

A BYZANTINE BOWL IN SERPENTINE

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IN THE TREASURE OF SAINT MARK'S in Venice is an oval bowl in serpentine, which has been mentioned in print a number of times. However, it has never been illustrated in full detail in any publication, since the interior has not been shown. During a visit to Venice in the Summer of 1957, the authorities of Saint Mark's kindly gave me permission to handle the bowl and examine it minutely. Further and more important, they allowed the removal of the Venetian Gothic mounting in order that the interior, which cradles an exquisite carving, could be photographed. Because of the remarkable technique of the carving on the outside and inside of the bowl and the fact that it dates from the Middle Byzantine period, I present the photographs here for the benefit of all who are interested in Byzantine art.

The bowl is lobate, a form long familiar in Byzantine art. Another example may be seen in the VI Century mosaic of the Adoration of the Magi in Ravenna. Of special interest,

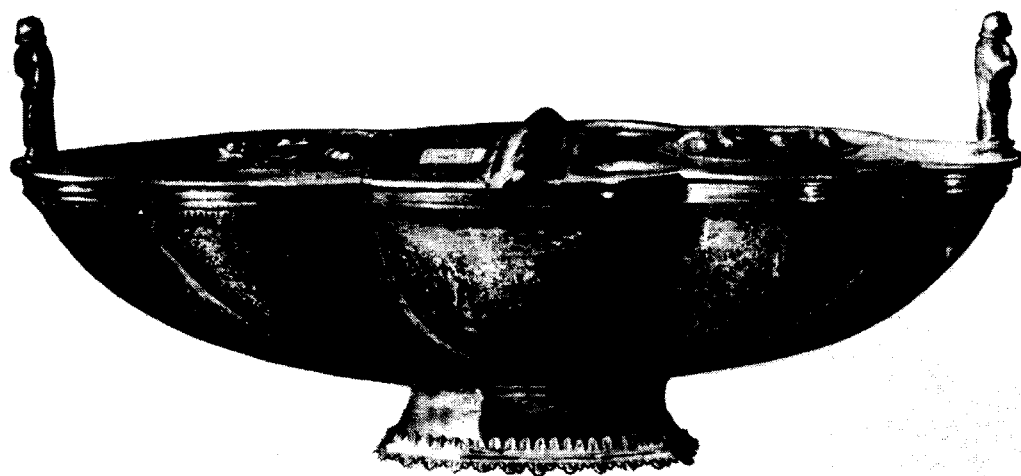


PLATE 1 — VENICE. SAINT MARK'S. BOWL IN SERPENTINE

A Byzantine Bowl in Serpentine

aside from the elegant lines of the bowl in Venice, is the relief carving in the center of the concavity—the standing figure of St. Demetrius, shown in the act of drawing his sword. He is identified by the inscription in Greek engraved on two of the petal-like division of the basin. As Professor André Grabar has pointed out, only at the church in Saloniki did the custom of making cult objects survive into the Middle Ages.¹ Throughout the Middle East it had been characteristic of churches and shrines erected in honor of martyrs, during the early ages of Christianity, and before the Arab Conquest in the VII Century. Some of the small cult objects made and sold at the Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites in Syria, for example, and those from famous shrines throughout the Holy Land and elsewhere, still in many instances remain the only clues we can follow to reach a conception of the original, now long lost, decorations of churches in the Middle East.

The cult objects of Saint Demetrius have been used to form an idea of his shrine as it originally appeared in his church at Saloniki. This is particularly true of two gold enameled pendants, one in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and one in the British Museum, but also of a large number of small representations of the Saint Demetrius, some in silver, others in ivory, cameos, glass paste, *et cetera*. While not known to have been copied from any particular one of his shrines, many of these give every indication of having originated at Saloniki. From the designs and workmanship we can draw signally clear conclusions about the art of the second most important Byzantine city of the middle period. The glass pastes are many, scattered in monasteries and museums, all the way from Cyprus to America. They are so similar in design and conception that one can assume they were made originally at some shrine of the saint, most probably in Saloniki.

Saint Demetrius was known and loved by the Salonikans as the saint of protection, which accounts, of course, for his being represented with a drawn sword. The carving in the

¹"Quelques reliquaires de Saint Démétrius et le martyrium du saint a Saloniki," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, V, 3-26.

