
LARA FRENTROP, *The Art of Dining in Medieval Byzantium* (Studies in Byzantine Cultural History). Abingdon – New York: Routledge 2023. 188 pp., 18 b/w figures. — ISBN 978-0-36786-001-1

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LARA FRENTROP's book evolved from her doctoral thesis 'The Art of Dining in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Byzantium' and examines middle Byzantine ceramic and metal vessels between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Various issues concerning food consumption, banquets, death, sin, glory, and hierarchy emerge through her study.

The subject is introduced by means of a silver bowl acquired in the Siberian village of Berezovo,¹ kept now in the State Hermitage Museum, and decorated with 164 images mostly related to Byzantine court life and entertainment.² FRENTROP views this vessel as 'part of the art of dining' itself (p. 2): she thus makes her readers vicarious participants in the middle Byzantine banquets and at the same time discusses references that decorated tableware made, beyond dining, towards ideology, ethics, and politics.

FRENTROP's first chapter, 'A Taste of Novelty' (pp. 14–32), examines middle-Byzantine pottery. The eleventh century is marked by changes in ceramic vessels, such as increased size and the use of glazing. This resulted from changes in the eating habits of the Byzantines, which are also reflected in the decoration of tableware. It often bore depictions of the animals consumed, such as fish or hares. Hybrid creatures also appeared, representing some culinary novelties introduced during that period. FRENTROP mentions a twelfth-century glazed ceramic bowl from Corinth, depicting a fish, an ostrich, and a Siren, and discusses its decoration as a comment on the food actually served, as well as, given that fish was considered a delicacy

1. Byzantine silver came to this region by way of Novgorod, in exchange for furs: ALEKSEI A. GIPPIUS, К интерпретации надписи на Березовской чаше. In: Звучат лишь письмена: К юбилею А. А. Медынцева. Moscow 2019, pp. 119–124, at p. 123.

2. VLADISLAV PETROVICH DARKEVICH, Светское искусство Византии: Произведения византийского художественного ремесла в Восточной Европе X–XIII века. Moscow 1975, p. 81.

and ostrich eggs a luxury, the food that diners would like to be offered – thus presenting dietary aspirations rather than reality.³

Information about various kinds of victuals fashionable in medieval Byzantium can be gleaned not only from tableware decoration but also from medieval literature. There could be fruit and vegetables grown in a specific way, and meat and fish transported from far away. The distinctiveness of prestigious food is discussed thoroughly in the first chapter of the book, with references to texts such as the *Geoponika*, Liudprand of Cremona's *Embassy*, the letters of Michael Italikos, the novels *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eumathios Makrembolites and *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* by Theodore Prodromos, etc. Combined study of art and literature shows certain changes in the perception of food during the middle Byzantine period. These changes are reflected in glazed ceramics.

'The Theater of Dining: Splendor and Performance', the book's second chapter (pp. 33–55), refers to banquets as 'multi-sensory theater' (p. 33). *FRENTROP* focuses on three specimens of twelfth-century Byzantine metalwork and pottery: the silver lid of a now-lost vessel,⁴ the aforesaid Bere-zovo bowl, and a fragment from a chafing dish excavated at Corinth. A common feature of these artefacts is their decoration with entertainment scenes, including musicians, dancers and acrobats. The purpose of tableware was to enhance the splendor of dining. This goal was achieved both by the physical and visual characteristics of objects and through the way they were presented at the table. *FRENTROP* refers to ceramic tableware, whose glazing and decoration produced an impressive visual effect. Regarding the serving of food, various references to banquets that took place in the imperial palace are given. The 'theatre of dining' also featured entertainment such as music, dance, and acrobatics. Music was also a means of organizing a banquet. On tableware, it is represented by centaurs playing an instrument and symbolizing the morally elevating power of music. Dancers were associated with amusement even if, in many cases, their morality was deemed questionable. Finally, the acrobats performed in many places, from

3. However, interpretations of the bowl's decoration can vary. For instance, the scene could be considered humorous and ironic, depicting the predator becoming prey, as it might depict a Siren preying on a waterbird, which was itself about to prey on a fish: HELEN C. EVANS – WILLIAM D. WIXOM (eds), *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261*. New York 1997, pp. 267–268.

4. This silver lid, which dates to the twelve century and was also found in Siberia, is now in the State Hermitage Museum: DARKEVICH, *Светское искусство Византии*, p. 103.

the Hippodrome to the imperial palace and private houses. FRENTRÖP's analysis shows the dual character of their performance, which could have comic and moral elevating effects at the same time.

The 'theater of dining' also involved the diners themselves, since rhetorical performances formed part of many banquets. This is the subject of FRENTRÖP's third chapter, 'Word, Image and Intellect: Rhetoric and Display at Table' (pp. 56–77). Pottery and metal tableware could bear ambiguous representations and inscriptions. These provided a visual and intellectual stimulus for diners, who would interpret them according to their knowledge and experiences, using various rhetorical techniques. FRENTRÖP discusses various cases of ambiguity in the decoration of the metal vessels from Vilgort, Berezovo, and Basilevsky's collection. For example, a scene on the inside of the Vilgort cup could be interpreted either as David with the personification of Melody, or as Digenes Akrites.

