

Presthlavitza, the Little Preslav

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Historical geography has much to gain from the edition of Byzantine lead seals. The present note, inspired by a recent publication, intends to bring to light some sigillographic material from the Harvard University Collections¹⁾ and use it as a basis in order to reexamine the problem of the Bulgarian city called the Little Preslav.

Two seals related to this city have already been published without an adequate interpretation. The first specimen that surfaced in Dristra (Silistria) was poorly preserved and, consequently, partly misread by the editors, who proposed the restitution Πρεσθ(λάβης) [με]γ(άλης)²⁾; this is an obvious error, which has been recently pointed out by V. Šandrovskaĵa, when she published a second specimen of the same seal, preserved at the Ermitage of Leningrad. Moreover, Šandrovskaĵa published another seal related to the same city. But in both cases, she read the place-name as Πρεσθλαβίτ(ων), which would be a *hapax*, meaning the inhabitants of Preslav³⁾; this is not the case: the final T is followed by a curly vertical line, indicating a Z; and the correct reading is undoubtedly Πρεσθλαβίτζ(ας), as this is confirmed by our seals.

I. Strategoi of Presthlavitza

Both the above mentioned seals belonged to military governors (strategoi) of Presthlavitza. The first one, already known from the Silistria and the Leningrad specimens, is also represented in the Harvard University Collections.

¹⁾ On this vast collection of more than 17,000 seals, see my presentation: Les sceaux de plomb byzantins conservés dans les collections de l'Université de Harvard (Dumbarton Oaks — Fogg Museum of Art), in: XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongreß, Akten I/Beiheft, Vienna 1981, section 3/1.

²⁾ N. Bănescu-P. Papahagi, Plombs byzantins découverts à Silistrie, *Byzantion* 10 (1955), p. 602—604.

³⁾ V. S. Šandrovskaĵa, Iz istorii Bolgarii X-XI vv. po dannym sfragistiki, *Byzantinobulgarica* 7 (1981), p. 461—464.

1. *Leo Pegonites*, protospatharios and strategos of Presthlavitza (XIth century)⁴).

Fogg 860. — Diam. 24 mm. Slightly off center; oxydation. See fig. 1.

Obv. Inscr. of four lines preceded by an ornament. Border of dots.

— ✱ — / + Κ̄ΕΡ,Θ, / ΤΩΣΩΔ, / Λ, ΛΕΟΝΤ, / ἈΣΠΑΘ

Rev. Inscr. of four lines preceded by an ornament. Border of dots.

— ✱ — / ΣΤΡΑ / Τ' ΠΡΕΣΘ, / ΡΙΤΣΤΩΠ / ΓΟΝΙΤ,

+ Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)θ(ει) τῷ σῶ δ(ού)λ(ω) Λέοντ(ι) (πρωτο)σπαθ(αρίω) (καὶ) στρατ(ηγῶ) Πρεσθ(λά)βιτζ(ας) τῷ Π(η)γονίτ(η).

2. Malesios (?) imperial protospatharios and strategos of Prestlavitza.

This seal is known only from the Ermitage specimen published by Šandrovskaja and dated to the XIth century. Unfortunately, the photograph accompanying the edition is too dark to be of any help in securing the reading of the first τ in Πρεσθλάβιτζ(ας), or, more importantly, the proposed reading of the name Μαλέσιος (which is never attested as such — the normal form is Μάλεσης — and which is a family name, not a first name: should one try Ἀλέξιος or Μελέτιος?).

II. Kommerkiarioi of Presthlavitza

This group of seals is completely new. They belong to officials residing in Presthlavitza and collecting the kommerkion, a 10% tax on circulation and sale of merchandise. The presence of these officials shows that the city was a major trading center in the XIth century like Attaleia, Cherson, Develtos, Mesembria, Thessalonica, etc. which were also seats of kommerkiarioi⁵).

⁴) The person is not known from other sources in spite of the hypothesis proposed by N. Bănescu in *Bulletin de la Section historique de l'Académie Roumaine* 27 (1946), p. 47—50; but the family is well attested throughout the XIth century, starting with the patrician *Nicetas Pegonites*, strategos of Dyr-rachion in 1018 (*Skylitzes*, ed. Thurn, p. 357).

