

THE CHALICE OF SISINIOS,
THE GRAND LOGOTHETE

MARVIN C. ROSS

AMONG THE MANY SUPERB BYZANTINE WORKS OF ART in the treasury of Saint Mark's in Venice is a chalice especially satisfying because of the combination of materials used and the general elegance of its proportions. The body of the chalice is chalcedony, carved very simply, yet the proportions are of such perfection that the chalice seems almost to have been wrought by magic. The mounting in silver is kept to the minimum and the artist's emphasis given to the beauty of lines on the handles, the lip, and especially on the delicate base.

The chalice is well known and has been published a number of times, but never with a reproduction of an actual photograph, combined with the actual date of the chalice; only a lithograph¹ or an outline drawing in such instances. New photographs recently authorized by the authorities of Saint Mark's justify calling attention to this superb chalice once again and pointing out that it is one of the securely dated objects of art surviving from the tenth century. The chalice is of particular interest in that, unlike so many Byzantine objects of art, it can be placed and dated within a very few years. There are two Greek inscriptions on it, the first a phrase from the Mass, used frequently on Byzantine chalices, "Christ gave his blood to bring life." The second is a prayer for the donor, "Lord, help Sisinius, patrician and general logothete."

Now we know precisely who this Sisinius was. The two texts through which he was first identified by Gustav Schlumberger,² are from the Life of the Emperor Romanos II, by Theophanes Continuatus and Simon Magister. Professor Glanville Downey has kindly translated them, "And the protospatharios Sisinius, the former sacellarius, he appointed prefect of the city, a worthy man, respected by the people, whom

¹See A. Pasini, *Il Tesoro di San Marco in Venezia* (Venice, 1886), 59, Pl. XLII, no. 85. J. Ebersolt, *Les arts somptuaires de Byzance* (Paris, 1923), 66 and fig. 26. Pasini published a lithograph and Bréhier used a dark photograph saying the chalice had been made for Sisinius, patrician and logothete, but does not give the precise dates. Only Schlumberger (see n. 2) gives the precise information about the chalice but he used only a line engraving.

²G. Schlumberger, *Un emperor byzantine au dixième siècle, Nicéphore Phocas* (Paris, 1890), 21.

he promoted to patricius and general logothete a little later; and instead of him, he appointed prefect of the city Theodore Daphnates, the former general. This Sisinius adorned the prefectship with his equity and justice . . ."³ The text of Simon Magister reads in translation, ". . . and the protospatharios Sisinius, the former sacellarius, he appointed prefect of the city, and a short time thereafter patricius and general logothete . . ."⁴ It is not likely that another Sisinius was both patricius and general logothete in the tenth century, to which we must ascribe the chalice, and so we can safely say that the Sisinius named on the inscription was the same person who was named prefect of the city by Romanus II, and shortly after, patricius and general logothete, or grand treasurer of the empire.

Romanus II reigned only a few short years as sole emperor, A.D. 959-963. Since the second combination of titles given to Sisinius by Romanus II appear in the inscription on the chalice, we can date it in the latter part of the emperor's reign, rather than the earlier. The chalice may well have been an offering made by Sisinius in thanksgiving for the high position to which he was raised. It is not likely and there is no evidence that Sisinius continued in the capacity of general logothete under the succeeding emperor, Nicephorus Phocas (963-969). Therefore, we can date the chalice between 959 and 963, and probably toward the later years of that time.

The many chalices and patens in Saint Mark's made of hard stones mounted in gold, or in silver, the gold and silver sometimes set with stones, or enamelled, attest the popularity of the media for liturgical vessels during the middle Byzantine period. One text is interesting in the connection and I cite it here, since it has never before been brought into the literature on objects of art. This is from the *Vita S. Euthymii* written in the first half of the tenth century, wherein is told the death of

³Theophanes Continuatus, *De Romano Constantini Porphyrogeniti Filio* (Bonn), 470, 3ff.

