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## ONCE AGAIN ABOUT THE «DANCING LITTLE MEN»: IS IT EMBROIDERY OR NOT?

### Анотація / Abstract

У контексті генези вишивки на одязі українців робиться спроба аналізу зовнішності «чоловічків, що танцюють» з відомого Мартинівського скарбу VII ст., особливо декору на їхньому одязі. Розгляд цих срібних фігурок, а також статуетки так званого «охоронця свічки» (підсвічника) з Полтавщини, із залученням порівняльного матеріалу, підтверджує зображення на них побутових деталей. Тобто ймовірність прикрашання вишитим декором одягу цих, як вважається, слов'янських (із центром на Наддніпрянщині) фігурок малої металопластики – висока. Ймовірність цього зростає, коли їх розглядати в контексті малої пластики та інших зображень («Диптих Берберіні», візантійські мозаїки, мініатюри та ін.), які походять із цілого Європейського регіону та прилеглих територій Азії. Названі зображення пов'язані з особливим комплексом уявлень і традицій «звіробійства» (включно з гладіаторськими боями) народів цього простору, а тому поширені в різних варіантах. І гіпотеза О. Щеглової про відображення у фігурках мартинівського типу біблійного мотиву «Данійл з левами» узгоджується з комплексом традицій та уявлень «звіробійства». При цьому зовнішність, у тому числі одяг, «мартинівських танцюристів», гадаємо, передає не лише запозичені, а й аборигенні риси, включно з вишивкою. Враховуючи існування традиції вишивання одягу на території України у сарматів I ст. н. е. і гунів середини V ст., можемо гіпотетично вважати декор на вбранні мартинівських фігурок VII ст. та «охоронця свічки» VII–VIII ст. продовженням цього ланцюжка, котрий, таким чином, веде до вишивки на одязі Київської Русі (Чорна Могила в Чернігові, могильник Шестовиця X ст.).

**Ключові слова:** «мартинівські чоловічки», вишивка, декор, мала пластика, одяг.

An attempt is made to analyse the appearance of the «dancing little men» from the famous Martynivka treasure of the 7th century and, especially, the decor on their clothing, in the context of genesis of embroidery on Ukrainian clothing.

Examination of these silver figurines, as well as the statuette of the so-called «candle keeper» (candlestick) from the Poltava region, along with the comparative material, confirms the depiction of everyday details on them. And this means a high probability of decorating the clothes of these, supposedly Slavic (with a centre in the Over Dnipro Lands) pieces of small plastic art with embroidered decor. The probability of this fact increases when considering them in the context of small plastic art and other images («The Barberini Ivory», Byzantine mosaics, miniatures, etc.), originating from the entire European region and adjacent territories of Asia. The mentioned images are connected with a special complex of ideas and traditions of «beast fights» (including gladiatorial fights) of the peoples of this area and therefore are widespread in various versions. And the hypothesis of O. Shchekhlova about the reflection of the biblical motif «Daniel with the Lions» in the studied Martynivka-type figurines is consistent with the complex of traditions and ideas of «beast fights». At the same time, we think that the appearance, including the clothes of the «Martynivka dancers», conveys both borrowed and also aboriginal features, including embroidery. Taking into account the existence of a tradition of clothes embroidery on the territory of Ukraine among the Sarmatians of the 1st century AD and the Huns of the mid-5th century, we can hypothetically consider the decor on the clothes of the Martynivka figurines of the 7th century and the «candle keeper» of the 7th–8th centuries as a continuation of this chain, which thus leads to embroidery on the clothes of the Kyivan Rus (Black Tomb in Chernihiv and the Shestovytsia burial ground of the 10th century).

**Keywords:** Martynivka little men, embroidery, decor, small plastic art, clothing.

There is a surge of interest in embroidery, especially on clothes, in Ukraine. Being amazed by the beauty of Ukrainian patterns, people order clothes decorated with traditional ornaments from professional embroiderers, embroider themselves, buy books and albums on the subject of embroidery. At the same time, the emergence of embroidery on Ukrainian clothing has not been studied fully enough yet. The prehistory of Ukrainian embroidery, when we can only talk about its formation at the stage of Ukrainian cultural genesis, as well as early history has many blank spots, and the published works by Ukrainian scientists on this topic often contain insufficiently reasoned and romantic statements about its antiquity, which are not always based on a solid factual basis and therefore raise a number of questions.

