residents. Despite these efforts, many artefacts remained hidden by locals and soon appeared on the antique market. The National Museum in Sofia purchased some of these objects, including the golden rooster ring, on the 30th of March the same year. Bogdan Filov recognised that the silver jar, acquired in this purchase, matched two silver handles with mythological beasts from Kukuva burial mound that had been previously confiscated from Duvanli by Plovdiv authorities in January. This is the primary reason for attributing the gold rooster ring to the Kukuva burial, that it was acquired together with the notable silver jar. Because looters often mix materials, we should be cautious about assigning the ring exclusively to the Kukuva tumulus, despite the widespread assumption in the literature. It may instead have originated from one of the other Duvanli burial mounds and was simply purchased together with artefacts from the Kukuva burial mound.

This situation led Filov to suspect that more hidden objects remained in the village. Consequently, authorities conducted another raid in Duvanli, recovering additional luxury items from the same burial mound (Филов 2000, 230–231).

Filov noted that the purchased silver vessel, specifically its beastly handles⁶, closely resembled a similar silver handle from Nimrud, Mesopotamia⁷, and were reminiscent of various jars depicted on the Persepolis reliefs (Филов 2000, 439–441). It is now known that this type of amphora also appears

Hallock 1969.” ‘Skudrian’ could indeed include groups that Greeks would consider to be ‘Thracian,’ but also that both Phrygian and Scythian cultural influences have to be reckoned with, if not that groups actually considering themselves to be Phrygian or Scythian could be summarized under the label ‘Skudrian.’ In other words: Skudrian reflects a distinctively Persian outlook just as ‘Thracian’ is largely a Greek construct.” Henkelman, Stolper 2009, 299. The discussion of European Thrace as a Skudra satrapy is completely excluded from *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East. Volume V: The Age of Persia* (2023), edited by K. Radner, N. Moeller, and D. T. Potts, as it is deemed irrelevant from the Persian perspective. Skudrians were predominantly Gastarbeiter in Persia, and their children were exploited just as much as adults (Zaccagnini 1983, 263f.), receiving minimal rations. A telling case is documented in PT 1954: 1–3, edited by Hallock 1969, 557, where 10 Skudrian boys received only 1/3 QA (approximately 330ml) of wine daily for 156 days.

3 See Briant 2002, 146; Vassileva 2015, 320ff.; Boteva 2021, 650; Potts 2023, 422. Evidence of the Persian army's presence in European lands is found not only in silver and gold artifacts. The northernmost cuneiform inscription attributed to Darius I was discovered in situ at Gherla, Romania (Briant 2002, 904). The Neo-Late Babylonian stamp seal from Dragodanovo, Bulgaria, was discovered in a 1st c. AD archaeological context (Мукарзев 2018). However, we can speculate that it was likely brought to European Thrace during the Persian invasion, as its iconography aligns with that period.

4 Particularly notable is the construction of the channel across Athos during the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BC. This significant engineering feat underscores the strategic and logistical efforts undertaken during the campaign (Isserlin et al. 2003). The construction of the channel is due to the losses of the Persian army and fleet suffered early on in the region around 492 BC (Hdt. 6.45), see Vassileva 2015, 322. For Xerxes campaign in coastal Thrace see details in Boteva 2011, 750ff.

5 The Duvanli necropolis could be associated with the Odrysian tribal homeland, discussion and literature in Boteva 2011, 740f., footnote 29.

6 Pictured in Martinez et al. 2015, cat. 195; Vassileva 2015, 328ff., fig. 21.4. See also the cover of the Ivanova et al. 2023.

7 For a study of the whole Mesopotamian silversmith's hoard see Robinson 1950.

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

on the wall paintings of Karaburun, tumulus II in Lycia⁸, all roughly contemporaneous with the Kukuva burial mound. There are at least eight analogous silver amphoras, three more in bronze, two in gold, and additional handles and parts, all meticulously catalogued and analysed by Athanasios Sideris in 2016. The discussion will return to the silver amphora at the end of the paper.

In addition to Bogdan Filov's observations, the bronze mirror (Филов 2000, 250)⁹, the alabastron (Филов 2000, 251, here figs 10–12)¹⁰, and the phiala (Филов 2000, 243f.)¹¹, from the same Kukuva burial mound also appear to be Mediterranean and Near Eastern imports. Moreover, the rooster ring exhibits features that align it with Greek finger rings, especially from Cyprus. This suggests that some, if not all, items from the treasure were imported from the Mediterranean and the Near East. The image of the rooster and the ring itself allow us to interpret stories that have not yet been told in the context of the Kukuva burial.

Materiality and Style of the Rooster Ring

The ring, catalogued as no. 6129, is crafted from gold, boasting a diameter of 2.3 cm and a weight of 16.20 grams (Филов 2000, 238). The composition of the ring's gold alloy has been tested and approximates 77% Au, 20% Ag and 1% Cu (Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 207). Milena Tonkova and Petia Penkova examined the ring and concluded: 'Les bagues sont exécutées en deux parties séparées (technique visible surtout dans la deuxième bague: la chaton et l'anneau (coulé ou martelé) d'une section ronde avec au milieu le gonflement caractéristique de l'époque. Le chaton de la bague à l'effigie de coq est ciselé d'après l'observation sous microscope' (Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 207).