⁴Simon Magister, *De Romano Constantini Porphyrogeniti Filio* (Bonn), 757, 13ff.

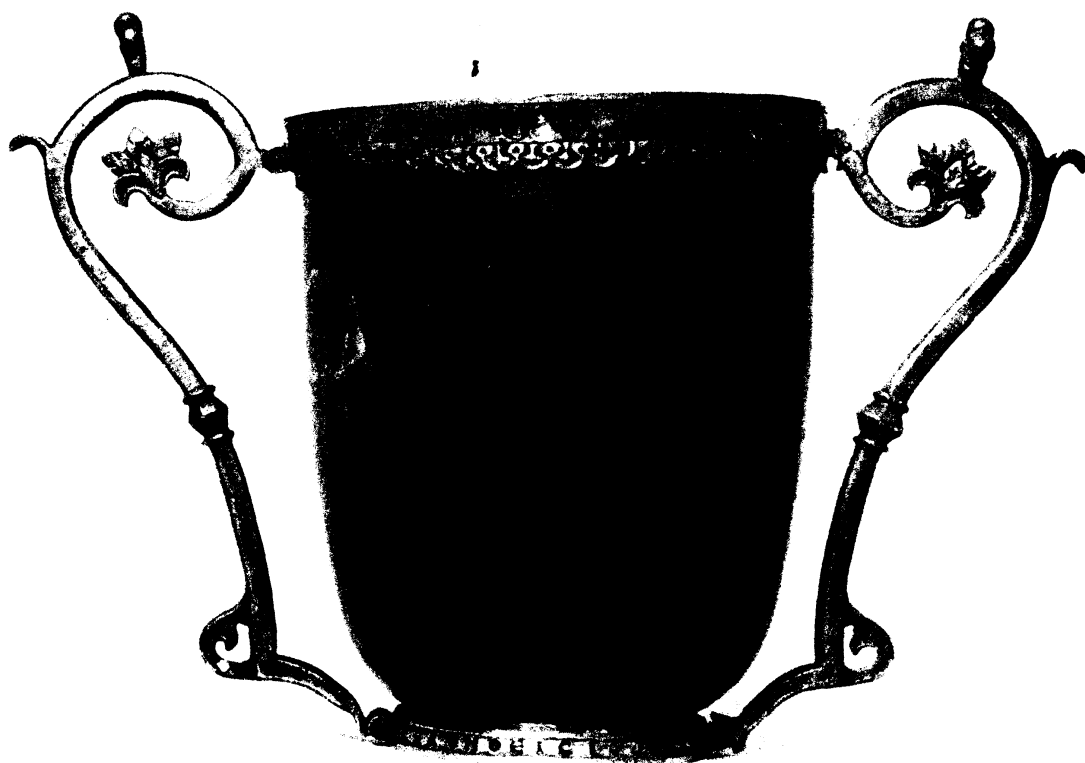


