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Light and Splendour: precious metal as a medium of ritual and social interaction in Late Antiquity

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Abstracts

Early Byzantine silver censers (fifth to seventh century): general reflections and a case study

Dr. Marco Aimone, Durham University

Various Byzantine sources dating from before the Iconoclasm mention the use of censers in Christian liturgy: in some cases, they refer to examples in precious metal (gold and silver) given by wealthy worshippers or even by sovereigns. Focusing on silver censers, there are eleven known examples with decorated surfaces: ten of these were acquired on the antiquities market, and at best the findspot is only approximatively recorded. Thanks to control stamps impressed into the back, we know that most of these censers date between the second half of the sixth century and the first half of the seventh; in the absence of firm evidence relating to the archaeological context, investigation is confined to the shape of the object, the repertoire of images and the inscriptions. Following these lines of research, two possible production centres have been identified: Constantinople and the region between northern Syria and south-east Turkey.

To this small corpus of early Byzantine censers, we can now add three recently published examples belonging to the Wyvern Collection (UK). The first is hexagonal and dates to the reign of Anastasius I (491-518);

the second is hemispherical and dates to the reign of Justinian I (527-565); the third is 'lamp-shaped' and is dated between the sixth and seventh centuries. Although all three of them were acquired on the antiquities market, the high formal quality as well as the presence of extensive figurative cycles and long inscriptions provides new data useful for contextualizing the examples that are already known.

The most significant of the three Wyvern censers is the hexagonal example. The control stamps impressed into the base indicate that this is the oldest Byzantine censer known to date; the iconography, with Christ flanked by Abraham and Melchizedek, has no parallels among other liturgical objects of the fifth to seventh century; and around the edges there is an inscription taken from Psalm 141 (Septuagint text) that throws light on the symbolic value of the incense as an offering. A study of this example opens up new perspectives on the origin of the type; on the relationship between the decoration of censers and monumental art of the same period; and on the significance of the use of such objects in liturgical ceremonies.

Faith, light and precious materials in Christian Africa

Prof. ém. François Baratte, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne

Roman and Byzantine Africa is certainly not the region of the Mediterranean basin for which precious metal objects are best known. The objects found there are rare, even if the images partly make up for them; one can nevertheless observe, thanks to the texts and to some discoveries, that silver plate, even in gold, must have occupied a not insignificant place in the liturgical furniture (in Cirta, for example, at the beginning of the 4th century) and in the fitting out of churches. The richest reliquaries were also in silver. The price of the material partly explains this interest; it justifies the prestige attached to it and the symbolic value it

confers on objects. The hagiographic texts, so numerous in Africa (*Liber de miraculis sancti Stephani*, *Passions*, etc.), bear witness to the importance that the faithful attached to gold and silver both in daily piety and in the paradisiacal imagination; the decoration of the baptistery fully confirms this interest. If the theme of light and radiance, however readily used in secular life, is hardly put forward (Augustine for example does not insist on it), it is nevertheless very present in the iconography, funerary in particular, directly linked to the metallic material, with all the values attached to it.

Reflected in Silver. Aristocracies, *latifundium*, *otium* and *clientes* in the decorative programmes of Late Antique silver vessels

Dr. Matteo Braconi, Università degli studi Roma Tre

In the self-definition process of the late antique aristocracies, the figurative imagery plays a prominent role. Through the images, *domini* and *dominae* express their economic potential, their richness and gained wealth, proposing scenes that depict them as protagonists, participating in person. This phenomenon, particularly well-known with regard to the decorations of villas and *domus*, involves the creation of a real iconographic cycle, which includes the background of the suburban villas where the landowners are represented administering their own properties or living their everyday life in their lavish estates.

In the context of this well-conceived self-representational ceremonial, also the decoration of silver vessels

seems to play a specific role, enhancing the meaning of these luxury products, in addition to the inner value of their material and the quality of their manufacture. Between hunts and outdoor banquets, body care and personal toilets, rural *otium* and erudite contemplation, the elites narrate the most significant moments of their *secessus in villa*, at the height of their economic potential. Like mosaics, the silver vessels become a distinctive communication channel that addresses the observer also through decorative programmes, within which *domini* with their spouses represent themselves surrounded by servants, precious objects, *clientes* and guests, with the aim of flaunting their superior social level and the most intimate private ambitions.