In contrast, we propose that the golden part of the ring consists of one piece, but the inside of the hoop is either hollow or composite. Interestingly, the hoop is slightly curved and, contrary to expectations, is not brazed at one point¹² (figs 1–6). The hoop's ends near the bezel are fashioned from a thin gold sheet, rolled around the hoop and flattened from the bezel's ends (figs 2–5). In this context, we suggest that the inner hoop might be made from a more affordable metal, such as copper, since a tubular hoop would be too fragile. This metal wire may have been encased in the gold sheet, which was flattened from the bezel and then partially brazed. The gold sheet is well-brazed in the centre of the hoop but only partially brazed and hammered towards the ends, especially near the bezel where it becomes visible. Additionally, the ends of the sheet are brazed and hammered onto the back of the bezel (figs 3–4). These observations suggest that the ring's hoop lacks precision and was left unfinished. This technique signifi-

8 It appears on the main scene of the west wall of the tumulus, see Mellink, Angel 1973, esp. plate 44, fig. 6. Well pictured also on <https://kulturenvanteri.com/en/yer/karaburun-tumulusu/#17.1/36.781857/29.990318>.

9 The mirror shape has been prevalent both in imagery and texts throughout the Near East since at least the 3rd millennium BC. This widespread motif highlights its cultural and symbolic significance across various civilizations in the oikumene, e.g. Pappi 2011.

10 I speculate that the alabastron no. 1210, currently housed in the Plovdiv Archaeological Museum, might be crafted from the so-called 'Mosul marble,' a type of low-quality alabaster used in Assyrian palace construction (Hussein et al. 2016, 4, 11, 48f., 165). Another alabastron of poor quality, from the neighbouring tumulus of Mushovitsa (no. 1550, Plovdiv), also dates to the Persian period, and is depicted in Martinez et al. 2015, cat. 25. Notably, remnants of greenish paint on alabastron no. 1210 suggest the presence of a possibly colored inscription. This can be compared to another alabastron from the peripheries of the Persian Empire, like the one from the kurgan at Novyj Kumak near Orsk, which features a quadrilingual inscription of an Artaxerxes (Rollinger 2023, 919f.).

11 The phialae from Kukuva and Mushovitsa tumuli are the earliest examples of the Achaemenid type, see Vassileva 2015, 328 with literature. For the Persianised phiale see Sideris 2008, 342f. with extensive literature.

12 The production technique of the golden rooster ring distinctly deviates from the traditional method of crafting a metal finger ring. Typically, a metal bar with a circular cross-section would be flattened at its centre to form the bezel, and the ends would be brazed to complete the hoop opposite the bezel. For a detailed description and related literature, refer to Spier 1992, 24 and Boardman 1970, 11.

cantly reduced production costs, as the hoop was either tubular or combined with a less expensive metal, indicating that the ring is not entirely made of solid gold. Future X-ray examinations will likely provide more insight into the engineering of the ring's hoop, which is crucial for identifying the workshop, as it is not typical of similar rings discovered in Greek locations.

Notably, the rooster ring (inv. no. 6129) has a golden counterpart, catalogued as inv. no. 6132, both purchased together (see above). This ring (inv. no. 6132) also measures 2.3 cm¹³ in diameter and weighs 15.45 grams (Филов 2000, 237f.), making it nearly identical in size and weight to the rooster ring (inv. no. 6129). Its gold alloy appears quite similar, although with slightly less copper content (Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 207). Inv. no. 6132 features snake heads at the ends of the hoop, which touch the bezel, though it lacks any image. There is a rectangular pattern surrounding the bezel (Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 203). Given these similarities, it is reasonable to suggest that both rings might have been crafted by the same workshop.

The leaf-shaped bezel of the golden ring (inv. no. 6129) features an intricate rooster design (figs 1–2, 5). The general shape of the bezel and the hoop corresponds exactly to the shape of the Greek metal rings, which notably date in the Persian period (Boardman 1994a, 385 – summary). John Boardman assigns the rooster ring under the Greek rings of category N, where we have another depiction of a rooster, but in different style (Boardman 1994a, 156f., 404). In other words, the golden rooster ring is part of the contemporary Greek metal rings¹⁴, but with some peculiarities as we have seen above.

The rooster image on the leaf-shaped bezel is carved into the golden surface (figs 1–2, 5). It is framed by a hatched border pattern made by U-shaped die technique and finished with a thick line. The rooster stands on a ground line featuring a hatched-dotted pattern beneath it. Notably, both the ring's shape and image composition resemble those found on finger rings from Cypriote studios, dating back to the 5th c. BC (Boardman 1970, 11). One particular ring is remarkably similar in shape and design (Boardman 1970, esp. p. 12, no. 27, Plate 4), displaying a similar hatched border pattern, thick line, and dotted ground line below the image (fig. 7). The hatched border pattern is typical of rings from the Persian period in Cyprus (Boardman 1970, plates 4–6). While we do not claim that the rooster ring from the Kukuva burial mound was directly imported from Cyprus, we strongly argue that its style derives from the Mediterranean region, as Cyprus served as a cultural crossroads in the ancient world. This notion is further supported by the drinking set: the silver amphora, the alabastron and the phiala from the Kukuva burial mound, which were widespread in the Persian world and imported into European Thrace, see in details below. In this context, the ring with the rooster image may be viewed as a part of the Achaemenising¹⁵ luxury jewels produced by Greek craftsmen (Brosius 2010, 35f.).

