

One More μουζίκιον

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For Cyril Mango

SOME YEARS AGO Gary Vikan and I discussed in this journal a rare late Greek word used by the spiritual writer John Moschus (ca 550–634), the author of a collection of edifying and entertaining stories about the lives of monks and solitaries in various parts of the Near East.¹ The word was μουζίκιον, which, up to that point, was attested in the lexica from one of the chapters of Moschus and was not known from any other source. The meaning was not immediately obvious and, on the basis of the single instance, the lexicographers who paid any attention to it had come up with different interpretations: for Du Cange it was “a small cloth,” but Lampe opted for “box inlaid with mosaic.”²

We were able to restore another instance of the term in a different story of the Moschus collection and proceeded from the contents of the two passages to reconsider the meanings proposed by earlier scholars. Du Cange’s idea of “cloth” could not be kept and though Lampe’s “box” was acceptable, the notion of “inlaid with mosaic” had to go because it was based on a questionable etymology. Though not able to resolve the issue of the word’s origin, we did confidently conclude that “μουζίκιον denotes a small box for keeping precious objects.” In addition we went on to make a case for considering the possibility that, as a genre of object, the ivory pyxis and the μουζίκιον may have been the same thing.

Recently some new evidence has come to light and it is the purpose of this brief report to bring the story up to date and to modify the earlier conclusions of Duffy and Vikan.

¹ “A Small Box in John Moschus,” *GRBS* 24 (1983) 93–99.

² Du Cange, *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae graecitatis* (Lyon 1688; repr. Graz 1958) *s.v.* (following the entry for Μούσα); G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961) *s.v.*

For their contribution to the first volume of the new Dumbarton Oaks series *Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation*, Jeffrey Featherstone and Cyril Mango have collaborated to provide an annotated English version of the *Life of St Matrona of Perge*, a text considered to have been written sometime before the middle of the sixth century.³ In chapter 42 of this document, as Mango points out in a footnote (56 n.104), we have another occurrence of μουζίκιον in a part of the story involving the theft of money from a pious noblewoman, Athanasia, which is reported to her by her stewardess; the thief, a servant, was put up to the deed by the lady's cash-hungry husband. In view of the interest of the passage and because it is not reproduced in Featherstone-Mango, it might be useful to cite the relevant portions of the Greek here:

μηνύεται αὐτῇ παρὰ τῆς μειζοτέρας αὐτῆς ... ὅτι Καλλοπόδιος ὁ παῖς διαρρήξας ὀπισθεν τὸ μουζίκιον καὶ βαλλάντιον χρυσίου κεκλοφῶς ἀφανῆς ἐγένετο. ταῦτα ἀκούσασα ἡ μακαρία Ἀθανασία καὶ τῷ θεῷ τὸ πᾶν ἀναθεῖσα, ὡς εἶχεν σπουδαία ἦλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς· τὸ δὲ χρυσίον τοῦτο κατ' ἐπιτροπὴν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς ὁ παῖς ἀπεσύλησεν.... προστάσσει τῷ παιδί διαναρρήξαντα τὸ σκευρίον τὸ ἀπαντοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ βαλλάντιον ἐπάραντα κατελθεῖν· τοῦ οὖν παιδὸς ἐπ' ὤμων ἔχοντος τὸ χρυσίον τὸ κεκλεμμένον καὶ ὀπισθεν ἐξέχοντος κατερχομένου ἐν τοῖς σκαλίοις καὶ τοῦ δεσπότη αὐτοῦ ἐπακολουθοῦντος, ἀπαντήσασα αὐτὸν ἡ μειζοτέρα καὶ ἐξ ὑποψίας κρίναςα τὸ δρασθῆν, ἐπέσχεν μὲν τὸν παῖδα καὶ ἐπέβαλε τὴν χεῖρα εἰς τὸ φερόμενον βαλλάντιον.⁴

The story is straightforward enough and needs little commentary except for three details, only the second of which is considered explicitly in Mango's footnote. First, this particular

³ In A.-M. Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium* (Washington 1996) 13–64: translation by Featherstone with introduction and notes by Mango.

⁴ AASS, *Novembris* III (repr. Brussels 1910) 790–813 at 808: "She was informed by her chief stewardess ... that the servant Kallopodios had broken into the back side of the money chest and, having stolen a bag of gold, had run off. Hearing this and referring everything to God, the blessed Athanasia returned to her house as quickly as she could. Now, the servant had stolen this gold on the instruction of her husband ... he ordered the servant to break into the money chest, take in his hands the bag he found in it, and come down <from the house>. Now, as the servant came down the stairs, carrying on his shoulders the <bag of> stolen money bulging out from behind, with his master following him, he met the stewardess; and suspecting what had happened, she stopped the servant and put her hand on the bag he was carrying" (tr. Featherstone 56).