Late Roman gold and political power in Barbaricum

Prof. Aleksander Bursche, University of Warsaw

Dr. Kyrylo Myzgin, University of Warsaw

The third century AD was a time of a major social, political and religious change in East-Central Europe. Direct Roman-Barbarian contacts resulted in the emergence of a new category of elite in Germanic societies manifested archaeologically by the imposing burials of the Zakrzów (Sackrau) horizon. The division of extensive plunder taken by invading barbarian retinues in the Roman provinces, as well as the economic development, contributed to increasing social stratification. In the aftermath of the Roman defeat at Abritus in 251, the Goths captured the imperial treasury including a vast amount of gold. After this date there is a marked increase in the number of gold objects found in grave inventories and hoards interpreted as elite

treasures. Other than Roman coins and medallions, and their imitations used as pendants, there are locally-made prestige objects - symbols of power status such as solid gold *Kolbenarmringe* and neck-rings. This tradition is noted across the Germanic environment from the Gothic territory on the Black Sea to southern Scandinavia. Another fascinating phenomenon of a religious nature are decorative gold-foil amulets and/or offerings and crescent-shaped pendants (*lunulae*) recovered on the same territory. In the twenty-first century the widespread use of metal detectors, especially in Ukraine and Denmark, has been responsible for a vast increase in archaeological evidence.

Appearance and reality: jewelry and gold-adorned clothing of barbaric elites in Late Antiquity

PD Dr. Christoph Eger, LVR-Archäologischer Park Xanten

A huge number of barbaric graves of the late 4th and 5th centuries contain extremely sumptuous dress accessories and rich pieces of jewelry. Gold, silver and precious stones, especially garnet, were lavishly used by the goldsmiths. The formal language of these artifacts is the result of complex interactions between

barbaric societies and the Roman Empire and barbaric societies among themselves. The finds reflect the emergence of new elites within and beyond the borders of the empire – elites who owe their wealth to the struggle against the empire or to the collaboration with it. However, there are significant regional

differences. The accumulation of wealth did not happen in the same way nor was the wealth displayed in the same way everywhere. Archaeological remains of

clothing accessories pile up where there was a desire to display the symbols of social advancement and the newly formed society even in death.

“All that glitters is not gold” – Byzantine gold-glass from excavations in the Holy Land

Dr Yael Gorin-Rosen, Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem

The focus of this paper is the Byzantine gold glass finds discovered in Israel. One emphasis will be the importance of excavated evidence in understanding the role of gold glass during that time.

There are three categories of Byzantine gold glass in the Holy Land. The first and most common category comprises the mosaic tesserae, the second category is tiles, and the last category—which is so far limited

to a single example—is the unique *opus sectile* glass panel (c. 103x103 cm), uncovered at Caesarea during salvage excavations in 2005.

These three categories, which differ in size, quantity, and distribution, nevertheless share the combination of glass and gold foil, as well as a connection with Christian public buildings or as attested by the panel, the manor of a wealthy Christian nobleman.

A new splendour: the *recusatio* of precious materials in Sidonius Apollinaris’ letters and poems

Dr. Judith Hindermann, University of Basel

In his letters and poems, Sidonius Apollinaris describes various types of shining material such as marble and precious metal. These occur in the description of, on the one hand, buildings (villas, temples, churches), and, on the other hand, of tableware at banquets. Sidonius makes a clear difference in his descriptions: Precious material is justified for religious places, as in the description of the church of Bishop Patiens in Ep. 2.10. As

is clear from the example of the famous silver bowl for Queen Ragnahilde (Ep. 4.8.5), he is, however, sceptical about material luxury in private use. Instead of splendour through precious material, which he rejects in his description of his villa (Ep. 2.2), he devises his own ideal, i.e. splendour through intellectuality. Sidonius emphasises this revaluation of material by reflecting on the materiality of his poetry, which he inserts in his letters.