Comparing the iconography of the golden rooster ring with Mediterranean depictions of rooster – particularly those on gems and finger rings¹⁶ – reveals noticeable differences. The rooster on the golden ring, presumably from Kukuva tumulus, features more squarish characteristics, especially in the head and comb, which are emblematic of Persian art¹⁷. Last but not least, the hatched border with U-shaped

13 Notably, 2.3 cm is the bezel of an excellent Achaemenising golden ring, but with solid golden hoop (Inv. no. P-1854.26. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg), see Brosius 2010, 35f. In this respect, one wonders if the 2.3 cm were not indeed standardised.

14 Also suggested by Tonkova, Penkova 2009, 205 but without providing any evidence.

15 We use the term 'Achaemenising/Persianising style' to refer to objects produced during the Persian period that are infused with iconographic elements stylistically amalgamated within the Empire. For a deeper understanding of this stylistic terminology, see Boardman 2001, 383ff., Rehm 2013, 35 ff., and Василева 2024, 139f. 'Eastern influence reached Thrace both directly and indirectly through the eastern features already adopted by the Greeks,' see Vassileva 2015, 333, and many examples in *Ibid.*, 326–333.

16 Examples in Boardman 1994a, nos 289, 326, 861, 875; Spier 1992, nos 24, 37, 249, 253, 302, 392.

17 Examples in Ward 1910, 336ff. While a deeper exploration of stylistic differences is beyond the scope of this paper, it presents an intriguing subject for art historians with a focus on Persian art influences.

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia



Fig. 1. The golden rooster ring from National Archaeological Institute with Museum (NAIM), Sofia (Inv. no. 6129) (photo Miglena Raykovska)



Fig. 2. The golden rooster ring from NAIM (photo Miglena Raykovska)



Fig. 3. The golden rooster ring from NAIM (photo Miglena Raykovska)



Fig. 4. The golden rooster ring from NAIM (photo Miglena Raykovska)



Fig. 5. The golden rooster ring from NAIM (photo Miglena Raykovska)

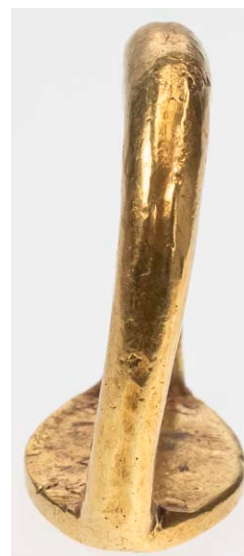


Fig. 6. The golden rooster ring from NAIM (photo Miglena Raykovska)



Fig. 7. A gold ring from Cyprus, in Cesnola Collection of Cypriot Antiquities, New York, C.E. 15 (after Boardman 1970, esp. p. 12, no. 27, Plate 4)



Fig. 8. A bronze oil lamp in the form of a rooster, Inv. no. 4/85, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin (photo Strahil Panayotov)



Fig. 9. A bronze oil lamp in the form of a rooster, Inv. no. 4/85, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin (photo Strahil Panayotov)



Fig. 10. An alabastron from Kukuva tumulus, Inv. no. 1210, Plovdiv, Regional Archaeological Museum (photo Lyubomir Merdzhanov)



Fig. 11. An alabastron from Kukuva tumulus (photo Lyubomir Merdzhanov)



Fig. 12. An alabastron from Kukuva tumulus (photo Lyubomir Merdzhanov)

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

the pattern of the rooster ring differs from those on Cypriote rings but reminds one of the hatched border patterns by U-shaped die technique on the pectoral from Chernozem, Kaloyanovo¹⁸, which like Kukuva tumulus also dates in the 5th c. BC. The pectoral combines Greek features, such as the Gorgon Medusa; the lions closely recall Anatolian representations (Vassileva 2015, 331), while their protruding tongues and style are known from Persian rhytons, going back to Assyrian forerunners (Wilkinson 1955, 222f.; Inagaki 2007). In other words, the same syncretism between Mediterranean, Anatolian, and Near Eastern traditions within a broader process of Persianisation can also be observed in the golden rooster ring.

The Arrival of the Rooster

The rooster depicted on the golden ring is notably one of the earliest images of the bird from the present-day Bulgarian lands of European Thrace. Another certain depiction of a rooster is found on a cup, presumably imported from Chios island. The cup is roughly contemporary with the ring or possibly dates a bit earlier to the late part of the 6th c. BC (Ковачев 2021, 28)¹⁹. But was there already a chicken in the northern part of Thrace (in modern Bulgaria)? Let's first take a brief look at the arrival of the rooster in the Mediterranean world before suggesting a plausible answer.

Historically, the chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus* Linnaeus, 1758) – undoubtedly the most consumed and numerous avian species on the planet today – has been linked to the East. In Indian art, it is depicted as early as the 3rd millennium BC (Eggler 2010, 1/3). In Mesopotamia, a Sumerian text from ca. 2100 BC, refers to a DAR.ME.LUH.HA^{mušen}, meaning 'Meluhhan, ie., Indian chicken,' specifically black chickens (Landsberger 1966, 247)²⁰. The ancient land of Meluhha²¹ – now known as the Indus Valley Civilization of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro – was a source of exotic goods and animals for the Ancient Near East, including peacocks, roosters, and elephants, as well as various precious minerals²². Not only Meluhhan commodities but also personnel were introduced into Mesopotamia for several hundred years around the end of the 3rd millennium BC (Vidale 2004) via ships through the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.

