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Original research paper

**FINDING THE FIRST EMPEROR OF THE LAST BYZANTINE  
DYNASTY:  
MICHAEL VIII PALAIOLOGOS' LEAD SEAL FROM KOCHANI**

*Abstract*

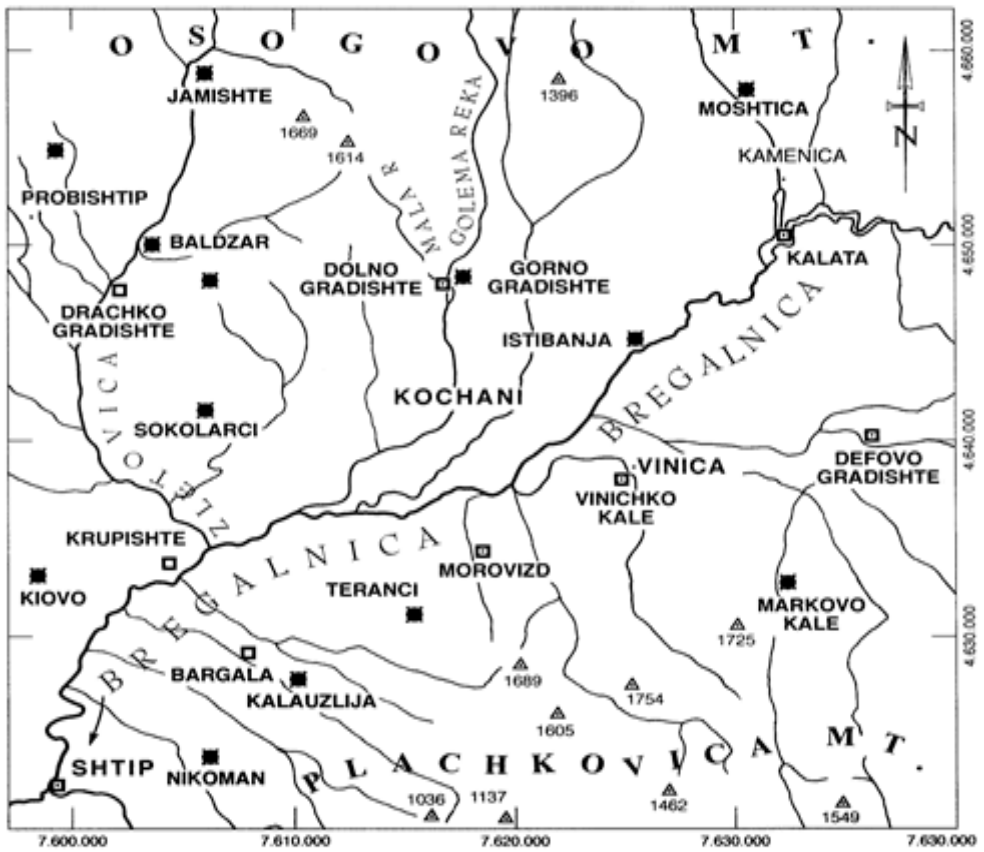
*The lead seal of Michael VIII Palaiologos found among several medieval artifacts during the excavation of the site Gorno Gradishte, v. Dolno Gratche, Kochani, its bearer and its location were an occasion for re-immersion in the turbulent waters of the 13th century and an attempt to shed additional light on its numerous and in places, dark layers.*

*This paper tries to give a wider archaeological context to the seal and at the same time, to insert that archaeological context in the historical reading of the man whose name will remain engraved in the annals of history as the one who managed to resurrect Byzantium and his connection with this area.*

**Keywords:** sigillography, Palaiologan, Byzantium, medieval, eastern Macedonia

### Introduction.

The valley of the river Bregalnica, the ancient Astibo in prehistory, antiquity and in the Middle Ages was an ancient road communication. However, the ancient rulers were especially attracted by the mineral wealth of the Osogovo Mountains, so the area was current and in it we can see the medieval Byzantine rulers, and Samuel and the Bulgarian medieval rulers. (Map 1)