Relationships between late imperial Rome and Sasanian Iran: the evidence of silver plate

Dr. Richard Hobbs, The British Museum, London

This paper will discuss the links between late Roman silver plate (c. 200 to 500 CE) and silver plate produced under the Sasanian emperors in Persia (c. 224 to 651 CE). During this period silver plate was produced in both regions and the literary sources suggest that it was used in both secular and religious spheres within the two different political and social systems. There are also intriguing references to the use of silver plate as elements of diplomatic exchanges between the royal courts of the Sasanian Empire and the late Roman emperors: but to what extent is there evidence for this in the surviving material itself? Vessel forms, decorative schemes and iconographic subject mat-

ter will be used to show how the material evidence may correspond with the literary references to these diplomatic ties. However, the trajectory of silver plate production in the two empires varied greatly and may provide insights into the changing political and social climates in which the rival empires operated. Finally, the paper will discuss the use of silver plate produced in late Roman/Byzantium and the Sasanian Empires for long-distance trade and political alliance forming. This paper will show that there is value in comparing these diverse sets of material culture in terms of understanding political and social developments across Eurasia during the early Global Middle Ages.

Roman silver transformed: Hacksilber, its nature, uses and effects

Dr. Fraser Hunter, National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh

Of the various forms of precious metal in the Roman world, *Hacksilber* is perhaps the least glamorous. These cut and crushed fragments of silver have received much less attention than intact plate or coinage. Yet they can cast fresh light on the ways in which precious metal was used in and beyond the late Roman world. Drawing on a recent international project to republish the great *Hacksilber* hoard from Traprain

Law in south-east Scotland, this paper will consider the nature of *Hacksilber* and the motivations for its creation. It will then turn to questions raised by the rather patchy distribution of *Hacksilber* across Europe, considering the ways in which precious metals were used in late Antiquity. Regional case-studies will explore how silver was perceived in different areas on the edge of the empire.

Sparkling garments – Late Antique clothing with gold threads, appliqués and beads

Dr. Petra Linscheid, University of Bonn

In Late Antiquity, textile production was a highly developed and specialised craft. Elaborately manufactured garments and furnishing textiles were precious objects and served as status symbols. Besides the work and skill involved, it was the use of costly materials like silk, purple dye or elements from precious metals that added to the value of a textile.

We know about gold decorated garments from depictions and written sources. But it is only the actually preserved finds that reveal the various types, the manufacturing techniques and the visual effects of gold decoration in clothing. The present paper will introduce the rare examples of gold decorated garments from Late Antiquity; most of them were found in Elite tombs both in the Eastern and Western provinces.

Several tunics and shawls survived, adorned with *clavi* or panels woven with gold threads in tapestry weave. In the neck area of tunics, the gold thread weaving may imitate jewellery. Little known so far is the embellishment of clothing by sewn on small golden appliqués - since textiles easily deteriorate, only the metal attachments are preserved. Headdresses were an important element of clothing, the precious examples were manufactured from gold thread or decorated with gold beads. Luxury leather shoes were adorned by the application of ornaments from gold foil. Generally, the metal threads, beads and appliqués in Late Antique textiles were manufactured from gold, instead silver was rarely employed.

The Brilliance of the Late Antique Table: special forms in the silver drinking service

Prof. Dr. em. Stefanie Martin-Kilcher, University of Berne

Two rare Late Antique silver vessel-forms for different drinks are described and their function discussed: the *gillo* (or *gello*) and the *situla*. Both forms are included in the surviving part of the magnificent Seuso find, with vessels from the end of the 4th to the second quarter of the 5th century.

The characteristic form of the *gillo*, always with two handles, is attested in both clay and glass from the 3rd century. However, in silver, which concerns us here, the form is very rare. If we survey the hoard finds with table silver, the type appears first in the late finds with

vessels from the end of the 4th century and the first half of the 5th. Its function can be inferred from images and written texts

The second form of vessel is a *situla* (bucket). To understand its function it is necessary to take a step back into the 3rd century, to northern Gaul (the silver hoard from Chaourse, the Simpelveld sarcophagus), and to rich graves in *Germania Magna* (e.g. Gommern). The composition of Roman, Gallo-Roman and Germanic banqueting equipment is compared, and the function of the buckets discussed.

Made for daily business? Functional aspects of Late Roman silver coinage

Dr. Markus Peter, Augusta Raurica

At a first glance, late Roman coinage seems to resemble quite closely the trimetallic Augustan system, which had lost its inherent stability during the 3rd century AD. However, the fact that coins from gold, silver and copper alloys were struck again after Diocletian's monetary reform hides their rather different functions, especially concerning silver coinage. While the Republican and Imperial silver denarius had played an

important role not only as a means of making larger payments and of value-storing but also in daily transactions, post-tetrarchic silver coins circulated in a quite different way. Although the metrology and the fineness of the new silver coin first copied the Neronian denarius, an analysis of hoards and single finds shows that it was not commonly used for daily transactions.