These intensive trade contacts suggest that rooster populations, originating from the regions of present-day Pakistan and India, reached the Ancient Near East by the end of the 3rd millennium BC. From there, they spread through the Near Eastern oikumene towards Anatolia, Syria, and the Mediterranean²³. By approximately 1500 BC, roosters and chickens had likely reached Africa. During the reign of Thutmosis III, the annals of Karnak mention birds from Asia (i.e., Babylonia) that lay eggs daily. Additionally, in the tomb of Rekhmira, a vizier of Thutmosis III, a rooster appears to be depicted among Cretan tributes (Magdy 2022), which notably seem to align chronologically with rooster images from

18 Maja Vassileva brought my attention to this artefact and to the U-shaped die pattern. For the 5th c. BC pectorals from Thrace see Lyubenova 2019.

19 Georgi Kovachev explored the rooster's connection to deities in antiquity in a broad context, yet he overlooks the rooster image on the golden ring, which is arguably the finest example from Thrace to date.

20 The interpretational translation of Ehrenberg 2002, 53 as 'Indian cock' is misleading, since Landsberger translated 'Indische Hühner.'

21 The Sumerian designation Meluhha is possibly linked to the Sanskrit word mleccha, going back to an original Dravidian etymon, see Parpola, Parpola 1975, esp. 225. For an overview of the Meluhha trade, see Kröll, Fink 2023; however, their translation of dar^{mušen} as 'Frankolin' throughout the article is misleading and counterproductive, as they themselves state on p. 4 that dar^{mušen} essentially means 'chicken': 'Das Meluhha-Frankolin lässt sich, wie uns später ein literarischer Text eindrücklich zeigen wird, mit ziemlicher Sicherheit als Vorfahre moderner Haushühnerrassen erweisen.'

22 Sumerian literary texts envision dar^{mušen} 'chicken' from Meluhha with a beard from carnelian (Falkenstein 1964, 75), aligning with the origin of this precious stone, which was also imported from India, see Vidale 2004, 263.

23 Chicken bones are reported from late 3rd millennium Kurdistan and Syria, and from the 2nd millennium Anatolia (Kelder 2021–2022, 7–9).

Crete²⁴. Later, during the 1st millennium BC, roosters spread widely in Greece²⁵, Sicily²⁶, Levant (Perry-Gal et al. 2015), Judea, Negev, Iran (Eggler 2010, 2/3) and Anatolia (Siracusano et al. 2021).

Regarding the context of the golden ring, several images from Asia Minor come into consideration. An excellent and colourful drawing of a rooster, along with illustrations of a chicken, a leashed dog, and a partridge, is preserved on the façade of the *kline* in the burial chamber at Karaburun II in present-day Antalya, ancient Lycia, dating to the 5th c. BC²⁷. Another contemporary Lycian monument, the Harpy tomb at Xanthos (circa 470–480 BC), depicts a rooster as a gift on the east side of the pillar²⁸, possibly symbolising the rooster's crow at sunrise. Moreover, the Persian seats of power, such as Persepolis, are also located to the east of Xanthos. Notably, a dog is also present in the scene on the east side of the pillar at Xanthos, similar to the depiction in Karaburun. Furthermore, images of two roosters facing each other have been preserved inside a rock tumulus in Phrygian Taşlık, likewise dating to the Persian period²⁹. The Achaemenid context of these rooster images from Lycia and Phrygia is unmistakable, especially when the Greek perspective on the rooster is considered.

The eastern connotation of roosters is especially apparent for the Greeks, who nicknamed the rooster the Persian bird (Tuplin 1992), dramatically politicising the bird, in connection to Darius I and Megabazus's undertakings in Thrace³⁰.

Pisthetaerus

It was not the gods, but the birds, who were formerly the masters and kings over men; of this I have a thousand proofs. First of all, I will point you to the cock, who governed the Persians before all other monarchs, before Darius and Megabazus. [485] It's in memory of his reign that he is called the Persian bird.

Euelpides

For this reason also, even to-day, he alone of all the birds wears his tiara straight on his head, like the Great King. (Aristophanes, *Birds* 485³¹)

This indicates the memory of the rooster's introduction into the Mediterranean world from distant

24 Kelder 2021–2022 convincingly argues that the chicken was already introduced to Crete in the 2nd millennium BC, which is very plausible given the fact that chicken already arrived during the 3rd millennium BC in the Ancient Near East.

25 Roosters appear often in Greek art as follows. In the Geometric small-scale bronzes since the 8th c. BC, e.g. a bronze rooster from Thessaly, ca. 750–700 BC in the Art Institute of Chicago, reference number 2008.600, Annual Report of the Art Institute of Chicago 2008–2009, 19f.; <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/196483/rooster>. Roosters feature on pottery during the 7th c. BC (e.g., a rooster-shaped aryballos in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion). In the 6th–5th c. BC, roosters also appear on Chian calices (see above) and a Samian small-scale bronze rooster, currently kept in Berlin. The multitude of rooster images from Greece shows a clear inclination towards the bird (references courtesy of Athanasios Sideris). Roosters remained a stable motif in Greek art after the Persian period as well. Notable for the dynamic and excellent execution is a cast of the Hellenistic grotesque of a dwarf fighting a rooster in the Yale collection, dating to the 2nd c. BC, possibly from Alexandria (McCarty 2006, 30f.).

