

MARCO AIMONE (with contributions by ERICA CRUIKSHANK DODD – RIKA GYSELEN – PETER NORTHOVER – JACK OGDEN), *The Wyvern Collection: Byzantine and Sasanian Silver, Enamels and Works of Art*. London: Thames & Hudson 2020. 552 pp. – ISBN 978-0-500-25249-9

• LARA FRENTROP, Universität Heidelberg  
(l.frentrop@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de)

Begun in the 1980s with a focus on Western medieval and Renaissance art, the private Wyvern Collection expanded substantially in the last two decades to include works from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. MARCO AIMONE's catalogue is the third in a series of publications bringing its content to a wider public. Three companion volumes, all by PAUL WILLIAMSON, are dedicated to *Medieval and Renaissance Sculpture and Metalwork* (2018), *Medieval and Later Ivory Carvings and Small Sculpture* (2019), and *Medieval and Renaissance Enamels and Other Works of Art* (2021).

AIMONE's Byzantine and Sasanian volume is divided into two sections. First comes the catalogue itself, which groups objects by material, period, geography, and function: Enamels, Late Roman Vessels, Byzantine Vessels, Sasanian and Early Islamic Vessels, Liturgical and Paraliturgical Objects, Devotional Objects, Furnishings and Architectonic Sculptures, Varia, Later Objects, and a Byzantine/Persian Peacock Plate. This is followed by three technical essays.

The catalogue contains a total of 131 entries for 215 items. Its focus is predominantly on luxury objects of both religious and secular nature (fluid as the boundary between these categories may be) made in the Roman, Byzantine, and Sasanian empires between 300 and 1300 – with slight expansions into other geographical, cultural, and historical areas. Most of the objects catalogued are made of precious metal and enamel; other types of materials include rock crystal, semi-precious stones such as marble and agate, bronze, and glass. Individual entries provide detailed and technically erudite descriptions, including the tools and techniques used. Inscriptions, stamps, and graffiti on artworks are meticulously illustrated, transcribed, and translated.

One of the stand-out pieces, presented in great detail, is the eleventh-century gold and cloisonné enamel *enkolpion* of the *proedros* Konstantinos (cat. no.

8, pp. 38–45). Combined with the numerous illustrations, including two full-page representations, this provides an effective display of the object’s technical virtuosity and dazzling beauty. The collection also includes liturgical and domestic furnishings ranging from sixth-century northern Syrian *transennae* to carved marble tables with figurative friezes. There is a large number of precious metal vessels intended for the houses of the wealthy, such as a spectacular ‘mystery cult hoard’ of the fourth century that comprises a *missorium* (large plate), an ewer, a pyxis, and a lanx and is decorated with Dionysiac imagery and scenes of the cult of an unidentified fertility goddess (cat. nos. 24a–d, pp. 85–99, 12 ill.). Displaying the wealth, sophistication, and taste of their owners, such tableware is complemented by precious metal plates, bowls, and drinking vessels bearing religious imagery and inscriptions, and used in some cases during the liturgy. Other objects for public and private devotions include a sixth-century glass jug from northern Syria, probably an *eulogia* for contact relics of a stylite saint (cat. no. 87, p. 303), and a mid-eleventh-century silver processional cross (cat. no. 80, pp. 281–286) decorated with repoussé and chased images of Christ, the Virgin, and saints, and bearing an inscription declaring the cross the ‘work of (...) Mark, monk and priest of Loiparos’. More unexpected additions to the catalogue include the tenth-century gravestone of Basilissa from Córdoba, with a Mozarabic inscription. A bulla of Patriarch Gregory V (1797) and a hanging cross and eucharistic cup (second half of the twentieth century) showcase the reception of Byzantine culture, and medieval culture more generally, in the modern eastern Mediterranean.

A separate chapter (cat. no. 31, pp. 404–411) discusses a silver and silver-gilt plate decorated with a large, frontally-placed peacock worked in high relief, with its chased feathers spread out behind it. Placed under the heading ‘Byzantine Empire, or Sasanian Empire, or Islamic Iran, 6th–10th century (?)’ (p. 406), the object clearly defied attempts at historical, geographical, and cultural categorization. Instead, its manufacture and iconography highlight cross-cultural exchanges along the Silk Road during the period. Its unusual production technique is illustrated with a diagram; close-up photography reveals some astonishing details.

The catalogue proper is supplemented with essays exploring inlaid enamels (JACK OGDEN), the technical analysis of silver vessels (PETER NORTH-OVER), and silver objects with stamps (ERICA CRUIKSHANK DODD with MARCO AIMONE).

OGDEN discusses the different techniques – four, to be precise – used in

the making of Byzantine enamels. He notes that the terms '*cloisonné*' and '*champlevé*' are of little use with reference to Byzantine objects, which tend to admix both techniques, so 'inlaid enamels' is to be preferred. The process is explained from start to finish, beginning with the gold basis and ending with the preparation and application of the enamel itself. Each form of construction is illustrated with diagrams and with details of objects from the catalogue (altogether, the brief essay includes 34 figures), with long image captions further clarifying the process of production.