μουζίκιον must have been fitted with a lock, because the servant had to break into it from behind; perhaps locks were a regular feature of μουζίκια? Second, if he was obliged or saw fit to carry the bag of money on his back, the container that guarded that bag cannot have been small. Third, the text gives us a synonym for the object, namely τὸ σκευρίον, itself an equal rarity but one that keeps us squarely in the realm of money and security. In the single instance cited by Lampe⁵ it is used of a money-box large enough to hold at least five hundred coins. Various forms of this same term are found also in a Byzantine recension of the Alexander Romance. In chapter 10 emissaries are sent by Alexander to the King of Persia bringing with them, among other things, two “chests” for collecting an annual tribute.⁶

The new evidence, then, from the *Life of Matrona* is very revealing and the logical conclusion may be succinctly expressed in Mango’s words (56 n.104): “It can now be said that a μουζίκιον was specifically a strongbox for keeping valuables and that it could be, as here, of some size. It was not a pyxis.”

At this point we would like to draw attention to yet another occurrence of the word, hidden from general view, which will have a bearing on the notion that a μουζίκιον was a sizeable object and will also raise a possible question about the exact definition. The source of the new sighting is John Malalas’ world chronicle, composed sometime in the last third of the sixth century, in a section of book 9 describing Cleopatra’s death after her capture by Augustus Octavian, as the chronicler styles him. In the standard Bonn edition, based on the only surviving copy of the Greek text,⁷ the immediately relevant section is worded as follows: ἦτις Κλεοπάτρα ἀπεχρήσατο

⁵ The source is *The Life of Symeon the Fool* by Leontius of Neapolis (7th c.), now available in the edition of A.-J. Festugière and L. Rydén, *Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre* (Paris 1974); the relevant section at p.95, 13–18 (=PG XCIII 1733c).

⁶ Anon. Byz. *Vita Alexandri Regis Macedonum*, ed. J. Trumpf (Stuttgart 1974). In that single segment of recension ε (pp.37f) the word for the containers, on the four occasions they are mentioned, is given in three different forms: σκευρός, σκευρίον, and σκεμβρός; these in turn will all be closely related to the earlier σκευάριον (itself from σκευός), which, by contrast, seems to have been used broadly from Classical times for various types of utensils or vessels, but not specifically for holders of valuables like money.

⁷ *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn 1831), who relied on earlier editions based on the unique Oxford copy of the Baroccianus 182 (late 11th[?] c.).

ἑαυτῇ, ἀπὸ ἀσπίδος κρουσθεῖσα ἐτελεύτα· ἐβάσταζε γὰρ ἀσπίδας καὶ ἄλλα ἔρπετὰ εἰς τὰ πλοῖα διὰ τὸν πόλεμον. The first part of the death-notice, reporting suicide by snakebite, will have a familiar ring for the reader, though the second half might sound a bit puzzling, especially for the expert on Cleopatra's biography. In addition, however, the Bonn text here may not represent the full original of Malalas, because another Greek witness for the same episode gives a further element of information; in this source the second phrase reads: ἐβάσταζε γὰρ ἀσπίδας ἐν μουζικίοις καὶ ἄλλα ἔρπετὰ εἰς τὰ πλοῖα διὰ τὸν πόλεμον (*De insidiis* p.156 de Boor).

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of how precisely one might imagine those containers as transport devices for reptiles, we should first consider what claim to legitimacy the words ἐν μουζικίοις have. Now, it has long been recognized that the text of the chronicle as preserved in the Oxford manuscript is less than the complete original in several respects, and it is equally accepted that it may be reliably supplemented with the help of related documents.⁸ One of these is the Greek witness just quoted, a set of excerpts put together verbatim from Malalas and other writers for the encyclopedia compiled under the auspices of Emperor Constantine VII (945–959). Another very important source for reconstruction of the wording of the chronicle is the medieval Slavonic version edited by V. M. Istrin—the most extensive witness to Malalas after the Oxford manuscript and, like the *De insidiis*, based on a Greek version fuller than that found in the Barocci copy.⁹ It is virtually certain, then, that when these two documents agree with each other, they represent a truer form of the chronicle than Baroccianus 182. For the passage in question the Slavic has: “But Cleopatra killing herself, died by letting an asp poison her. They carried asps and other snakes in cases on the ships for military” (*sic*).¹⁰

⁸ The whole subject of the survival of Malalas in Greek and other languages is expertly presented in E. Jeffreys, ed., *Studies in John Malalas* (Sydney 1990) ch. 9: part 1 by Jeffreys, “Malalas in Greek”; part 2 by S. Franklin, “Malalas in Slavonic.”

⁹ Istrin's edition of the reconstructed Slavonic version, *Khronika Ioanna Malaly v slavyanskom perevode*, was published in nine installments (1897–1914; see Franklin [*supra* n. 8] 277) and is now available in a one-volume format: ed. M. I Chernysheva (Moscow 1994).