26 Rooster image on a rhomboid bezel of a silver finger ring from the 6th c. BC, see Spier 1992, no. 37. For other images of roosters on gems see *ibid.*, nos 24, 249, 253, 302, 392 (note the rooster treading a hen).

27 Mellink, Angel 1973 and <https://kulturenvanteri.com/en/yer/karaburun-tumulusu/#17.1/36.781857/29.990318>.

28 Briant 2002, 503. For a discussion of the different opinions see Draycott 2007, 122ff. Some scholars see on the east panel the tomb owner before the Persian King, see *ibid.*, 122, footnote 80.

29 Sivas 2010; reference courtesy of M. Vassileva.

30 For Megabazos as *strategos* in Thrace see Delev 2007, 110ff.; Boteva 2011, 745ff.; Vassileva 2015, 321; Boteva 2021, 650.

31 After Oates, O'Neil 1938, Aristophanes, *Birds*.

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

eastern lands of Persia³². The chicken was certainly introduced to ancient Greece prior to the Persian invasions of Darius and Xerxes³³. Yet, some ancient Greek authors discussed and associated the 'cocky' attitude of roosters with the Persians' attempts to 'enslave' and 'conquer' the Greeks (Cozzarin 2025, 27f.). Intriguingly, Assyrian royal inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (8th c. BC) mention *māt tarlugallē*, 'land of the roosters,' as a toponym deep in inner Media (Zadok 2002, 114, 128) – a prominent satrapy of later Persia (Traina 2023). The notion of a rooster land in Persia and Persian bird align Assyrian and Greek traditions.

Returning to the question of the rooster in Thrace, the rooster images from the golden ring discussed here and the Chios cup (Ковачев 2021, 28) are Eastern Mediterranean imports, offering no insights into the bird's presence in Thracian husbandry. Thus, by the 5th c. BC, it remains unclear if chickens were already imported into Thracian lands from the Mediterranean regions, as certain philological or archaeological evidence currently seems lacking. For now, we can speculate that the chicken arrived in ancient Thrace after or during the Graeco-Persian wars, while at least some Thracians were aware of the rooster in the 5th c. BC, as evidenced by the golden ring and the Chios cup, which fall into the Persian period. Later, substantial evidence of chicken bones and eggshells from Roman settlements in Thrace appears (Георгиева 1999, 81)³⁴. More archaeological scrutiny of bone remains might possibly shift the arrival of the rooster to present-day Bulgaria to an earlier date, since the bird was already widespread in the Mediterranean region during the 1st millennium BC.

The Rooster as a Symbol

In the Ancient Near East, during the 3rd millennium BC, the rooster was portrayed as a king in the Sumerian language, which is fitting given its crown-like comb. The Sumerian word for rooster, DAR. LUGAL^{mušen} – transferred into Akkadian as the loanword *d/tarlugallu*³⁵ – literally translates to 'chicken king^{bird}'. The same idea has been echoed in the Greek world, as exemplified by the passage in the *Birds* of Aristophanes – cited above – where the rooster is said to wear a tiara as the Great King of Persia.

The rooster's distinct behaviour at dawn, crowing to announce the arrival of light, has linked it to the sun and moon across various cultures³⁶. In Assyria, the rooster is particularly associated with sunlight, and in Persia, as we will see below, it is also connected with light and Auramazda (Ehrenberg 2002, 54). Nevertheless, both gods, Ashur and Auramazda, are symbolised by winged images. Subsequently, the Greeks also linked the rooster with sunlight, as well as with various divinities (Ковачев 2021).

During the 1st millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean regions, the rooster symbolised not only the light of the sun but also the light of the moon and, understandably, the illumination from oil lamps. Consequently, both the rooster and the oil lamp were closely connected with the god of light, Nusku, in Mesopotamia (Eggler 2010, 2/3). This association is vividly depicted in Babylonian glyptic art, which features the rooster during the Persian period (Ehrenberg 2002, 55). During the same

32 This is apparent also in Menodotus of Samos (see Ковачев 2021, 24).

33 As also suggested by radiocarbon dating of chicken bones from various sites ranging from Greece to England (see Best et al. 2022, esp. p. 9).

34 Interestingly, no chicken bones were identified among the faunal assemblage, found at the sanctuary with dedications to Asclepius near the modern-day town of Pernik dating ca. 2nd–4th c. AD. This fact is surprising as in ancient Greece a rooster was normally sacrificed in the cult practices connected to Asclepius (see below footnote 40). The sanctuary near Pernik exhibited 405 bone fragments, mainly from mammals (see Иванов, Василев 1980, 95).

35 Lexical evidence collected in *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, Volume T, 2006, 237f.

36 Ковачев 2021, 27 draws attention to a passage in Aelian, offering an etiological-mythological explanation that at the rise of the moon, the rooster becomes possessed by spirits and never fails to herald the sunrise.

era, the image of a rooster also appears on Greek gems³⁷.

In Mesopotamian domestic settings, the oil lamp was placed at the head of the bed and played a significant role in the healing of sick individuals through medical and magical practices in cuneiform cultures (Panayotov 2020), as it provided the much-needed light.

