A Small Box in John Moschus

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I

JOHN MOSCHUS (ca 550–634) was a monk and spiritual writer whose one surviving work, the Pratum Spirituale,\(^1\) became a very popular manual of devotional reading, especially in monasteries, throughout the Byzantine world. Composed probably in the second decade of the seventh century, the work consists of a long series of edifying stories about monks and their lives in many parts of the Near East, and it provides a wealth of information on religious and social conditions in that part of the Empire during the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

One of the distinguishing features of the Pratum is its language; Moschus writes Greek that tends towards the colloquial, and he is one of a handful of authors who bring us close to the Byzantine vernacular of the period.\(^2\) This informal style allows him to admit certain words from everyday language which, if writing in a more elevated manner, he would likely avoid. The present note concerns one such term which will be shown to occur in two passages of the Pratum and whose meaning, despite our ignorance of the etymology, can be established with more confidence than heretofore.

In ch. 203 (3093A–C Migne) we are told the story of a gem-cutter who embarks on a business trip by boat, accompanied by his children, taking with him precious stones and pearls. During the voyage he is warned that the sailors are plotting to throw him overboard in order to get the gems~\(^1\) whereupon he commands his children to fetch the stones and toss them into the sea, thereby frustrating the evil intentions of the crew. According to the Greek text, the man orders the children to fetch the gems by saying φέρετε τά μον ζικία. An

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\(^1\) Also known as the Leimon or Leimonarion or Neos Paradeisos. The text is in Migne, \textit{PG} 87(3),2852–3112; a new edition is expected from Dr P. Pattenden. For a good recent account of Moschus and his work see H. Chadwick, “John Moschus and his Friend Sophronius the Sophist,” \textit{JThS} 25 (1974) 41–74, reprinted in his \textit{History and Thought in the Early Church} (London 1982).

accompanying note in Migne\textsuperscript{8} explains that the word \textit{ζικία} is unattested and that, to judge by the Latin version \textit{capsulas},\textsuperscript{4} it may be a mistake for \textit{βικία}.\textsuperscript{5} The attempt at emendation is admirable, in view of the context, but it is not the correct one.

A more attentive ear to the man’s words would detect something strange. Would a Greek speaker, especially in the colloquial atmosphere favored by Moschus, be likely to say \textit{φέρετε τά μου \ζικία}?

Hardly: then as now one would expect \textit{φέρετε τά \ζικία μου}. The text, therefore, is faulty. But the problem is not deep-seated, for it can be removed by a slight shift of the elements, namely by reading \textit{φέρετε τά μουζίκα}.\textsuperscript{6} This again confronts us with a rare word, \textit{μουζίκα}, but fortunately it is attested twice in another story of the same John Moschus, and apart from that in no other Greek author. The term appears in ch. 79 of the \textit{Pratum}:

\begin{quote}
παραγενήσεως εἰς Σελεύκειαν τὴν πρὸς Ἀντώνιους, συνετύχομεν τῷ ἄββα Θεοδώρῳ ἐπισκόπῳ τῆς αὐτῆς Σελευκείας πόλεως καὶ διηγήσατο ἡμᾶς λέγον ὅτι, “Γέγονεν ἐπὶ τοῦ μακαρίου Διονυσίου τοῦ πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἐπισκόπου ταύτης τῆς πόλεως τοῦ τοιούτου ἡν τῷ ἀνήρ πραγματεύτης ἐνταῦθα πάνω εὐλαβής καὶ πλούσιος· ἦν δὲ αἵρετος τῶν Σεβήρου δογμάτων, ἔχων δὲ πιστικὸν κοινωνούντα τῇ ἁγίᾳ καθολικῇ καὶ ἀποστολικῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. οὕτος ὁ πιστικὸς κατά τὸ ἐθος τῆς χώρας ἔλαβεν κοινωνίαν τῇ ἁγίᾳ πέμπτη, καὶ βαλὼν αὐτὴν ἐν μονζικῷ, ἀπέθετο ἐν τῷ ἱδίῳ ἀρμαρίῳ. συνεβή δὲ μετὰ τὸ ἁγιὸν πάσχα τῶν πιστικῶν πεμφθήναι εἰς Κωνσταντινούπολει διὰ πραγματείαν, ἔστατα κατὰ λήπθην τὰς ἁγίας κοινωνίας ἐν τῷ ἀρμαρίῳ αὐτοῦ. δὲ δεῦκεν δὲ τὸ κλείδον τοῦ ἁρμαρίου τῷ αὐθεντῇ. ἐν μα' ὅν ἀνοίξει τὸ ἁρμαρίον ὁ αὐθεντής εὑρεν τὸ μονζίκαν ἔχον τὰς ἁγίας κοινωνίας . . .”
\end{quote}