⁵) On the kommerkiarioi, their function and their geographical distribution see H. Antoniadis-Bibicou, *Recherches sur les douanes à Byzance*, Paris 1963. Substantial additions, concerning mainly the early period (until the IXth century) are to be found in G. Zacos — A. Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals I*. Basel 1972, p. 131—363; III, p. 1592—1596. — Being a tax-collector, the kommerkiarios is also called πράκτωρ: I. Pomjalovskij, *Žitie prepodobnago Athanasija Athonskago*. Sankt Peterburg 1895, p. 5 (reference brought to my attention by Prof. A. Každan).

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3. *Sergios* chartoularios and kommerkiarios of Presthlavitza (XIth century)⁶).

Fogg 1263. — Diam. 25 mm. Flattened on the two sides. See fig. 2.

Obv. Inscr. of five lines. Border of dots.

· · Ε Ρ , Θ , / . Ψ Σ Ω Δ Θ / Σ Ε Ρ Γ Ι Ω / Χ Τ Θ Λ . / Ρ ,

Rev. Inscr. of four lines preceded and followed by an ornament. Border of dots.

— · · — / Σ Κ Ο Ν . / Μ Ε Ρ Κ , Α . / . Ρ Ε Σ Θ Λ , / . Ι Τ Σ Α Σ / — · · —

[+ Κ(ύρι)]ε β(οή)θ(ει) [τ]ῷ σῷ δού(λω) Σεργίω χ(α)ρτουλ[α]ρ(ίω) (καὶ) κουμ(ε)ρκ(ι)α[ρ(ίω) Π]ροσθλ(ά)[β]ιτζας.

Beyond collecting taxes on merchandise, *Sergios* was also in charge of up-keeping the lists of soldiers and recruits: this is the meaning of the title chartoularios when applied to an official of the provincial administration⁷).

4. *John* kommerkiarios of Persthlavitza (XIth century)⁸).

DO-Shaw 137. — Diam. 23 mm. The upper part has remained out of the field. See fig. 3.

Obv. Bust of Saint John the Baptist blessing (r. h.) and holding a long cross (l. h.). On either side, vertical inscr.:

· / Ψ / . / Σ - Π Π / Δ Ρ , / Μ , ·

[·Ο (ἅγιος) Ἰ]ω[άννη]ς [ὁ] Πε(ό)δρο(ο)μ(ος). Border of dots.

Rev. Inscr. of five lines followed by a decoration. Border of dots.

· Κ Ε . . / . Ψ Κ Θ Μ , Ρ / Κ Ι Α Ρ Ι Ο / Π Ε Ρ Σ Θ Λ , / Ρ , Τ Σ Η Σ / — · · —

[+] Κ(ύρι)ε [βοήθει Ἰ]ω(άννη) κουμ(ε)ρκιαρίο Περοσθλ(α)β(ι)τζης.

5. *Eustratios Romaios*, spatharokandidatos and kommerkiarios of Persthlavitza (XIth century)⁹).

⁶) The spelling κουμμερκιάριος is well attested: N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe s.* Paris 1972, p. 113, l. 33; cf. H. Antoniadis-Bibicou, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁷) N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance . . .*, p. 314, 364.

⁸) The variant reading Περοσθλάβιτζα (see also the next seal) has not any chronological implications, since this permutation is well attested for the name Preslav/Perslav in the XIth century: see *infra*, note 11. Another specimen of this seal is preserved at the American Numismatic Society, Mabbott 80.

⁹) The restoration of the family name, Ῥωμαῖος, is not absolutely certain, in spite of the fact that this name is well attested in the late Xth and XIth cen-

Fogg 1750. — Diam. 23 mm. Lead slightly smaller than the inscription. See fig. 4.

DO-Shaw 2128. — Diam. 19 mm. Lead too small for the inscription.

Both the above specimens come from the same boulloterion.