The association between the rooster and light in a healing context was recorded within the zodiacal framework of the Hellenistic period. We will briefly discuss the significant discovery made by Maddalena Rumor, which illustrates how the rooster was integrated into Babylonian and later zodiacal concepts. An astro-medical text (SpTU 3, 104) from Babylon, dating to the 4th c. BC, shortly after Alexander the Great's conquest of Babylon, illustrates a healing tradition that Pliny the Elder later addressed in his 'Natural History' during the 1st c. AD (Rumor 2024, 180ff.). Pliny provides various examples of how the *magi* – portrayed as charlatans and quacks – would associate zodiacal signs with ingredients in their remedies during healing procedures³⁸.

As for the eyes of the horned owl reduced to ash, I should be inclined to count this remedy as one of the frauds with which magicians mock mankind, and it is especially in fevers that true medicine is opposed to the doctrines of these quacks. For they have actually divided the art according to the passing of the sun, and also that of the moon, through the twelve signs of the Zodiac. That the whole theory should be rejected I will show by a few examples. If the sun is passing through Gemini, they recommend the sick to be rubbed with the combs, ears, and claws of cocks, burnt and pounded with oil; if it is the moon, the cocks' spurs and wattles must be used (Pliny, *Natural History*, book 2, sections 95–95)³⁹.

Pliny describes the medical use of parts from birds (*gallinaceus*) whenever the sun or the moon pass through the constellation Gemini. Notably, the Babylonian tablet in question recommends bird parts from DAR^{mušen} for the same constellation, which, as we have seen, is part of the rooster family. Importantly, the rooster could also be represented with the Sumerograms SIPA.TIRA.RA^{mušen}, in Akkadian *kubšī barmat*, translating to 'my cap is colourful,' vividly portraying the colouring observed by the cock's comb. Furthermore, the Sumerian logogram SIPA is used in cuneiform to refer to the third zodiacal sign, which is unsurprisingly Gemini. These hermeneutical associations and explanations illustrate how a Babylonian tradition – incorporating the rooster in a medical context – was echoed in ancient Rome. The cuneiform data presented here comes from the era of Alexander the Great, but as is typical with cuneiform writings, it originates from earlier historical strata. This is also indirectly proven by the above cited passage of Pliny, as the *magi* can be associated with the Chaldeans, i.e. Babylonians (as interpreted by Rumor 2024, 181), but nevertheless *magi* are the Persian exorcists and priests *par excellence*. Thus, during the Achaemenid period, the rooster was associated to the light of the moon, the sun and the well-being and health⁴⁰. In this context, we are aware of a silver incense burner with a small figure of a rooster on the top, produced in Lydia, from a tumulus dated to the late 6th c. BC.⁴¹ Notably, the

37 See Boardman 1994a, nos 289, 326, 861, 875.

38 The association of ingredients and astral signs within medical and magical contexts is a hallmark of Babylonian healing knowledge, which the Greeks revered, referring to the Babylonians as 'Chaldeans.' The Greeks considered them a pivotal source of astrological information (Heeßel 2008), unsurprising given that cuneiform cultures had been observing the night sky and astral movements for at least three millennia by the time they were identified as Chaldeans.

39 After Jones 1963, 339f.

40 In ancient Greece, the rooster – and sometimes the hen – was also associated with healing, as the cock was symbolically linked to Asclepius, examples collected by Ковачев 2021, 24, 27, 30, 39, 48.

41 From the same tumulus, there is a silver alabastron featuring a Greek phalanx fight in the third register, with animals in the first (rooster) and in the second and fourth registers; see Özgen, Öztürk 1996 (references courtesy of Athanasios Sideris). According to Sideris, the incense burner is likely a Lydian or mixed work, while the alabastron is an Ionian work, either produced directly in Ionia and imported, or made by Ionian craftsmen settled in Sardis.

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

same censers are known from Persian glyptic and Persepolis reliefs (Neumann 2023, 62). Furthermore, the rooster appears on a Persian chalcedony seal, poised above an incense burner in front of a god, linking the bird to light, fire, and Auramazda⁴².

The legacy of the rooster's symbolism and its association with light, censer, and the oil lamp extended beyond the Babylonian and Persian religious and astro-medical traditions. According to Erica Ehrenberg, 'the alliance between the rooster and the lamp is perhaps echoed by a terracotta lamp adorned with a rooster,' found in the Jewish catacomb of Monteverde in Rome (Ehrenberg 2002, 59). We would argue that the association between the rooster and its transcendental manifestation of divine light continued into Late Antiquity, as reflected in an object from the Eastern Roman Empire. The Museum für Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin preserves a 6th c. AD bronze oil lamp in the form of a rooster (Inv. 4/85). The broader Near Eastern belief that an oil lamp could incorporate a transcendental being found a later echo in the story of Aladdin.