After arriving at Seleucia near Antioch we met with abbot Theodore, the bishop of the same Seleucia, who told us a story, saying, “The following happened in the time of blessed Dionysius my predecessor as bishop of this city. There was a certain businessman here, very devout and rich, who belonged to the heresy of Severus; he had an agent who was a member of the holy catholic and apostolic church. This agent, following the local custom, would

\textsuperscript{8} The note is taken over from the seventeenth-century edition of Moschus by J. B. Cotelier.

\textsuperscript{4} The Latin translation printed in Migne is the work of the fifteenth-century humanist Ambrogio Traversari.

\textsuperscript{5} That is, a diminutive of οὗ βίκος (jar, cask). Lampe, \textit{Patristic Greek Lexicon} s.v. ζικίον, evidently accepts this suggestion, listing the one occurrence as an “error for βικίον, vessel, box.”

\textsuperscript{6} We should point out that Migne tacitly changed the accent in ζικία; Cotelier had printed ζίκια.
take communion on Holy Thursday. So having placed it in a mouzi-
kion, he stored it in his own cabinet. Now it happened that after
Easter the agent was sent to Constantinople on business, forgetting
that he had left the holy communion in his cabinet. He had given
the key of the cabinet to his employer, and one day the employer
opened the cabinet and found the mouzikion containing the holy
communion . . . ”7

What is the meaning of μοντζίκιον in this passage? Du Cange8
suggested that it may be a piece of cloth or napkin, and there is
nothing in the description that would make that impossible. In put-
ting forward the idea Du Cange may well have been following the
lead of Traversari, who rendered βαλον αυτην εν μουζικιω by involvit
in lino mundissimo (where the adjective is interpretative) and εφευ
το μουζικιον by inventit linteolum.9 Stephanus has no entry for the
word. Sophocles does, but ventures no explanation. Lampe is more
definite, describing it as a “box inlaid with mosaic.”10

Now that we have recognized a second instance of the word, we
are perhaps in a better position to evaluate it. We can say straight-
away that the possibility of a cloth (Traversari, Du Cange) is more or
less excluded by one detail in the gem-cutter’s story: before the
children bring the μουζικία, the father spreads a piece of linen (ἀπλοὶ
συνδόνα); when the μουζικία arrive, he opens them (ἀνοίξας) and
proceeds to lay out the precious stones before he has them tossed
into the sea. If the stones were already in cloth, would another be
necessary? We should note too the different verbs used for ‘open-
ing’. Lampe’s definition, on the other hand, at least in so far as he
opts for a box, is strengthened by the new passage. From the point of
view of security, boxes would seem much more appropriate for gems.
And, to return to the second story, while linen could be used for
keeping the eucharist, a box would make at least as good sense.
Lampe’s added “inlaid with mosaic,” however, would seem to de-
pend only on the assumption that μουζικιον is derived from the term
for mosaic work (μουσείον or μουσιόν). This is a tempting idea, but

7 2936c–d Migne; only the relevant first half of the story is quoted here. The phrase
ἐλαβεν κοιλωμαν τη αγια πέμπτη could conceivably mean “he would take (sc. home)
communion (sc. to have) for Holy Thursday.” Whatever the precise meaning of the
slightly ambiguous Greek, the second part of the account makes clear that the agent
took home the eucharist in order to have it on hand for Holy Thursday of the following
year.
8 Glossarium s.v. (placed after the entry Μούσιον).
9 Du Cange in his entry Μούσιον specifically mentions Traversari’s capsulas.
10 Stephanus, Thesaurus Graecae Linguae; Sophocles, Greek Lexicon of the Roman and
Byzantine Periods; Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon.
it ignores the linguistic problem created by the letter zeta. The etymology must remain an open question.

We may conclude, then, from the two surviving examples that at the very least μουζίκων denotes a small box for keeping precious objects.