In connection with the consideration of the issue about the emergence of Ukrainian embroidery on clothes, it is necessary to mention the figurine of four famous silver and gilded little men measuring 7.6 cm from the famous Martynivka treasure of the 6th–7th centuries in a pose resembling dancers – legs slightly bent at the knees and hands on the hips, with cross-shaped notches on the chest similar to an embroidered sleeve (Image 1). They have been found in 1907 on the bank of the Ros rive in the Martynivka village of Kyiv province, now Cherkasy region [8, p. 531; 13]. These «dancing little men» (the name is an allusion to the

story by A. Conan Doyle) are associated with figurines of five animals with fantastic features («lions» or «horses», etc.). There could have been more of them, given the circumstances of discovering, looting and searching of 116 silver objects from the treasure weighing 3.3 kg. Most of them are now in the National Historical Museum of Ukraine, and some are in the British Museum. These figurative anthropomorphic overlays, supposedly on leather armour, saddles, horse harness, clothing, etc., are used by some authors in reconstructions of clothing and considered as evidence of the existence of embroidery on the clothing of the Slavic population of Ukraine at that time, while others deny this thesis. There is a lot of literature on the cultural and ethnic origin of the mentioned men as well as on the authenticity of the depiction of their clothing. Among the scientists from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Germany and other countries (Oleh Prykhodniuk, Andrii Skyba, Hali Korzukhina, Olha Shchekhlova, Illia Akhmedov, Wojciech Szymanski, Bartholomew Shmonevsky, Gyula Laszlo, etc.) there are both supporters and sceptics on the issue regarding whether the mentioned little men are related to the ancient Slavs in the territory of Ukraine. They argue about the accuracy of the master's depiction of appearance specific details, and therefore whether it is embroidery or not. Details of the discussion and historiography are given in the reviews included in the published works by

O. Shchekhlova and I. Akhmedov [13; 15]. At the same time, while rightly accusing some of the Ukrainian opponents of an uncritical attitude towards the alleged depiction of embroidery on the figures, the «sceptics» also often do not operate with proper argumentation. For instance, Oksana Kosmichna indicates that such a view dates back to the publication of Borys Rybakov in 1948 [9, p. 82–83] and she unfairly accuses the scientific community («in all literature related to the history of embroidery») of uncritically supporting his opinion [5]. At the same time, the problem of depicting decor on the clothes of the «dancing little men» from Martynivka has been studied carefully, using the latest methods and comparative material, by the aforementioned scientists, who often defend opposing points of view. Among them, by the way, an important one is the idea that the figurines of people and the mentioned animals depict the Christian plot «Daniel with the Lions» [13, p. 162]. Thus, these are copies of works of Byzantine decorative and applied art, and not original works of Slavic masters.

In connection with the above and in the context of emergence of embroidery on Ukrainian clothing, we set the task to consider by involving additional comparative materials, how likely it is that the Martynivka figurines depict domestic details of the aborigines, including embroidered decor on clothing. The theoretical basis of the study is made up of general provisions on the patterns of evolution of cultures of different peoples, as well as the action of the mechanism of intercultural borrowings. The principles of functioning in the social context of phenomena of material culture – a field called «the social life of things» are of particular importance. These provisions were formulated by American anthropologists and culturalists Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber [16; 18].

Recent published works deserve attention. There the facts demonstrating the connection of the mentioned figurines with the Byzantine world as well as also the belonging to a wide barbarian area from Central-Eastern (and even North-Western) Europe to the Caucasus and

the Urals are submitted [13; 15]. The number of finds of figurative overlays, which completely or partially repeat those found in Martynivka, is constantly growing in this area. This has led to the emergence of the term «Martynivka-type figurines», and the quality of the image decreases with distance from Ukrainian territories (see the comparison of images and maps in the articles by O. Shchekhlova and I. Akhmedov). Therefore, according to O. Shchekhlova the finds of recent years, mostly from Ukraine, «remove doubts that in the Middle Dnipro region in the 7th century overlays of this type were quite widespread, whatever their origin» [13, p. 152]. Andrii Skyba also notes that they are the most perfect among all similar finds [10, p. 60, 63]. That is, it can be assumed that the centre of production of these small plastic figurines was located on the territory of present-day Ukraine, regardless of which master made them – a local one or a native of the Byzantine provinces.

At the same time, based on the images themselves as well as on the observations of archaeologists and art historians, we have reason to state the fact that the products of aboriginal masters reflect at least some of the familiar typical features of the characters' appearance, including elements of clothing. Therefore, despite all the conventionality of the image and the existence of a certain canon, there seems to be reason to assert that the clothing on the Martynivka figurines is not at all similar to the same Byzantine tunic, which was often copied by barbarian masters. Thus, the Martynivka little men have shoulder clothing like a shirt, tucked into narrow trousers, unlike tunics, which in various images (small sculptures, mosaics, miniatures) from the European-near East region were usually wearing loose closing girded with a strap. The shoes of the Martynivka little men also look peculiar – the boots, over which tight trousers fall in an overlap.