The Rooster Ring in Context

The golden rooster ring is believed to originate from the same burial context at Kukuva tumulus as the silver amphora (no. 6173, Sofia), which shares an intriguing cultural connection with the ring. The jar is the largest example of 'Achaemenid court art.' Scholars suggest that the Kukuva amphora likely comes from the same workshop as the Oritz amphora, which is said to originate from the Black Sea region⁴³. Furthermore, it has stylistic connections to amphora handles from Afghanistan and Mesopotamia⁴⁴. Amphoras with beastly handles⁴⁵ are a notable feature across the Persian Empire and its satellites. Importantly, the images on the Apadana relief sculptures and the stairways of Artaxerxes I and III depict only Armenian and Lydian envoys carrying these amphoras (Sideris 2016, 22). This suggests that amphoras with beast-shaped handles may be typical of Armenia and Lydia, which, on the other hand, shows that such jars are not tied to any single region; rather, they represent a style favoured by the Achaemenid court (Treister 2010, 226f.). Notably, the Lydian case is further supported by an image from Karaburun in Lycia, which was part of the Lydian satrapy at the time⁴⁶, showing an amphora with beastly handles⁴⁷. This all might suggest that the workshop responsible for the silver amphora (no. 6173, Sofia) was likely

42 Eggler 2010, 1/3; Ward 1910, 337 (no. 1119) points that the flower in the one hand of the god might actually be the *baresma* from the Zend-Avesta.

43 <https://www.georgeortiz.com/objects/achaemenid/205-amphora/>. From the Black Sea regions of Trabzon and Sinop, numerous Persian silver objects have been discovered, including a distinctive type of amphora, see Summerer 2003. Sideris 2016, 22f. identifies a specific Pontus group for the amphora from Sinop. Additional Achaemenid finds from this area are comprehensively catalogued in Manoledakis 2023.

44 Sideris 2016, 22 describes the object as originating from Babylon, which is plausible. However, Budge, in another publication, attributed it to a hoard from Quyunjik and Nimrud, see Robinson 1950, 44, 49. Therefore, Филов 2000, 440 cited the origin of the silver handle as coming from Nimrud. Budge often employed ghost-writers for his extensive publications, so scepticism about the object's provenance is warranted. Nonetheless, whether the handle originates from southern or northern Mesopotamia is less significant since both were under Persian control. The key point is that the silversmith's hoard, consisting of the silver handle and other items, includes coins from Athens, Aegina, Samos, Lycia, Aspendos, Cyprus, Arados, Sidon, Tyre, and Persia (Robinson 1950), showcasing the globalization characteristic of the Persian period.

45 Their iconography and style are seen by some as a result of the exchange with the Steppenvölker, Rehm 2013, 44f.

46 Sideris 2016, 22, footnote 26.

47 Mellink, Angel 1973, esp. plate 44, fig. 6. <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/karaburun-tumulus-ii-early-5th-century-bc-0#/media=6273>

located in Anatolia⁴⁸, possibly in Lycia⁴⁹, Caria⁵⁰, or especially Lydia⁵¹ – areas known for their wealth in precious metals and skilled craftsmanship⁵². Lycia, Caria, but also Ionia were part of the Lydian satrapy during the 5th c. BC, the richest of all due to abundant natural resources. Notably, the Aegean coastline of Ionia and Caria served as a cultural contact zone, linking maritime routes to mainland Greece, the Black Sea, Crete, and Cyprus (Klinkott 2023, 600ff.)⁵³. Multiple representations of roosters are known from Eastern Greece (see above), and with regard to the golden rooster ring, we have identified Cyprus as the most likely origin, as it has yielded rings of similar design and style. Thus, the Mediterranean world of west Anatolia (or Eastern Greece) and Cyprus are the likely places where the golden rooster ring, the Kukuva amphora and phiala might have been produced in the Achaemenising style⁵⁴. The jewellery objects associated with Kukuva burial were not crafted in a single workshop, as is evident from their stylistic features, but were amassed from different locations, as also suggested by the chemical differences in the gold-alloy composition of the objects from the site (Tonkova, Penkova 2009). All this advocates that the luxury items were collected from different parts of the Empire into a treasury, and used as gifts when needed⁵⁵. These jewels intended to promote the so-called *pax persica*. They were presented to the local Thracian aristocracy in exchange for their favours and loyalty (Brosius 2010, 33ff.)⁵⁶.

Last but not least, as Athanasios Sideris (2008, 339) has pointed out, it is notoriously difficult to determine where ‘Persianised toreutics’ were produced, because the Persian sites in Iran were heavily looted, and most of the known jewellery comes from loot and/or elite burials from the periphery of the Empire⁵⁷. Sideris draws attention to the fact that the jewellery from the so-called ‘Bactrian treasure,’ now in the Miho Museum in Japan, displays material closely comparable in style to the amphora from Kukuva tumulus, which might suggest the existence of central court workshops for Persianised objects (assuming the treasure really comes from Bactria). The particular style of the lion-griffins shows an amalgamation of features known from Near Eastern, Anatolian, and particularly Assyrian traditions (Inagaki 2007).

Notably, the textual data from the Persepolis fortification archives – cited above – clearly suggest that gold and silver craftworkers, as well as the gold itself, came from western Anatolia (Lydia, Caria,

48 North-western Anatolian workshop was suggested by Bouzek, Ondřejová 1988, see Sideris 2016, 22. ‘Anatolian origin’ is suggested also by Boardman 1994b, 184. See also Treister 2010, 226f., and Rehm 2013, 48.

49 Note that Lycian coins (ca. 450 BC) were included in the silversmith’s hoard, part of which is the silver bull handle from an amphora (Robinson 1950), comparable in style to the amphora from Kukuva tumulus.