NORTHOVER provides a metallurgical analysis of forty-six samples from the Wyvern Collection, relating these to published samples from other collections. Scattergrams show the relative weight of different metal compositions in the Wyvern dataset, distinguished by period, function, and date. This is contextualised with datasets from other groups of Late Roman, Byzantine, and Sasanian metalwork to highlight that the Wyvern objects are 'fully representative of the practice of silversmiths in the Late Roman, Byzantine and Sasanian empires' and 'underline the continuity of practice between the later Roman and Byzantine states' (p. 455).

CRUIKSHANK DODD and AIMONE survey the ten silver vessels from the late fourth to the late seventh century that have been stamped in order to guarantee the quality of their metal. Such stamps indicate an object's probable place of manufacture and date. The authors provide an overview and history of the practices of stamping, anchoring this on objects from the Collection, with a particular focus on the stamps of individual Late Antique emperors. The stamped Wyvern objects visualise 'the change from pagan to Christian artistic expression over three centuries' and 'offer new and unexpected insights into the control system for precious metal developed in the first centuries of the Byzantine Empire' (p. 473).

The catalogue is beautifully produced and excels in terms of detailed description and technical analysis. Works are contextualised visually and materially through comparison with similar techniques or iconography on items in other collections. An archaeologist by training, AIMONE has expertise in the architecture, metalwork, and epigraphy of the late antique and medieval periods. His disciplinary and thematic specialisation are evident in the technical virtuosity of his descriptions, but also in the fact that entries for objects that fall outside of his area of expertise are noticeably shorter. On the whole, the entries stay largely descriptive, with only little cultural, social, or art historical analysis. As such, the volume lays a solid basis for further work by specialists in other fields.

One area that invites further attention is that of the cross-cultural and cross-period analysis of the Wyvern Collection's works in precious metals and enamel. Considering that Byzantine and Roman objects were brought into the Collection to serve as comparanda or contextualisation for the western Medieval and Renaissance material, this promises to be a fruitful avenue of approach both within the Byzantine and Sasanian parts of the Collection, and across the Collection more widely. A gorgeous Justinianic plate shows at its centre the gilt bust of a personification of Africa, surrounded by silver swirls that suggest the movements of a river, the Nile, teeming with golden fish and ducks (cat. no. 36, pp. 146–149). The catalogue entry considers exchange between Persian metalworking on the one hand, and objects produced in the Byzantine empire on the other.<sup>1</sup> The plate's similarity to a Sasanian plate in the Collection, made of silver-and silver-gilt and decorated with a 'Nilotic scene' (cat. no. 53, pp. 202–205) is noted in the entries for both objects, but not explored in depth. The Justinianic plate's probable findspot in Iran further opens the object up to discussion of cross-cultural exchange and reception between Byzantium and Iran, encapsulated by the object bearing both Byzantine stamps within the foot-ring and a Middle Persian inscription on the outside of the foot-ring.

The catalogue expands the range of known Middle Byzantine silver cups (which previously consisted of *Župan* Sivin's cup from Preslav, one from the 'Dune Treasure' discovered in Gotland, and the cup of Theodore Tourkles from the western Urals) by featuring a tenth-century silver-gilt cup later converted into a censer (cat. no. 41, pp. 163–165). The small piece is decorated with roundels showing griffins, a goat, and a cheetah, interspersed by a band of vegetal ornament framed by palmettes. An inscription round the rim asks for the divine protection of its owner Nikolaos. This short prayer, combined with the size and shape of the cup, indicates that the object was designed as an individual drinking vessel. The catalogue entry however does overlook to mention another significant example of Middle Byzantine silver drinking vessels, an enamel cup from the Chungul Kurgan.<sup>2</sup>

For a group of silver and silver-gilt dishes made in Byzantium in the second

---

1. AIMONE's avowal in the introduction that the text of the catalogue has been translated from his native Italian might explain the (recurring) use of terminology that, at least in the fields of art history and Byzantine studies, is no longer current – from mentions of 'influence' between cultures, to the outdated binary of centre and province and the association of Byzantium with the 'dark ages' and decline.

2. See WARREN WOODFIN, *Within a Budding Grove. Dancers, Gardens, and the Enamel Cup from the Chungul Kurgan*. *The Art Bulletin* 98.2 (2016) pp. 151–180.

half of the eleventh or the twelfth century and decorated with armed men on horses, leaf lattices, and an inscription naming the one-time owner of the vessels, the proedros Constantine Alanos, the catalogue presents the convincing argument that they were part of the same deposit as three objects in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Izgirli Treasure),<sup>3</sup> and eight plates and dishes in the Benaki Museum, Athens.<sup>4</sup> It expands the number of objects known to have belonged to this Hoard of Constantine Alanos by adding another plate to the corpus, bringing the number of plates and dishes from the hoard in the Wyvern Collection to seven (cat. nos. 42 and 43a–f, pp. 166–175).

The catalogue features many previously unpublished and unstudied objects, and thus significantly enlarges the body of material known and accessible to scholars. It provides an important foundation for further research on works in the Wyvern Collection, which are thoroughly documented and beautifully presented.

#### **Keywords**

Wyvern Collection, Late antiquity, Byzantine empire, Roman empire, Sasanian empire, enamels, metalwork, silver, gold

---

3. GASTON MIGEON, *Orfèverie d'argent de style oriental trouvée en Bulgarie*. *Syria* 3 (1922) pp. 141–144.

4. ANNA BALLIAN – ANASTASIA DRANDAKI, *A Middle Byzantine Silver Treasure*. *Benaki Museum* 3 (2003) pp. 47–80.