A common Byzantine cultural practice was the contemplation of sin and death, even during dining. The book's fourth chapter, 'Bad Taste' (pp. 72–102), discusses the importance of recalling death and the Last Judgment, together with the consequences that food consumption could have for the human body and soul. Representations related to sin and the Last Judgment are found on numerous dining vessels. FRENTRÖP mentions, for instance, a fragmentary Corinthian chafing dish decorated with a monkey in the shape of a trumpet: in medieval Western Europe, monkeys stood for indulgence and human sin, while trumpets signified the Last Judgment. Another example is a silver bowl inscribed with the name of a certain Theodore Tourkeles and carrying depictions that reminded its owner of the punishment for committing a sin. Thus, tableware reinforced reflections on morality and mortality, inviting banqueters to stick to the path of virtue. Moralizing images were essential, because consumption of food could lead to carnal desires. Therefore, rules had to be followed concerning the food that should be eaten, good table manners, and avoidance of gluttony.

'Manly Men, Heroic Hunters' (pp. 103–117), the book's fifth chapter, focuses on various heroic scenes. The theme was quite popular in middle Byzantine tableware and was related to the concept of the ideal warrior and hunter, developed at the late eleventh century. Images originally involved Alexander the Great, but in the middle Byzantine period often referred to Digenes Akrites, too. Vessels such as the bowls from Vilgort and from Basilevsky's collection are also connected to the ideal hunter. Hunting was not only a necessity, but also a symbol of status and a kind of substitute for

warfare. The ideal hunter and warrior was the emperor himself.⁵ For instance, FRENTROP mentions a hunting scene which decorated the church of the Forty Martyrs in Constantinople. Similar depictions are found on luxurious tableware, e.g. the plates from the hoard of Constantine Alanos, *proedros*,⁶ probably a member of the military elite. Moreover, representations of hunting, hunters, and warriors could decorate objects belonging to the lower classes, because such images signalled an identity either desired or real.

The last chapter, ‘The Display of Triumph or: How a Plate Can Make You Powerful’ (pp. 118–135), refers to tableware as a means of displaying power. Color or weight, as well as the way they were presented, contributed to this purpose. Dishes and bowls decorated with scenes of military triumph were often gifted to visitors with the purpose of demonstrating the emperor’s power and a host’s hierarchical relationship with his guest. References to such luxurious tableware are numerous, even if the preserved objects are few. For instance, the bowl from Basilevsky’s collection bears a representation of the Ascension of Alexander the Great, a scene with eschatological and triumphal character. Depictions of musicians, dancers, and acrobats on other vessels carry a similar message. Triumph and power were displayed at table by various means: from the menu itself to the dining rituals.

In conclusion, FRENTROP has meticulously studied a selection of ceramic and metal vessels that reveal various aspects of life in medieval Byzantium: the food consumed, as well as the diners’ ambitions, fears, and desires. The intellectual concerns of those who used such vessels included rarity and hybridity, entertainment, rhetorical ambiguity, contemplation of death, fear

5. Liudprand of Cremona mentions that he was invited by the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas to his hunting park and shown the emperor’s onagers; this was done in order to impress the ambassador: PAOLO SQUATRITI (ed. / tr.), *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*. Washington DC 2007, pp. 260–262.

6. The Hoard of Constantine Alanos has a complex history on which MARCO AIMONE recently shed light. It was studied thoroughly by ANNA BALLIAN and ANASTASIA DRANDAKI. It is a set of silver gilded dishes which date to the twelfth century, and it probably consists of three pieces located in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, seven in the Benaki Museum in Athens, and seven in the Wyvern Collection in London. See M. AIMONE, *The Wyvern Collection: Byzantine and Sasanian Silver Enamels and Works of Art*. London 2020, pp. 166–175; ANNA BALLIAN – ANASTASIA DRANDAKI, *A Middle Byzantine Silver Treasure*. *Benaki Museum* 3 (2003) pp. 47–80; GASTON MIGEON, *Orfèvrerie d’argent de style oriental trouvée en Bulgarie*. *Syria* 3.2 (1922) pp. 141–144; ALEXANDRE DEGRAND, *Le trésor d’Izgirli*. *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions* 47 (1903) pp. 390–396.

of punishment, victory, and glory. These meanings coexisted not only upon the vessels and at the banquets, but also in people's minds. Significantly, FRENTROP does not consider ambiguity an obstacle, but rather sees it as an opportunity for scholarly reflection. Her *Art of Dining in Medieval Byzantium* is a well-structured study of middle Byzantine material culture and literature, introducing us to the life, ideas, fears, and hopes of people in the past. The book will be of interest not only to scholars but to all those generally interested in the Middle Ages.

Keywords

dining; banquets; tableware; pottery; metalwork