Obv. Bust of the Virgin holding the Child in her left arm.

Sigla: $\overline{\text{MP}}-\text{Θ}$: Μ(ήτη)ρ Θ(εο)ῦ. Border of dots.

Rev. Inscr. of six lines preceded by an ornament. Border of dots.

—•—/ΕΝΣΤΡ/ΣΠΑΘ,Κ,Δ./ΣΚΟΜΕΡΚ./ΠΕΡΣΘΛΑ/ΤΡΑΣΤΟ/.ΩΜ

Εὔστρ(ατίω) σπαθ(αρο)κ(αν)δ[(ι)δ(άτω)] (καὶ) κομερκ[(ια)ρ(ίω)] Περ — σθλά[β(ι)τζας τῶ [P]ωμ[αίω].

Our seals attest a place-name with a Slavic diminutive ending, the nominative of which should be Πρεσθλάβιτζα/Περσθλάβιτζα. According to the rules of Classical Greek, its genitive should be Περσθλαβίτζης: sure enough, this purist form is written out on one of our seals (nr. 4). But on two others, we have the vernacular genitive in -ας, which I have also restored in all uncertain cases; as this last form is anyway incorrect by classical standards, I maintained in the genitive the proparoxytone accent of the nominative, which is also closer to the tendencies of demotic Greek.

The diminutive ending — *itza* shows clearly that our Presthlavitza is identical to the Little Preslav, and has to be clearly distinguished from the Great Preslav, the Bulgarian capital of the Xth century which also became the seat of a strategos as soon as it was captured by the Byzantines; first in 971, when *John Tzimiskes* renamed it Ioannoupolis and appointed there a well attested strategos¹⁰). Then the city was lost to the Bulgarians of *Samuel*; and when it was recaptured by the Byzantines in the year 1000, the

tury: beyond the famous *Eustathios Romaios*, known from the *Peira*, one can also mention an asecretis *Peter Romaios* (V. Laurent, *Le Corpus des sceaux de l'empire byzantin II*. Paris 1981, Nr. 84; the interpretation of the name *Romaios* as “competent in Roman law” seems to me far fetched and very unlikely); a patrikios and a strategos of the Anatolikai *Gregory Romaios* (*Neos Hellenomnemon* 19, 1925, p. 163—164, 181); a protospatharios *Kosmas Romaios* (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 120, c. 741); other *Romaioi* with the following first names: *Athanasios*, *Basil*, *Makarios* (*Archivio Storico Siciliano* 6, 1881, p. 13; *Izvestija RAIK* 6, 1900, p. 38; *Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 3, 1931, p. 303—304).

¹⁰) The taktikon of the Escorial, depicting a situation prevailing some time between 971 and 975, mentions the “strategos of Thrace and Iannoupolis” (N. Oikonomides, *Les listes . . .*, p. 265, l. 9, cf. p. 261); and we now have the seal of *Leon Sarakenopoulos*, protospatharios and strategos of Thrace and Ioannoupolis; moreover this same person became (later?) strategos of Ioannoupolis and Dorostolon, as shows another seal of his: on all this see V. S. Šandrovskaja, loc. cit., p. 459—461 (editio princeps of the first seal; bibliography concerning the second).

name Ioannoupolis was forgotten: variants of the name Preslav are to be found in all Byzantine sources¹¹), including two known XIth century seals of strategoi Μεγάλης Πρεσθλάβας¹²) or Περασθλάβας¹³).

The position of the Great Preslav on the north slope of the Haemus Mountains is now well established. Current excavations of the site have yielded important archaeological finds, many of which, including a treasure of lead seals, are not yet accessible¹⁴). But there is no agreement among scholars with respect to the geographical situation of the Little Preslav, our Preslavitza. The various hypotheses that have been put forth on this subject have been analyzed in relatively recent publications¹⁵), and for this reason they will not be repeated here.