¹⁰ Tr. M. Spinka 28, who, with G. Downey, produced an English version of some books: *Chronicle of John Malalas: Books VIII–XVIII, translated from the Church Slavonic* (Chicago 1940).

The conclusion that the words ἐν μουζικίοις must have been written by Malalas would appear to be beyond dispute.¹¹ That solves one problem.

But what about the meaning? Given the nature of the other contexts in which we find μουζίκιον, it is a little surprising to see how it is used here in Malalas. Any number of explanations could be attempted, none of them likely to be very satisfactory. As a minimal approach we will be content with the following observations.

The chronicle's account of the battle of Actium (31 B.C.) and its aftermath is peculiar: in its present form it seems to make Cleopatra die in Epirus after Octavian's victory rather than later in Egypt following the capture of Alexandria. In view of that scenario Malalas, or his source, in the interest of plausible storytelling needed to explain how Cleopatra, far from home, came to have a cobra available for her suicide; hence the sentence uniquely attested by Malalas: "for she brought with her cobras and other reptiles in μουζίκια on the ships on account of the war."¹²

So what could Malalas have imagined these μουζίκια to be (if he paid attention to the point at all)? Two lines of thought suggest themselves. One would be that μουζίκιον is used in the strict sense of a money-box or chest for valuables. In that event it could be speculated that, as such, these boxes were part of the effort to conceal the presence of the reptiles. In Malalas, as in other versions of this famous episode, it is stressed that Cleopatra was under close guard during her captivity, precisely to prevent the action that she eventually managed to take. In other accounts the cobra(s) are smuggled in to her concealed in a basket or a water-jar.¹³ It is conceivable that, by a process of confusion or misunderstanding of earlier sources, the boxes have here come somehow to play a rôle similar to that of the other camouflage containers.

¹¹ It should be clearly acknowledged that this piece of restoration was already made in Alexander Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg's partial edition with commentary: *Die römische Kaisergeschichte bei Malalas: Griechischer Text der Bücher IX–XII und Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart 1931) 6.

¹² Cf. von Stauffenberg's observations on the passage (*supra* n.11: 147), who also makes an intriguing connection with Cassius Dio 51.11 on Cleopatra's death (εἶχε δὲ καὶ ἀσπίδας ἄλλα τε ἕρπετὰ ἐφ' ἑαυτῇ, προπειραθεῖσα αὐτῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις, ὄντινα τρόπον ἕκαστόν σφων ἀποκτινύσσι), but wisely foregoes the effort to explore the intermediate stages by which the one description may have descended from the other.

¹³ E.g. Plutarch (*Ant.* 85–86) mentions both; Dio (51.14) has the water-jar version as well as "hidden in some flowers," which is likely to depend on a basket story.

An alternative approach would be to get away from the death scene altogether and see these objects as only connected with conveyance on the ships. In that case it could be suggested that *μουζίκιον* in its day was also used in a more generic sense of "box," "container," "trunk," whose function was not restricted to guarding money or similar valuables.¹⁴

Given the nature of the evidence provided by this peculiar passage of Malalas, it would not serve any useful purpose to continue speculating. The rôle assigned in the chronicle to the *μουζίκια*, however, allows one fairly solid conclusion that returns us to our starting point. Seeing that the Egyptian cobra is not a small snake, but measures anywhere from four to seventeen feet, a further proof is thereby provided that a *μουζίκιον*, whether as a holder of valuables or as a more general container, was not "a small box" (Duffy/Vikan), but indeed an object "of some size" (Mango).¹⁵

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¹⁴ It would be a bit much to expect from the Slavonic version any help in solving the precise issue, and in fact it is not very enlightening for this purpose, as it employs the general term *sosyd* ("vessel," "container") for the objects in question. That fact could be used to argue in favor of a more generic meaning for *μουζίκιον*, but it is hardly a reliable indication.

¹⁵ *Postscript*: After this paper went to press, a browse in the *LSJ* Revised Supplement (Oxford 1996) revealed a new entry for *μουζίκιον*, with the assigned meaning "box inlaid with mosaic," *i.e.*, as in Lampe (a retrograde step; see *supra* 413). The lexicon cites D. G. Martinez, "A Memorandum with *μουζίκιον* and *Σαίτιον*," *ZPE* 93 (1992) 213-18, an 11-line Colorado papyrus, of perhaps the fifth century, consisting of a bare list of miscellaneous household items including two mentions of *μουζίκιον* (l.4, *περὶ τοῦ μουζικίου*, and l.7, *περὶ τοῦ μικροῦ μουζικίου*). In a brief but perceptive commentary on the term (214), the author covers all the known occurrences except that in the *Life of St Matrona*. Because of the baldness of the papyrus list he has to conclude, "Except for the obvious point that they came in different sizes, the Colorado papyrus does nothing to illumine our understanding of the nature of *μουζίκια*." He does, however, raise the interesting possibility that the word may owe its origin to the name of a city or a town.