50 Carian goldsmiths are known from the Persepolis Fortification Archives: PT 0037: include 27 men, 27 women, 13 girls and 3 boys, discussion in Zaccagnini 1983, 263 and Briant 2002, 436; see also Henkelman, Stolper 2009, 302. Carian elements are recognized on *sigloi* from Babylonia and Persia (Robinson 1950, 47, 50). Carians also settled in South Babylonia in the area around Nippur for over two centuries in the Persian period, see Potts 2018.

51 Sideris 2016 does not include the amphora from Kukuva into the Lydian workshop. Yet, Lydia was an origin of specialized smiths, which were imported into the empire according to the data from the Persepolis Fortification Archives. Nine Sardian (Lydian) blacksmiths, which received rations, Hallock 1969, 252 (PF 0873); see also Henkelman, Stolper 2009, 280, 287, who list 26 ethnic groups working for the empire, *ibid.* 274f.

52 Lydia is notably famous for inventing coinage, see Payne 2023, 178ff., 215ff.

53 The intensive cultural contacts between the Aegean coast of Anatolia, Cyprus, Levant, Bosphorus and the Black Sea are also exemplified by the similarities of the draped *kouroi* in Eastern Ionian attire, see Sossay 2024, esp. 48.

54 Vassileva 2015, 330 views the Hellenistic area and northwestern Anatolia as the best locations for the manufacturing of the majority of Thracian ‘Persianising’ vessels.

55 Some of the inscribed Thracian phialae bear names from Hellenistic area, see Vassileva 2015, 331. The author points out that the gift exchange within the Empire was possibly standardised, since metrological studies show that certain weight standard might have been used. However, the actual weights of the precious metal artefacts do not allow us to have any safe conclusion regarding areas of manufacture, see in detail Sideris 2008, 341.

56 The flow of goods and ideas was multi-dimensional. Many Thracian tribal coins were found in different parts of the Persian Empire like Lycia, Asyut, Egypt, Elmalı, see Vassileva 2015, 325.

57 Only the amphora from the Kukuva and Filippovka burial mounds are with precise archaeological spots, see Khatchadourian 2016, 219, note 37, with additional literature on the Persianising style.

The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

Ionia, Lycia), from centres such as Sardis, but also from Bactria. 'It was worked by Medes and Egyptians, and Sardians applied the gold inlays' (Wilkinson 1955, 223). In this context, we must bear in mind that skilled craftsmen were relocated throughout the Persian Empire, an imperial practice already known from Assyrian times (Wilkinson 1955, 223; Zaccagnini 1983).

Importantly, the rooster image and the amphora with beastly handles appear alongside an alabastron and phiala in the drawings from Karaburun tumulus II in Lycia. Remarkably, these exact elements were discovered in the contemporary Kukuva burial mound (assuming all objects really come from Kukuva tumulus). This elegantly illustrates that these luxury items were part of the Persian high-life, associated with privileged status, drinking⁵⁸ and possibly opium consumption⁵⁹, which local elites sought to emulate, thereby interweaving themselves with the larger empire⁶⁰. 'The gifts themselves were ranked and signified the level of esteem bestowed by the king on the recipient' (Brosius 2023, 971). If our observation regarding the ring's hoop is correct – namely, that it is not made entirely of gold – this would indicate that the ring was of comparatively lower value, which in turn implies a particular intentionality and pattern of behaviour on the part of the giver.

Conclusion

The golden rooster ring, possibly from the Kukuva tumulus, exemplifies Persianising luxury crafted within the Achaemenid Empire, probably by East Greek artisans in the early 5th c. BC. Its most likely origin lies within the Mediterranean world, possibly Cyprus or the Aegean coast of Anatolia. Notably, the ring's hoop appears to be hollow, or more likely constructed from a composite material in order to provide greater stability.

The rooster image is associated with light and well-being, particularly linked to Auramazda in the Persian context. From a Greek perspective, the rooster is closely connected to Persia, explaining its widespread depictions during the Persian periods in Babylonian glyptic art, Greek rings and gems, Phrygian and Lycian tombs with Achaemenised art, such as the Karaburun II and Harpy tomb at Xanthos. Notably, in Karaburun II, a rooster is depicted next to a banquet scene that includes an amphora with animal-head handles, an alabastron, and a phiale. The same elements were found in the contemporary Kukuva tumulus, indicating that such objects were part of the Persian high life – markers of status and of festivities involving drinking and intoxicants – which local elites in the satrapies and peripheral regions, such as Thrace, sought to emulate.

The jewels and the luxury drinking set found in the Kukuva burial mound were presented to the local Thracian elite by the Persian court in exchange for allegiance and loyalty during the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes, when European Thrace was under Persian military control. If our assessment of the ring's hoop is correct – that it is tubular and possibly of composite construction rather than solid gold – then the ring likely had a lower value. This would imply that the Thracian recipient was not considered of major royal significance by the Persian king, but rather as an obedient subject on the empire's periphery.

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58 Banqueting on official and ritual occasions was also part of the high life in Thrace, see Vassileva 2015, 330.

59 Organic residue analyses of Egyptian alabastrons, specifically produced and inscribed for the Persian rulers like Xerxes I, suggest that these vessels were integral part of the opium trade, consumption and storage, Koh et al. 2025.

60 The Persian gifts for foreigners often include alabastrons, spread from Thrace to south Ural, see Rollinger 2023, 919f. In this regard, from the same Ural region comes the amphora from Filippovka.

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The 'Persian' Golden Rooster Ring in Sofia

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