Let us examine the few literary sources concerning the Little Preslav, which are the following in chronological order:

a. The Russian Primary Chronicle refers several times to a city called *Perejaslavec* when relating the campaigns in Bulgaria (967—71) of the Russian prince *Svjatoslav*. One passage referring to the year 969 is particularly important for our research. *Svjatoslav* is reported to say: “I ... should prefer to live in Perejaslavec on the Danube (*na Dunaj*), since that is the center of my realm, where all riches are concentrated; gold, silks, wine and various fruit from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus’ furs, wax, honey and slaves”¹⁶). In spite of its being vividly disputed¹⁷), this text is basic for locating the Little Preslav: the name *Perejaslavec* is phonetically much closer to our Preslavitza/Perslavitza than to

¹¹) Περασθλάβας, Περισθλάβας, Πραισθλάβας, Πρισθλάβας. A detailed list of the various forms of the name is to be found in P. Năsturel, Peut-on localiser la Petite Preslav à Păcuiul lui Soare?, *Revue des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes* 3 (1965), p. 17—36, esp. p. 19—21.

¹²) *Andronikos Doukas*, protospatharios and strategos of Great Preslav: lead seal of the first half of the XIth century found in Pliska; references and prosopographical commentary: D. Polemis, *The Doukai*. London 1968, p. 28.

¹³) Unpublished seal (Fogg 2284), datable to the XIth century: [A]etios protospatharios and strategos Πε[ρ]σθλ(ά)β(ας).

¹⁴) Preliminary publications exist; a recent one of them is quoted by P. Diaconu in *Revista de Istorie* 34/6 (1981), p. 1123, n. 75; I. Iordanov, Vestiteli na minaloto. Pečati na preslavski stratezi ot X-XI vek, *Pliska-Madara-Preslav* 5 (28 December 1979), p. 9.

¹⁵) P. Năsturel, loc. cit., p. 22—24; P. Diaconu, Autour de la localisation de la Petite Preslav, *Revue des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes* 3 (1965), p. 37—56, esp. p. 38ff. (see in particular the map of p. 39); I. Barnea-Ș. Ștefanescu, Din Istoria Dobrogei III. Bizantini, Romani și Bulgari. La Dunarea de Jos. Bucarest 1971, p. 14, 163.

¹⁶) The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text, transl. by S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor. Cambridge Mass. 1953, p. 86.

¹⁷) Especially by P. Diaconu and P. Năsturel, loc. cit.

(the Great) Preslav¹⁸); and the Chronicle states clearly that it was a major center of international trade situated on the Danube. We shall return to this point.

b. *John Skylitzes* reports that in the year 1000 two Byzantine generals led a successful expedition against the Bulgarian fortified cities to the north of Mount Haemus and that they captured the Great and the Little Preslav together with Pliska¹⁹). It is clear therefore that the Little Preslav was different from the Great Preslav, let alone Pliska, and that all three cities were situated somewhere to the North of Haemus²⁰).

c. *Anna Comnena* provides confused information: she speaks of the Great Preslav (μεγάλην Περισθλάβαν) as of a city situated close to Dristra and on the Danube — or near the Danube (περὶ τὸν Ἰστρὸν)²¹). We know that this is not the case and for that reason it has been supposed that there is here a confusion between the Great and the Little Preslav. Be that as it may, no solid demonstration can be based on a text which is not very explicit and certainly not completely reliable²²).

d. The Arab geographer *Idrisi*, who wrote toward the middle of the XIIth century, describes a series of cities along the Danube (from west to east); he underlines the importance of the city and the market of Dristra, and then he adds²³): “And from Distra to the city of Barasklafisa (it is a distance) of four days going to the east through a wilderness. And it (= Barasklafisa) is (situated) on a river that is fordable”²⁴).

¹⁸) It is legitimate to assume that the form *Perejaslavec* of the Russian chronicle is influenced by the name of *Pereiaslavl* (in Ukraina) the “Russian Preslava” of the Byzantines.

¹⁹) Skylitzes ed. Thurn, p. 343—344: πέραν τοῦ Αἴμου . . . τὴν τε μεγάλην εἶλε Περισθλάβαν καὶ τὴν μικρὰν καὶ τὴν Πλίσκοβαν.