II

Do these passages in Moschus help explain any genre of 'small box for keeping precious objects' extant from the late antique period? The obvious candidate for identification with Moschus' μουζίκων is the ivory pyxis. For decades it has been supposed that those pyxides with Christian iconography were intended for eucharistic or eulogia bread; ch. 79 of the Pratum offers important new evidence from a region and period of the pyxides' manufacture suggesting that there was a demand for such receptacles and indicating plausible circumstances in which they might have been used. Two further points are noteworthy. (1) While most scholars have assumed that ivory pyxides were altar implements, Moschus places his host box within the realm of private piety; this might explain why pyxides do not appear among

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11 Archaeology provides interesting leads but no answers for the etymology of μουζίκων. Linguistic problems aside, Lampe's 'box inlaid with mosaic' is unsatisfactory because no such genre is known from the period. On the other hand, the possibility of some connection with the Muses is inviting, for two reasons: (1) at least one well-known genre of late antique box, the so-called Pannonian caskets, frequently bear bronze relief images of the Muses; (2) Muses, authors, and scroll boxes (the latter usually called capsae or capsulae) are frequently associated in late antique art. A small re-adapted version of such a scroll box, perhaps once decorated with the Muses, might have been called a μουζίκων. Yet here too the problem of zeta applies. For the Pannonian caskets see H. Buschhausen, Die spätrömischen Metallscrinia und frühhchristlichen Reliquiare 1 (Vienna 1971) 9ff nos. A7, 23, 25, 26, 38, 40, 41, 45. For some Muses, authors, and scroll boxes, see K. Weitzmann, ed., Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art (New York 1979) nos. 238–42.

12 W. F. Volbach, Effenbeinarbeiten der Spätantiken und frühen Mittelalters (Mainz 1976) 69ff, 103ff. About one third of the nearly five dozen specimens comprising this series of cylindrical ivory boxes bear pagan themes, the remainder Christian; traditional datings vary from the fourth to the seventh century, while localizations range over a variety of Mediterranean centers from Italy eastward. Neither Du Cange, Lampe, nor Sophocles provides an attestation of the word πυξίς which can be directly linked to Volbach’s ivory boxes. For the antique use of the word see H. Graeven, “Pyxide en os,” MonPiot 6 (1899) 161ff.


14 For evidence more distant in time and place see H. Leclercq, DACL 14.2 (1948) 1983ff s.v. “Pyxide”; also Du Cange s.v. πυξίς.
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the objects portrayed in early Byzantine representation of the divine liturgy.\(^{15}\) (2) For Moschus, consecrated bread was worthy of the same protection as gems; this might explain why so many pyxides (especially those with Christian iconography) bear locks.\(^{16}\)

It is reasonable to suppose that some pagan ivory pyxides (e.g. those with scenes such as Venus and Adonis, Volbach no. 98) may have been used for gems,\(^{17}\) and that some Christian pyxides (e.g. those with the Blessing of the Loaves and Fishes, nos. 165, 166) may have been used for the host.\(^{18}\) It is quite another thing, however, to suppose that the genre they represent was developed specifically in response to those functions—that the ivory pyxis was, depending on its iconography, a jewelry box\(^{19}\) or a box for holy bread.

The world of John Moschus knew several distinctive types of small boxes of idiosyncratic design and function. There were, for example, pen boxes with trays for reeds and wells for ink, medicine boxes with images of healing deities on their sliding lids and tiny compartments for various remedies, relic boxes in the shape of small sarcophagi, and weight boxes with rows of variously proportioned holes suitable only for a specific set of weights.\(^{20}\) That Moschus assigned a single name to objects with two such different functions and contexts strongly implies that his \(\mu\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\omicron\zeta\kappa\alpha\omicron\nu\) was a multi-functional, ‘generic’ box. The same was probably true of the ivory pyxis, for in addition to their possible use for consecrated bread and for gems, there is evidence suggesting that they served also as containers for incense and for offerings:

**Incense.** In early Byzantine art Sts Stephen and Zachariah, and occasionally the Women at the Tomb, hold a censer in one hand and a small domed cylindrical box in the other; such a box, though without a cover, is held by the sacrificing woman on the ivory diptych panel of the Symmachi.\(^{21}\) Not only do ivory pyxides match these

\(^{15}\) As on the Riha and Stuma patens, and in the Rossano Gospels. Rather, it is the paten that is typically used for the host.