FIGURE 1

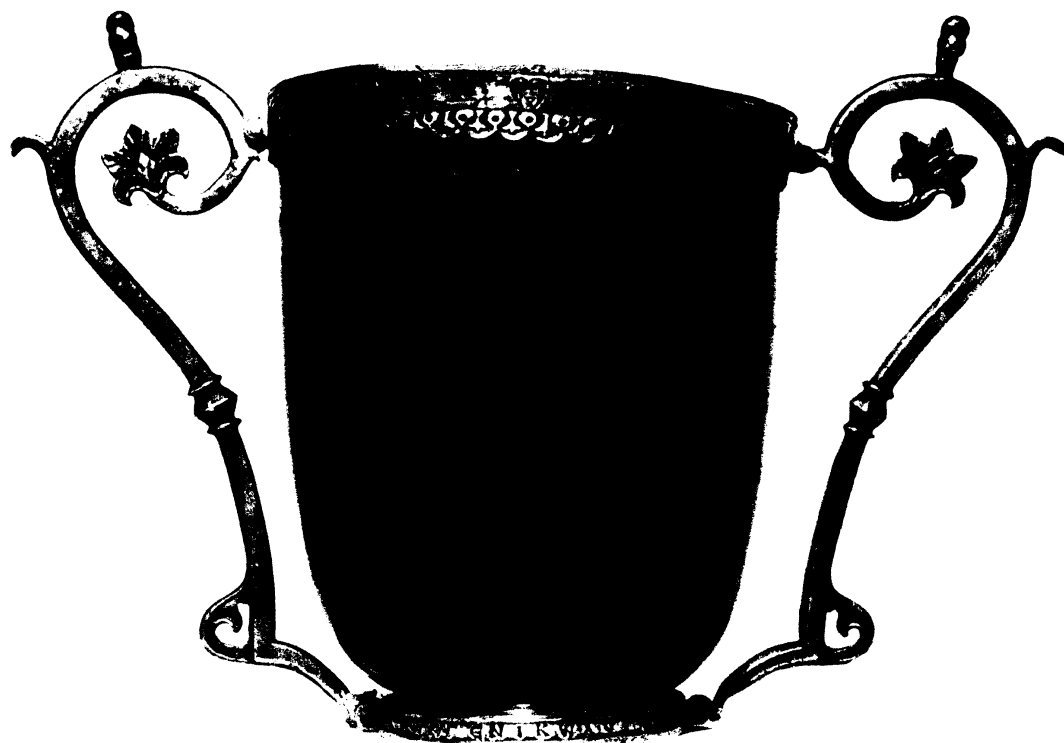
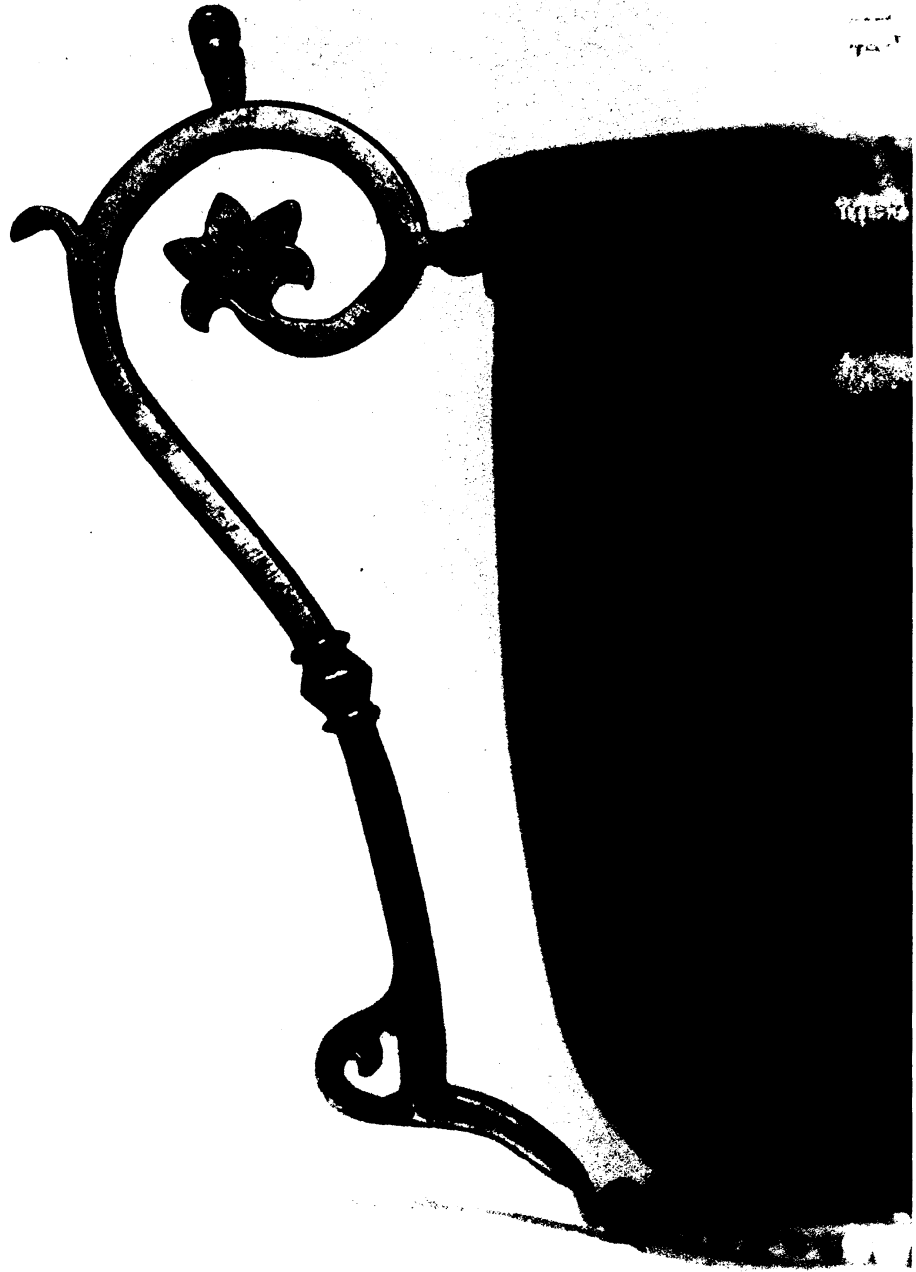