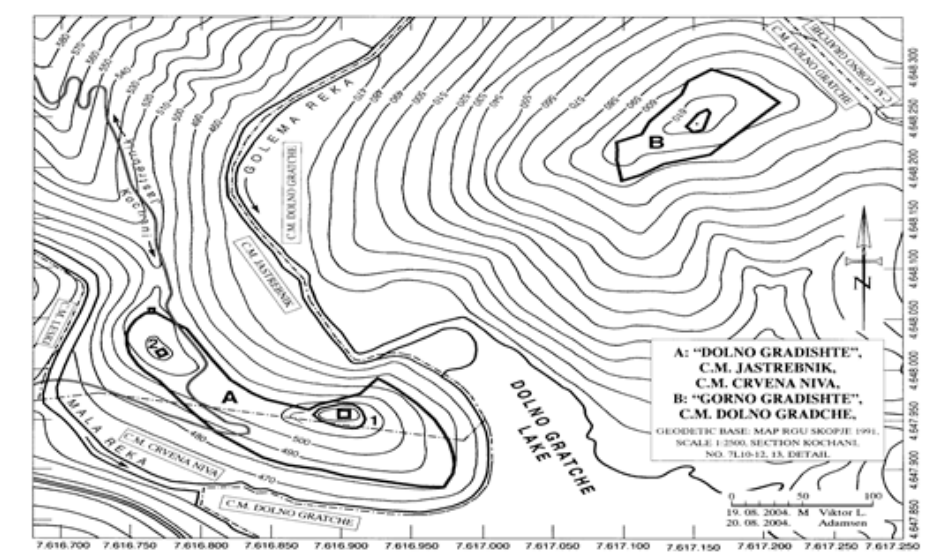
**Map 1.** Archaeological sites in the Bregalnica region in antiquity and the middle Ages

First of all, Morodvis / Morobizdon is mentioned here as an important medieval city and seat of a bishop, in the charter of the Byzantine emperor Basil II from 1019. (Mikulchik, 1996, 215; Trajkovski, 1983; 1985; 1986). Morobizdon is located on the southern edge of the Kochani region, at the northern foot of

Mount Plachkovica. At the opposite end of the Kochani field, is the site Gorno Gradishte, v. Dolno Gratche, again visited by the archaeological research team under the leadership of professor dr. Viktor Lilchik Adams as part of the field archaeological excavations in the Bregalnica valley, in August 2008.

### About the archaeological poleogenetic context of the microregion Golemo Gradishte (cadastral municipalities Jastrebnik and Crvena Niva).

North of the city of Kochani is the long valley of Golema Reka, which springs in the deep southwestern bosoms of the Osogovo Mountains. The more intense search for ores in late antiquity caused in the lower course of the junction of Golema Reka and Mala Reka, which flows from here as Kochanska Reka, near the villages Dolno Gratche, Jastrebnik and Crvena Niva, formation of a striking city with a protected castle at Dolno Gradishte and Gorno Gradishte. (Map 2)



**Map 2.** The town of Dolno Gradiste and the castle of Gorno Gradiste, georeferenced planimetry (V. L. Adams)

The town of Dolno Gradishte was mentioned by D. and M. Garashanin, A. Keramitchiev and I. Mikulchik. The first field survey of the city planimetry was performed in 2004 by V. L. Adams, and the first archaeological excavations were started by I. Atanasova. (Atanasova 2005, 1-12; 2007, 53-68 with cited older literature from the mentioned researchers in the text; 2008, 356-359).

A summary of the research efforts presents the city plan and the excavated finds. It is a strongly fortified ridge rope with an elongated and rounded shape, 200x100 meters in size. The city consisted of a dominant eastern acropolis with an approximately triangular shape with a solid tower with a square plan in the center and the highest elevation of 524.8 m. Remains of another similar tower in the northwestern part of the city have been registered. Movable finds, mainly coins, bone and ceramic objects, date to the existence of Justinian I (denomination of 20 nummi) and the Venetian trade with Byzantium in the 13th century (a silver Venetian denarius of the doge Ranieri Zena (1253-1268)).

### Gorno Gradište, cadastral municipality of Dolno Gratče.

About 300 meters northeast of the city, on a higher and dominant hill, a castle was formed. A plateau with an irregular shape at a height of 616.7 m, spreading 134x60 m was leveled. A central building was formed approximately in the middle of the castle at the highest elevation. It is elongated and consists of a solid plaster wall with a polygonal shape. There are indications of the existence of a middle residential terrace that stretched along the perimeter southern defense wall at a slightly higher level (map 3).