\(^{16}\) See Volbach no. 193a for a Christian pyxis with its original lock intact. The box of the Seleucian Christian seems not, however, to have had a lock, as his employer needed only a key to the cabinet in which the \(\mu\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\omicron\zeta\kappa\alpha\omicron\nu\) was kept in order to gain access to the consecrated bread.

\(^{17}\) See Graeven (supra n.12) 163.

\(^{18}\) See L. Kötzcse in Weitzmann (supra n.11) no. 549.

\(^{19}\) Jewelry boxes appear with some frequency in late antique art, and almost invariably they take the form of a rather large rectangular chest with a hinged lid. See Weitzmann (supra n.11) figs. 32, 34, 35.


\(^{21}\) See Weitzmann (supra n.11) no. 557; A. Grabar, *Ampoules de terre sainte* (Paris 1958) Monza 14, Bobbio 20; Volbach no. 55. Compare also the Zachariah miniature in
incense boxes in size and shape, but a few show scenes (such as the
Marys approaching the altar with censers, Volbach no. 177) which are
highly suggestive of such a use, while others show a peculiarity of
design (a semicircular opening at the base, no. 92) which seems to
presuppose the dispensing of incense grains.22

Offerings. One silver pyxis of the sixth century in the St Louis Art
Museum bears the following inscription on its lid: προσφορά Τιμερνης διακο(νίας) το άγιω Στεφάνω, “offering of the Tiberine diaconate to St Stephen.”23 That the weight designation scratched into the
base of this pyxis far exceeds its true weight suggests that the vessel
itself was not the offering but rather the container for a more valuable offering, namely, a donation of precious metal to a church or
monastery dedicated to St Stephen. Some ivory pyxides may likewise
have served as donation boxes, which may explain why so many of
them show one or another scene of offering or sacrifice, whether the
Adoration of the Magi,24 the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes (nos.
165, 166), Habakkuk bringing food to Daniel (162, 167), the Marys
offering incense at the altar (176, 177), the Israelites bringing offerings to the Tabernacle (190), or the Sacrifice of Isaac (161–64).

There are further possible uses for ivory pyxides. Medicine: doctor
saints occasionally hold medicine boxes that look like pyxides;25 moreover, a significant number of extant ivory pyxides show scenes of miraculous healing (e.g. Volbach nos. 182, 187, 194). Relics: some early silver reliquaries look much like ivory pyxides; and there is no
doubt that in both East and West pyxides were used as reliquaries in later centuries.26

22 See St Clair (supra n.13) 127ff; Graeven (supra n.12) 162f; and C. Schneider,
ReallexAntChrist 1 (1950) 63ff s.v. “Acerra.” The silver-gilt censer from the Kumluca
Treasure (E. Akurgal, C. Mango, R. Ettinghausen, Treasures of Turkey [Geneva 1966]
98) is decorated with an infancy cycle much like that found on contemporary ivory
pyxides (e.g. Volbach no. 169). The censer (and presumably the incense-holder) had
an important rôle in private as well as public piety: cf. P. van den Ven, La vie ancienne
de S. Symeon Stylite le Jeune I (Subshagiogr 32 [1962]) 151*.
23 Buschhausen (supra n.11) C3, Weitzmann (supra n.11) no. 573. For προσφορά as
24 Volbach nos. 171, 173, 173a, 199. Recall the Magi on the hem of Theodora’s cloak
in the famous imperial donation mosaic at San Vitale in Ravenna.
25 See S. Pelekanides, Kastoria (Thessaloniki 1953) pl. 266.
26 See Buschhausen (supra n.11) B20; Volbach 77ff; C. Astruc, “L’inventaire dressé
en septembre 1200 du trésor et de la bibliothèque de Patmos,” Travaux et mémoires 8
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The ivory pyxis and the μονήκιον may well have been one and the same; yet even if they were not, each enlarges our understanding of the other. Moreover, both are susceptible to the same definition, ‘a small box for keeping precious objects’, precisely because both were generic. Indeed, the design of ivory pyxides was probably determined much less by their function than by their medium—by the very size and shape of the elephant’s tusk. The impression they give is one of series pieces—of mediocre workshop products ready to be purchased off the shelf.27 Their iconography may not have been intended to be anything more than generally meaningful, and thereby multi-functional, and this may explain why generations of art historians have failed to make much sense of their iconography. One is inclined to conclude that the functions of both pyxis and μονήκιον, whether to hold bread, gems, incense, offerings, or something else of value, were probably determined, and changed, at the discretion of the owner.

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