In most other images, the characters are wearing boots, stockings, wraps, or boots laced up over the trousers. By the way, not all Martynivka-type figurines have their shirts tucked into their trousers; only those from

Martynivka as well as some of those found further west – in Ukraine and nearby – have such a pattern. However, the shoulder clothes of such figurines from the Caucasus and most other areas have a hem like tunics and even floors [15, p. 509]. This is clearly visible in the illustrations in the article by I. Akhmedov, where we learn that even a similar figurine from the close-to-Martynivka «Poltava region» has floors and a strap, although it lacks decoration on the chest [15, p. 514, 515]. As we can see, the studied anthropomorphic figurines reflect truly the features of the real clothing of the characters they depict.

Rostyslav Zabashta has drawn attention to an interesting circumstance in a private conversation. Thus, the shoulder clothing in the images of men of the studied time in most cases looks like a tunic, or a belted outer garment worn over a shirt. And the images of shirts tucked into trousers lead us to the East, in particular to Sasanian Iran in the 3rd/4th – 7th/8th centuries AD as well as to neighbouring countries. There we also encounter cases of narrow trousers overlapping shoes [14, p. 183–195]. Obviously, it was from there as well as from ethnic groups and communities culturally and genetically connected with Iran, that the manner of dressing in this way could have come to the Dnipro Slavs (see below). Let us recall Dmytro Zelenin's indication that only Ukrainians among all Slavs have the manner of tucking a man's shirt into their trousers, and they borrowed it from the eastern peoples. And again the Martynivka little men as R. Zabashta has noted are material evidence of the time when this manner appeared among the proto-Ukrainians in the process of their cultural genesis. The reflection in the clothes of the «dancing little men» of the analysed characteristic features of the clothing of the population from the territory of Ukraine of the 7th century also testifies in favour of the embroidered (or embossed or appliquéd) decor on it. Regarding the peculiarities of the depiction of clothing on figurines of small plastic art of the European region of the period under study, Mykhailo Panchenko draws attention to

the ornamental «belt-reaching chest inserts, which are sometimes found on tunics, <...> rectangular or trapezoidal in shape» [6]. And these ornamental inserts are not particularly similar to those seen on the Martynivka little men. Those of the latter are also reach the belt area but are wider than such inserts on tunics, and importantly, they do not have decorated shoulder pads, and of course, they are not located on the hem tucked into the trousers. At the same time, M. Panchenko, as examples, cites various cases of depicting decor on clothing. It seems, most of them show embroidery, as we see on the famous bone plate «Triumph of Justinian» or the «Berberini Ivory» (barbarian clothing in the lower left corner and behind the spear shaft), on miniatures, Byzantine mosaics, etc.

The earliest embroidered decor among the peoples living in Ukraine is recorded in the 1st century AD. This is a rich Sarmatian burial, believed to belong a priestess, from Sokolov Mohyla in the Mykolaiv region, excavated in 1974 by Halyna Kovpanenko. The oldest significant fragments of luxurious embroidery on clothes with gold threads having examples of geometric and floral ornaments were found here in Ukraine [4, p. 115–118]. The impact of the Sarmatians as the main substrate and of their culture in the ethnogenesis and cultural genesis of Ukrainians is proven [2, p. 587–595]. The mechanism of assimilation by the Slavs of the local Iranian-speaking population as part of the Ante tribal union has been demonstrated clearly by historians [3, p. 29]. And it seems doubtful that the Sarmatian ancestors of Ukrainians, especially Sarmatian women, while becoming the Slavs in the process of ethnogenesis of Ukrainians, would suddenly reject their inherent skills of decorating clothes with embroidery.

Another later-in-time undoubted evidence of the existence of embroidery on the clothes of the peoples who lived on the territory of Ukraine in the past and who can claim the role of ancestors of Ukrainians, is the mention of it in the «History» of Priscus of Pania – a member of the Roman embassy in 448 – to the Hunnic ruler Attila [17, p. 301–311]. His headquarters at

that time was somewhere in the Danube region, possibly in Pannonia. After Attila's death, the Huns returned to the Northern Black Sea region.