²⁰) There is absolutely no reason for accepting the interpretation of this passage proposed by P. Diaconu, loc. cit., p. 53, according to which the Little Preslav would have been situated between the Great Preslav and Pliska. This has been correctly pointed out by P. Năsturel, loc. cit., p. 19—20.

²¹) Anne Comnène, *Alexiade*, éd. B. Leib, II. Paris 1943, p. 95, 96.

²²) P. Năsturel, loc. cit., has based his theory that the Little Preslav could be the island of Păcuiul lui Soare on this text of *Anna Comnena*, indicating that this city was close to Dristra. But this same text seems to contradict his hypothesis as it seems to imply that one could go from Dristra to Preslav on horseback; consequently Preslav should not be sought on an island.

²³) B. Nedkov, *Bŭlgarija i sŭsednite i zemi prez XII vek spored Idrisi*. Sofia 1960, p. 78—79. I quote here a new translation of the paragraph kindly prepared for me by Prof. Irfan Shahid, who tells me that instead of *Barasklafisa* one can as well read *Br(i)sklaf(i)sa*.

²⁴) Explanatory note of Prof. Shahid: “that is fordable” translates Arabic *garīb al-khawḍ*. This last word in Arabic admits to be read: *khawḍ* (plunging or wading), *hawḍ* (reservoir or basin), *khūṣ* (reeds). Arabic *garīb* means close or near and it could possibly in certain contexts mean “easy”.



Fig. 1 Fogg 860: *Leo Pegonites*, protospatharios and strategos of Presthlavitza



Fig. 2 Fogg 1263: *Sergios*, chartoularios and kommerkiarios of Presthlavitza

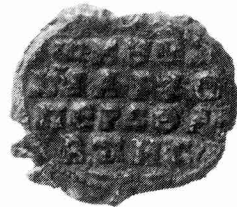


Fig. 3 Shaw 137: *John*, kommerkarios of Persthavitza

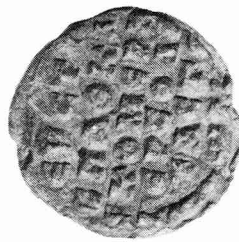


Fig. 4 Fogg 1750: *Eustratios Romaios*, spatharokandidatos and kommerkarios of Persthavitza

establish that Presthlavitza equals Perejaslavec, equals Barasklafisa, equals Proslauiza. The literary sources tell us all that this city was situated beyond the Haemus (*Skylitzes*), on the Danube (Russian Chronicle, *Anna Comnena* maybe also *Idrisi*), near the mouths of the Danube (mediaeval maps). All this taken into consideration, it seems to me obvious that our Preslavitza should be sought at (or around) the modern Prislava; of course one should not forget that the configuration of a territory near the delta of a very big river tends to change considerably with time.

Our seals allow us also to draw two negative conclusions concerning the topographical problem under consideration: Preslavitza should not be sought at the vicinity of the Great Preslav since this city is known to have also been the seat of a strategos³⁰). Neither should it be sought in the vicinity of Dristra³¹), which had its own strategos (until 1017) and later its doux or katepano³²) and, more significantly, it had its own kommerkiarioi in the XIth century³³). By excluding these possibilities, we are once more urged to look towards the mouth of the Danube: this geographical position of Preslavitza may very well explain why and how it flourished.

Trade was active along the west coast of the Black Sea throughout the Xth century. The Russo-Byzantine commercial treaties of 907/911 and of 944 had opened the way for regular commercial exchanges between Byzantium and Kiev. Towards the middle of the Xth century, *Constantine Porphyrogenetus* describes in detail the annual itinerary of Russian merchants, who come to Constantinople with their "monoxyla": they formed convoys at Kiev, they descended the Dniepr and followed the coast of the Black Sea down to the central main branch of the Danubian delta, called Sulina; "and until they are past the river Selinas (Sulina), the Pechenegs keep pace with them. And if it happens that the sea casts a monoxylon on shore, they all put in to land, in order to present a united opposition to the Pechenegs. But after the Selinas they fear nobody, but entering the territory of Bulgaria, they come to the mouth of the Danube"³⁴). This mouth is undoubtedly the one of Saint George, on which we have located our Preslavitza. This was the first secure stop of the Russian merchants after a long

³⁰) This is the hypothesis proposed by P. Diaconu, loc. cit. On the strategoi of the two Preslavs see supra.