FIGURE 2

VENICE. SAINT MARK'S. CHALICE



VENICE. SAINT MARK'S. CHALICE. DETAIL OF HANDLE

the Empress Theophano and her gifts to Euthymius in gratitude for his sympathy and support during her difficulties with her husband, Leo VI (886-812). "It was the month of November [897], and the Empress Theophano of sacred memory was in the Church of God's Mother at Blachernae, being nursed, and there she called Father Euthymius, and was relating all her concerns to him till that most compassionate of men was in tears, and said to her, 'This, my mistress and honoured Lady Theophano, is my last farewell. Never again in this life will you see my humble self, but if your voice is heard, as I hope, remember also this least of men.' Then this worthy queen took from her chest and gave him sacred vessels made of jaspers, as well as the cloths that covered them, which she had adorned with the father's name woven in gold. With these she gave the scarf she wore in church on her head and shoulders, adding it by way of *ex-voto*. And these same sacred vessels the emperor [Leo VI] later asked for and had brilliantly decorated, afterwards sending them back to the father."⁵

From this act of the Emperor Leo VI, we can see that such jasper vessels as were given by his Empress just before her death to the Patriarch Euthymius were valued for liturgical use, and further that it was considered appropriate to adorn them with gems and precious metal.

From the time of Romanus II and the immediately succeeding reign we have a number of superb works of art—the ivory of Romanus and his empress Eudokia in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris,⁶ the reliquary of the True Cross in gold, silver, and enamel made for Basil the Proedrus, now in Limbourg,⁷ as well as the chalice and paten now in Saint Mark's that was made for the same Basil.⁸ It has been our custom to study Byzantine art vertically—from century to century—or in

⁵P. Karlin-Hayter, "Vita S. Euthymii," *Byzantion*, 25-26 (1955, 1956, 1957), 1-172, esp. 51.

⁶H. Pierce and R. Tyler, "Deux monuments dans l'art byzantine du X siècle," *Arethuse* (1927), 129-135.

⁷*Das Münster* (1955), 8, heft 7-8, pp. 201-240.

⁸Schlumberger, *op cit.*, 291-293.

groups of objects, made of the same material, as for example, ivories or manuscripts. Perhaps we now have enough safely dated objects to warrant horizontal study, i.e. the studying of objects made in the same period, no matter of what material. This method of study might cast new light on Byzantine art, enabling us to understand more about it than by the methods we have used. Looking anew at this chalice of unusual elegance and beauty, so very much of its time and so closely related to other objects datable to the reign of Romanus II, points out the need of studies of Byzantine art by periods to lead us to greater understanding and appreciation.

WASHINGTON, D.C.