So, if the decor on clothes (embroidered or some other) was inherent in the Dnipro aborigines from ancient times, then its depiction on small plastic art products as a detail familiar to them, even when imitating foreign cultural (Byzantine) samples, should not be surprising. And researchers quite confidently attribute the figurines of the Martynivka treasure precisely to «antiquities of the Ante», among whom the Slavized Sarmatians could have a tradition of embroidery on clothes. At the same time, according to the observation of M. Panchenko, in the depictions of clothes on anthropomorphic figurines of small plastic art, the masters expressed embroidery mainly with «oblique crossed notches» [6]. He supports this statement with the examples mentioned above. O. Shchekhlova also writes about embroidery [13]. A. Skyba also notes that the Martynivka figurative overlays «despite a certain iconographic stereotype <...> have a clearly expressed individual character» [10, p. 60, 63]. And although these words refer to zoomorphic products from the Martynivka treasure, they add arguments in favour of the assumption that the figurines may have embroidery (although some probability of an embossed or woven pattern remains) because they were made by the same skilled craftsman. At the same time, of course, we are not talking about the too straightforward connection announced by B. Rybakov according to the principle: local aborigines – hypothetically mythical Rosy-Rusy – ethnography of modern East Slavic embroidery on clothes [9, p. 82–83].

Also we would like to draw the reader's attention to one more circumstance, in particular, related to the claims about borrowings (regarding the plot of «Daniel with the Lions», details of clothing, etc.). Without having objections to the borrowings themselves, we note that in the studied era, there practically could not exist secular art in the modern sense as well as artistic products made only for decorative purposes among the barbarian peoples. All such products, even those which forms were

borrowed by the barbarians or were made in Byzantium, etc. to their order, or even obtained as trophies, were necessarily included in the cosmological-mythological picture of the world of their consumers. It is necessary to consider the very nature of the worldview of people of barbarian society, even those of them who accepted Christianity. After all, they perceived this religion differently than the Christians of Byzantium. As Volodymyr Toporov notes, for mythological consciousness «only that which is sacralised is essential and real, and only that which is part of the cosmos and can be derived from it or involved in it is sacralised» [12, p. 114]. Therefore, the studied figurines can't be some mindless replicas of «Daniels with the Lions». They were rethought by either the Ante or other barbarians in accordance with their picture of the world. That is from the point of view of the barbarians, those were images of some important characters – either of gods, or demiurges, or eponymous ancestors, or mythologized heroes of past times. If they borrowed some foreign «Daniels» (it really happened often), they still considered the same as some important mythologized characters for those foreigners, and consequently they tried to find a counterpart for the same in their own pantheon or in their mythology and mythologized history.

And recent research shows that the biblical plot «Daniel with the Lions» about the taming of predators by the prophet by means of ritual gladiatorial fights in Ancient Rome, was contaminated with the aboriginal customs and ideas of the surrounding European barbarians (especially Germanic). They had ancient cults of predators such as bears, which their «bear fighters» like gladiators sacrificed to the gods during ritual fights with animals. In addition, there was the image of *the berserker* – a man-bear, a warrior-bear [20, p. 1–46]. Similar cults and related customs were also widespread among the other barbarian tribes of Europe and Asia, including the Slavs; the memory of it is imprinted, for example, in legends about werewolves, which are a distant reflection of the rituals of youthful initiations [1, p. 125–191].

And if so, then the products we have analysed certainly depict such non-random characters for the Antes themselves, as a rule with no random but familiar to them appearance (like biblical characters on the paintings of Renaissance masters, dressed in costumes familiar to the authors from the late Middle Ages – early Modern). And we hope that further finds, the number of which is growing, will bring us closer to the final solution to the mystery of the «Martynivka dancers».

We believe that the «dancing little men» are to some extent related to the bronze male figurine found around 1861 near the Khorol town in the Poltava region, made by a Byzantine master. Researchers have called it the «candle keeper» because it is a kind of candlestick (Image 2). According to M. Panchenko the plot's basis for the «candle keepers» was «the symbolic image of a warrior, in whose clothing there are nomadic elements of the 7th–8th centuries» [6]. On the figurine, the long tunic-like clothing of the bronze warrior is decorated with something similar to an ornament. The strip of intersecting notches located on the chest reaches the strap, like that of the «dancing little men» but unlike them, is little narrower, and at the top it continues to the shoulders and upper part of the sleeves, forming epaulettes. This can be both embroidery and embossing. At the bottom, the outfit may be decorated with metal plaques or something similar. It is girded with a typesetting strap with special devices for fastening weapons, which was used by nomads and borrowed from them by neighbours due to its convenience. Regarding the ethnic and cultural affiliation of the clothing details of the «candle keepers», after a long discussion researchers have concluded that they «can with a high degree of probability be interpreted as belonging to the clothing of nomadic peoples, or those peoples of the 7th–10th centuries who were influenced by the former, with a confident narrowing of the dating towards the 7th–8th centuries» [6].