**Map 3.** The castle of Gorno Gradište (georeferenced plan V. L. Adams)

Several movable artifacts have been discovered that point to existence in the 4th or 5th century AD. (small illegible bronze coin), 6th century (tip of a three-ribbed Avar arrow) and in the 13th century from which the massive lead seal of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos dates. Our logical conclusion is that the determination of the higher elevation of the Gorno Gradishte was a castle - *a speculum* for protection and announcing possible attacks of some aggressors in late antiquity and in the Middle Ages.

### About the lead seal.

The lead seal of the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos found on the site Gorno Gradishte, v. Dolno Gradche, Kochani<sup>2</sup>, is very well preserved, slightly damaged near the central axis, with a maximum diameter of 30mm, weight 32.93 g and thickness 2.7 / 8 - 6 mm.



#### Obverse

Christ bearded standing before a low thokos, wearing a tunic and himation and holding the right hand in blessing and a book in the left. He has a nimbus cruciger. Sigla visible at left: ΙΣ̄: Ι(ησοῦ)ς [Χ(ριστός)]. Border of dots.



#### Reverse

The emperor Michael VIII is standing, wearing a crown and chlamys. He holds a labarum in the right hand and an akakia in the left. So far as one can tell the emperor's chin is covered with a short beard. One can discern, in an abbreviated and stylized form, the manus Dei in the upper right field. Inscription in two columns. Border of dots...

<sup>2</sup> The finding was presented for the first time at the First National Conference on Byzantology and Medieval Studies: Samoil's State - 1000 Years Later, Ohrid, Congress Center of UKIM, 25-26. 10. 2018 Robert Mihajlovski and Viktor L. Adams, The Molivdovul of the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos from the fortress Gorno Gradishte, village Dolno Gradche, near Kohceni.

However, considering that it deserves to be presented to the wider scientific public, we decided to publish it here.

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 ΔΕ            ΠΑ  
 ΣΠΟ           Λ  
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 Σ

[Μ(ι)χ(α)ῆλ] δεσπότης ὁ Παλαιολόγος.

*Michael Palaiologos, despotes.*

Zacos and G. Veglery A. (1972) have published two types of variants of this representation in the seal of Michael VIII Palaiologos. On their type A the emperor is depicted holding a short labarum in his right hand and a globe upgraded with a patriarchal cross on his left.

An outstanding specimen of this type is preserved in the Istanbul Collection. (See Ébersolt, Sceaux, pl. VII, no. 6.) In this specimen it can be seen that the emperor wore a long, pointed beard. In the upper right corner the *manus Dei* field appears quite clearly. On their type B (No. 121) the emperor wears a loros, the end of which is wrapped around the left forearm. He holds a cross scepter in his right hand and an acacia in his left one.

Another fairly damaged specimen of this type is in the Dumbarton Oaks collection (Nesbitt John W., Morrisson Cécile, 2009).

The seal of Michael now depicts the standard image of the standing Christ on the obverse and the emperor wearing a crown and chlamydia holding a labarum and an acacia on the back. Michael is identified by his family name, Palaiologos.

### **About the first emperor of the last Byzantine dynasty.**

The name *Michael Dukas Angelos Comnenus Palaiologos* (1223 - December 11, 1282) is remembered in world history as the founder of the last Byzantine Palaiologan dynasty, the one who succeeded in resurrecting Byzantium and Constantinople after Latin rule, a man who, using his own high noble pedigree, military skill and readiness, but also exceptional charisma, was able to climb hierarchically from a favorite military leader, through the titles of *meḡas dux* and *despot*, to co-emperor of the Nicæan Empire (1259-1261) and finally, to the ruler of Byzantium (1261-1282) (Geanakoplos, 1959, 39-46).

His accession to the throne in Constantinople brought the stain of usurpation of the legitimate heir to the throne John IV Lascaris, but also brought a significant renewal of Byzantine power, including the expansion of the Byzantine army and navy, the renewal and the enlargement of Constantinople, re-



newal of the University of Constantinople, the key base for what is considered a palaiological renaissance between the 13th and 15th centuries (Geanakoplos, 1959, 17-18). On the other hand, the dynamic historical-political scene during his reign brought him more than a few diplomatic failures and setbacks in trying to fully assert his sovereign position, whether through failed political marriages or through the (wrong) choice of allies (Geanakoplos, 1959, 181-85).