³¹) Thus one should reject the hypothesis of P. Năsturel, loc. cit., who proposed to identify the Little Preslav with the island of Păcuiul lui Soare, at 20 km. to the east of Dristra.

³²) See my *Listes de préséance* ..., p. 362.

³³) An XIth century seal of a kommerkiarios of Dristra is now preserved at Dumbarton Oaks (Nr. 55.1.3333).

³⁴) Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik - R. J. H. Jenkins. Dumbarton Oaks 1967², ch. 9 (I quote the English translation of lines 93—97 by R. Jenkins). Cf. Vol. II, Commentary, London 1962, p. 18ff. (D. Obolensky).

and perilous trip, during which they were constantly menaced by the Pechenegs from the shore; and it was a place with relatively shallow waters ("fordable"), convenient for putting in to land the light Russian "monoxyla"³⁵). Consequently, Preslavitza was obviously very important for the Russo-byzantine trade. Moreover, it controlled the entrance to the Danube, that major waterway that led to Central Europe. The words attributed to Svjatoslav by the Russian Primary Chronicle (*supra*) can be easily explained. It is equally easy to understand why Preslavitza remained a trade-center with its own *kommerkiarioi* and with its defense entrusted to a *strategos* throughout the XIth century, at a time when the Danube had become the northern frontier of the empire³⁶).

Then came the decline, attested by *Idrisi* who mentions Preslavitza but insists only on the importance of Dristra; and by the portulans, who record just the name and nothing more. This may be due to the competition of other centers that flourished along the Byzantine Danube (e.g. Noviodunum—Isaacea; Dinogetia—Garvān; etc.); it may be due to the development of new important trade routes (e.g. Morava—Vardar, Sofia—Constantinople) after the unification of the Balkans under Byzantine rule. But as the Russian trade has remained very active throughout the XIIth century³⁷), one may venture one more hypothesis: it is possible that the shallow waters of Preslavitza did not offer any more a necessary or convenient haven, when ships larger than *monoxyla* started being used for the Russian trade.

³⁵) For these boats see *Commentary*, loc. cit., p. 23—25; the Russians tended to stop at river mouths, obviously in quest of shallow waters: the river of Varna (Provadiya), the river of Ditzina (Panisos, Kamčiya).

³⁶) Preslavitza does not appear as the seat of a *strategos* in the *taktikon* of Escorial (971—975) but one may imagine that the city was contained in (or was the capital of) the gubernorate of the *strategos* of the Western Mesopotamia (see my *Listes ...*, p. 269, l. 16 and p. 363); the problem of its location has been studied by several scholars, often with a patriotism that defies my imagination. As far as I am concerned I find no reason to modify the hypothesis that I expressed in 1965. For up to date bibliography and discussions of the issues, see V. Tŭpkova-Zaimova, *Dolni Dunav-granična zona na Vizantijskija zapad*. Sofia 1976, p. 34 ff.; P. Koledarov, *Političeska Geografija na Srednevekovnata Bŭlgarska Dŭrŭžava*. Sofia 1979, p. 54; I. Božilov, *Anonimŭt na Haze, Bŭlgarija i Vizantija na Dolni Dunav v kraja na X vek*. Sofia 1979, p. 185—196; P. Diaconu, *Realitāti politice la Dunărea de Jos: Români, Bizantini, Bulgari, Pecenegi*, *Revista de Istorie* 34/6 (1981), p. 1123 ff.

³⁷) Cf. M. V. Levčenko, *Očerki po istorii Russko-vizantijskih otnošenij*. Moscow 1956, p. 386 ff.; G. G. Litavrin - A. P. Každan, *Ekonomičeskie i političeskie otnošenija drevnej Rusi i Vizantii*, in: *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies*. London 1967, p. 69—81.