In Byzantine mosaics we see scenes of «beast fighting», the heroes of which have

tunics decorated like the clothes of the «candle keepers» (Images 3–5). And many bronze figurines similar to the latter have been found outside Ukraine, where they are associated with the Avars. At the same time, it is clearly visible that this is embroidery [19, Abb. 1, 2, 4a, 5, 6, 7, 8a-b, 9a-b, 10a, 11a-b, 13a-b, 15, 15a]. That is, in the «candle keeper» we also have an image of clothing, very likely decorated with embroidery. These clothes are similar to the late antique – Byzantine tunic, to which it is obviously genetically related. At the same time, despite the most probable belonging of it to the world of steppe peoples, this clothing, and therefore the decorations on it, should be considered genetically related in one way or another to the traditional clothing of the ancestors of Ukrainians. After all, in the process of ethnogenesis, many nomads and semi-nomads – Iranians and Turks – joined the Slavs – proto-Ukrainians, and generally the Ante were largely Slavicized steppe Iranians (as already mentioned). In addition, not only the Ante but also other tribal groups of Slavs in the territories of the future Ukraine (Siverians, Tyvertsi, Croats) had a clearly traceable significant steppe component [11; 7; 3]. And since the figurine of the «candle keepers» was found in an area where ethnic groups of Slavs – proto-Ukrainians and steppe Iranians, Turks and Ugrians lived side by side for a long time and therefore were in close contact, our assumption is very likely.

Thus, the analysis of the material associated with the «dancing little men» from the Martynivka treasure of the 7th century confirms the high probability of decorating with embroidered decor of the clothes of these, as most scholars believe, Slavic (Ante, with a centre in the Dnipro region) anthropomorphic figurines of small metal sculpture. The probability of this increases when they are considered in the context of small plastic and other images (mosaics, etc.) originating from the entire European region and adjacent territories of Asia. The mentioned images are associated with a whole complex of ideas and traditions of «beast fights» (including gladiatorial fights) in

this wide area and therefore are very widespread in various versions. And the hypothesis about the reflection in the studied anthropomorphic Martynivka-type figurines (and zoomorphic ones related to them) of the biblical motif «Daniel with the Lions» is well consistent with the complex of these traditions and ideas of «beast fights». At the same time, we think the appearance of the «dancers», including the clothes, to some extent conveys both borrowed and specifically aboriginal features. Considering

that the tradition of embroidering clothes in the territories of Ukraine is attested among the Sarmatians of the 1st century AD and the Huns of the middle of the 5th century, we can hypothetically consider the decor on the clothes of the Martynivka figurines of the 7th century and the «candle keepers» of the 7th–8th centuries as a continuation of this chain, thus, practically reaching the embroidery on clothes from the burial grounds of Black Tomb in Chernihiv and Shestovytsia of the 10th century.

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Image 1. «The Dancing Man» from the Martynov Treasure. Source: PRYKHODNIUK, Oleh. Martyniv Treasure. In: Ivan DZIUBA, Arkadii ZHUKOVSKYI, Mykola ZHELEZNIAK [et al.], editorial board. *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine*. Kyiv: Institute of Encyclopedic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2018 [in Ukrainian]



Image 2. Statuette from the City of Khorol «Guardian of the Candle». Source: PANCHENKO, Mikhail. Nomadic Clothing in Artistic Casting of the Middle Ages. *East European Archaeological Journal*, 2000, no. 6 (7), November–December [online] [viewed 12 November 2021]. Available from: <http://archaeology.kiev.ua/journal/061100/panchenko.htm> [in Russian]



Image 3; Image 4; Image 5. Samples of Byzantine Tunics Decorated, It is Believed, with Embroidery. Source: SCHMAUDER, Michael. Vielteilige Gürtelgarnituren des 6.–7. Jahrhunderts: Herkunft, Aufkommen und Trägerkreis [Multi-Part Belt Sets of the 6th–7th Centuries: Origin, Emergence, and Wearers]. In: Falko DAIM, ed. *Die Awaren am Rand der byzantinischen Welt: Studien zu Diplomatie, Handel und Technologietransfer im Frühmittelalter* [The Avars on the Edge of the Byzantine World: Studies on Diplomacy, Trade and Technology Transfer in the Early Middle Ages]. Beitr. von J. Andradi u. a. [Contribution by J. Andradi et al.] Innsbruck, 2000, pp. 15–44 [in German]

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