***Imago* – The gold bust of the emperor in Late Antiquity. Reflections on the head of Saint Fides in Conques (F): a portrait of Valentinian I?**

Anne de Pury-Gysel, Basel

In the legacy of precious metals from Late Antiquity, objects made of gold occupy an extremely modest place; the majority are coins and jewellery. The reason is well known: Like no other material, gold was melted down at all times and shaped into something new.

Among the preserved exceptions in the field of portraits there are three *imagines*: hollow, chased busts of emperors of various sizes.

The following points will be considered:

Gold as a material. One difficulty in stylistic analysis is the material itself: the specific properties of gold affect the style and artistic quality of the work.

The meaning of imagines. *Imagines* – or *eikones* – are golden or silver portrait busts of the emperor that

could serve as legitimate proxies in his absence. The practice of making an *imago* in gold is attested for imperial likenesses in particular. They are confirmed since Augustus. As polyvalent and easily transportable busts, *imagines* were used in the imperial cult, in the army, and for legal acts; they could also be part of a *largitio*, an imperial gift to high-ranking persons.

On the iconography of the head of Saint Fides. Since the restoration of the seated statue of Saint Fides in Conques (9th-11th century) by the Louvre in Paris, it is known that the head must originally have been a Late Antique imperial portrait. Stylistic investigation leads to the suggestion that the portrait possibly represented Valentinian I.

Portraits of Women on Late Antique Mosaics in the Eastern Mediterranean

Mag. Dr. Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail, Österreichisches Archäologisches Institut Wien

Based on personifications from late antique mosaic floors in Levantine dwellings, this study examines the extent to which adorned and distinguishedly dressed female bust portraits symbolized the ladies of the

house. Even if inscriptions superficially indicate that the busts show personifications, it was precisely their status-compliant adornment that associated them with the female inhabitants of noble residences.

***Ecce vides quantus splendor...* Paulinus of Nola and his contemporaries on the interplay of light and image composition**

Prof. Dr. em. Barbara Schellewald, University of Basel

My lecture will focus on Paulinus of Nola and his contemporaries. They decorated their buildings with elaborate and ingeniously calculated mosaics placed at significant points in the building, for example in the

apse. Integrated *tituli* do not only serve as an addition but often open up further levels of meaning that are inscribed in the image as well as in its materiality. The pictorial composition of the mosaic is charac-

terised by the interplay between natural and artificial light. Accordingly, the sacred spaces are deliberately equipped with light sources that bring out the actual meaning of the mosaics. The type of lighting as well as the arrangement and choice of lamps and lights reveal a marked interest in a subtle choreography of light. Written statements by patrons such as Paulinus of

Nola give evidence of the manifold functions assigned to light and image composition. Since the mosaics for which Paulinus was responsible are preserved in very small fragments only, surviving decoration projects of this period are drawn on which testify to a similar intellectual concept.

Words of Gold and Silver: iconic and symbolic mimesis of precious metal in Late Antique Poetry

PD Dr. Raphael Schwitter, University of Bonn

In late antiquity, poets were deeply concerned with the relationship between the world of things and the language that relates to them. Particular attention has been paid to aspects of light and colour. In hyper-realistic descriptions poetic art often seems to compete with light-reflecting materials such as precious gems, marble or glass. In this paper, I draw attention to some striking cases of ekphrastic representation of precious metal in late antique Latin poetry. It is argued

that the poetic visual language – carried by expressive sound patterns, rhythms and syntactic elements – corresponds with the material preciousness, creating a direct link between the verbal art and the materiality of the objects described. In this way, the poetic fabric in certain cases even goes beyond symbolic mimesis and becomes iconic itself, an embodiment of the materiality it describes.