Byzantium was surrounded on all sides by enemies. Michael has often been criticized for neglecting the Asian heart of his empire and its eastern border with the then-growing Seljuk Turkish sultanate and their allies. It is obvious that he thought that the greatest threat to the restored Byzantium came from the West, so his generals and army were more focused on the Balkans and Italy, i.e. Sicily. The threat was called Charles of Anjou, the brother of Louis IX of France, Count of Provence. By order of the papacy, Charles conquered the Kingdom of Sicily and began to create a Mediterranean empire with territories in Albania, Greece and for a time in Tunisia.

Charles of Anjou, as soon as he became the ruler of Sicily, openly came out with aggressive intentions against Byzantium. He soon became actively involved in the events in Greece, secured for himself Manfred's possessions in Epirus, and entered into a relationship with William II Villehardouin. The Achaean prince, whose forces were exhausted in the fight against the Byzantines, feeling threatened by the hatred of his subjects, threw himself into the arms of the Sicilian king and placed his country under his sovereignty. He married his daughter Isabella to Philip, Charles's son. Serbia and Bulgaria sided with him because both political and dynastic reasons led the Balkan rulers to join the anti-Byzantine coalition. Bulgarian king Konstantin Tih was the son-in-law of John IV Laskaris, who was overthrown and blinded by Michael VIII, and Serbian King Urosh I, who was married to a French princess, expected an alliance with Charles of Anjou to help spread his country at the expense of Byzantium. Meanwhile, Charles of Anjou finally consolidated his power in Italy and began sending troops and money to Achaia (Ostrogorski, 1992, 550).

To oppose this alliance, Michael sought to redeem the pope with a promise of ecclesiastical unification and allied himself with Hungary, Egypt, and the Mongols. He also agreed to unite the churches under papal leadership, removing an important supporter of Charles's venture. Unfortunately, the newly elected pope was not so sympathetic to him, so at this point Michael allied himself with Peter III of Aragon, who agreed to invade Sicily. To help with the attack, Michael sent money to the island to incite a revolt against Charles. In 1282, at the sound of the bells ringing at Vespers, Sicily revolted against its French rulers, and the army prepared to sail for Constantinople had to turn and defend the kingdom of Charles. In the end, Charles of Anjou lost Sicily to Aragon and his entire Mediterranean empire fell apart.

Michael VIII Palaiologos died in the village of Pahomios, Thrace on December 11, 1282. He was not buried in Constantinople because of his persecution by the Church in support of the unification with Rome, and instead was buried

in the monastery of Nea Mone, Raidestos (modern-day Tekirdağ, Turkey). Three years later, in 1285, his remains were transferred to the Monastery of Christ in Selymbria, to be buried forever at the place where earlier in 1260 he had reburied the body of Basil II (Melvani, 2018, 237-260).

### **Concluding remarks.**

The lead seal of Michael VIII Palaiologos found at Gorno Gradishte, Kochani is just one of the few medieval artefacts that the site has so far revealed for the few explorers in the region – dedicated archaeologists who, regardless of conditions, inaccessibility, finances and all the current difficulties that may arise when organizing archaeological expeditions, even on the smallest scale (and they appear every time, in a number and scope that without exception goes beyond the planned); are tirelessly searching for answers.

In a perfect scenario, this seal would be found in larger, systematic excavations, in an archaeological context and in a clear field condition, preferably on the floor of a well-defined room. That, certainly, is not the case here.

However, the finding speaks loudly enough about the presence and interest of Michael VIII Palaiologos, among other things, for this territory. As mentioned above, the emperor's interest in the Balkans in an attempt to form an alliance against the West did not bear fruit. Michael VIII tried to weaken Charles of Anjou's pressure in the Balkans by establishing dynastic ties, which, however, proved insufficient to consolidate his position. An agreement between Byzantium and the separatist states could hardly be achieved, since the primary goal of the Byzantine emperor was their liquidation. Then, what was he looking for in Kochani?

The Gorno Gradishte site is a part of the basin of Bregalnica and it is in the immediate vicinity of the rich ore deposits, used from antiquity to the present day: the deposits of lead-zinc ore are one of the largest and economically most important deposits of minerals in the ore-mining basin that are exploited in the mines of Zletovo, Dobrevo and Makedonska Kamenica; copper and iron-titanium are found in the Osogovo Mountains.

Taking into account the growing need for precisely these resources in the newly renewed Byzantium, the increased consumption and investment in the reconstruction of Constantinople, the need to regularly pay the army in expanded composition; seems that the correspondence of Michael VIII Palaiologos with these areas was primarily related to a request for the delivery of metals to the capital of the empire.



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