***Lux abstrusa* – current state of research and conservation of the Vinkovci silver hoard**

Hrvoje Vulić, Municipal Museum, Vinkovci
Damir Doračić, Archaeological Museum, Zagreb

In 2012 during a rescue excavation in Vinkovci/Croatia (former *Colonia Aurelia Cibalae, Pannonia Secunda*) a hoard of silver objects was discovered. With 46 objects (45 silver plate and utensils, one onyx gemstone) and weight of 36 kg it belongs to a group of largest 4th century silver plate hoards with parallels in Kaiseraugst, Mildenhall, Seuso and Traprain, and so far the largest one in the new millennium. Due to the nature of Roman silver, fragmentary state and other outside circumstances, the conservation process is still underway, so most of the secrets are still hidden beneath

the layers of dirt and corrosion. But with preliminary observations and study of some of the objects that have been conserved so far, we can say that except vessels similar or same to other hoards, it also has some unique objects, Tantalus bowl as the so far oldest functional siphon vessel standing out. Conservation and analysis of material so far has found some interesting things that will be presented as well as material that has been conserved and its regional and in some instances international parallels.

Light in the darkness: the use of gold-leaf in late Roman gold-glass

Dr. Susan Walker, Ashmolean Museum and Wolfson College, University of Oxford

How and why was gold-leaf applied to the bases of glass vessels in Roman times? In this paper, I briefly review the archaeological contexts of ancient gold-glass and its likely process of manufacture, with some evaluation of the use of gold-leaf lettering styles by

modern scholars in attempts to identify workshops of gold-glass producers in fourth-century Rome. I then consider the likely purpose of the use of gold-leaf in late antique sandwich gold-glass within the contexts of convivial dining and funerary practice.

Text and images were clearly designed to be read from the inside by the person using the vessel. Though the content of surviving texts cut from gold-leaf is ambivalent, with many texts expressing conventional greetings used in celebration of life events, most of the accompanying images may be matched in other media of indisputable funerary purpose, such as sarcophagi and catacomb paintings. On balance, it seems likely that Roman gold-glass vessels were commissioned for use at funerary feasts and afterwards purposely broken. The transparent, decoloured glass vessel walls were discarded by the diners but

could then have been collected for recycling, while the gold-glass bases were retained and cemented into the closure wall of the tomb.

Like late classical and Hellenistic gold-glass furnishings and other grave goods, gold-leaf decoration applied to transparent glass was apparently intended to bring light to the tomb. Where it survives *in situ*, the setting of a late Roman gold-glass medallion within the plaster seal of a *loculus* burial can tell us whether it was offered as a gift to the deceased or if it acted as a marker to remember the dead and guide the visitor to the burial slot.

Gold and Silver in Late Antique and Early Medieval Book Illumination

Prof. Dr. Harald Wolter-von dem Knesebeck, University of Bonn

In late Antiquity there was a change from a broad range of book-types to the emergence of the parchment codex as the dominant form. This opened up the possibility of a new wealth of light and colour for both pagan and Christian luxury manuscripts through the use of precious materials such as gold and silver, or colours evoking precious material such as purple. This obviously appealed to patrons in both the pagan and Christian spheres. However, the Bible translator Jerome (347-420) criticised the lack of philological quality of the biblical texts in these luxury manuscripts, which is indeed generally true for the early examples. He also rejected their "heavy" bindings, in which a combination of gemstone settings, turetics and ivory carvings created a special splendour and fullness of light. For this reason, bindings are also included here, since the earliest surviving examples, such as the Queen Theodelinde's binding in Monza, provide evidence of material luxury of a Christian book. Book pages may also be compared, such as the canon tables of Gospel fragments in London which were laid

out entirely on leaves coloured with gold (British Library, Cod. Add. 5111).

I will also look at the innovative impetus in Charlemagne's so-called court school associated with the liturgy. In the sumptuous liturgical manuscripts produced there, the Mediterranean style of luxury manuscripts with gold, silver and purple pages is combined with precious bindings for the first time north of the Alps. It is linked to Charlemagne as an outstanding secular patron promoting his liturgical reform, which he pursued with the intellectuals of his time and with book artists closely associated with them. Accordingly the features of sumptuous manuscripts and high philological standards, still separated by Jerome, are combined in the Godescalc Evangelistar produced for the Pope between 781 and 783 (Paris, Bibl. Nat., Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 1203), the first work of the Carolingian reform concerning liturgy. In its dedicatory poem the abundant use of gold and silver, as well as of purple pages, is defended against criticism by interpreting the materials anagogically towards the Kingdom of Heaven.