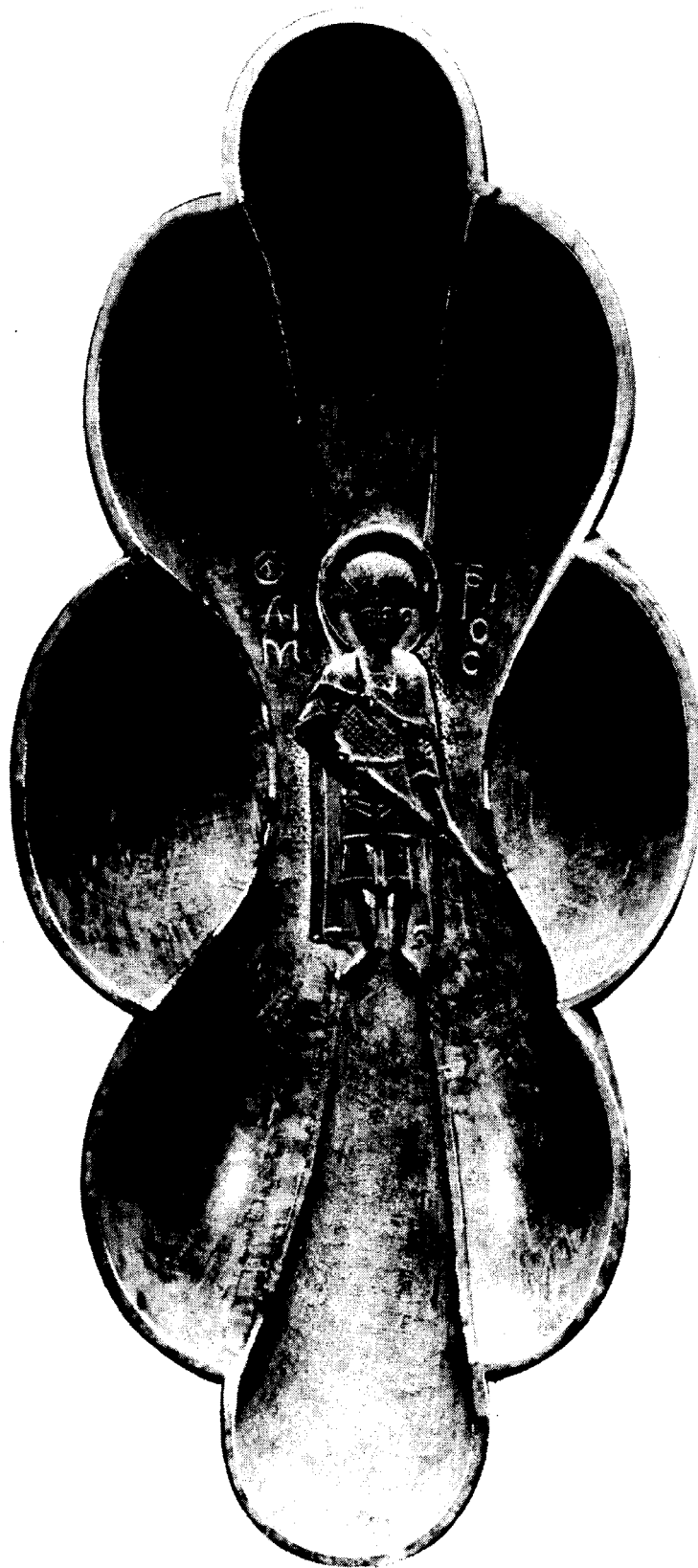


PLATE 2 — VENICE. SAINT MARK'S. BOWL IN SERPENTINE. INTERIOR

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Saint Mark's bowl shows him in the act of drawing his sword, and this is unusual. I recall only one other instance in which he is seen actually drawing the sword, and that is in a relief on the facade of Saint Mark's in Venice, attributed by Otto Demus to the XII or XIII Centuries — before 1260, since it was in place by that time.² The question of whether it was made in Constantinople or Saloniki he leaves open, but he states it to be definitely of Greek workmanship and not Venetian in origin. It differs from many sculptures in Venice done by Venetians in the Byzantine style. Correspondingly, the origin of the lobate bowl in serpentine is an open question. However, it is also of Greek workmanship and not Venetian. There is no similarity stylistically to any Venetian carvings. Within the Byzantine Empire, Saloniki would seem the most likely place of origin. It was the heart of the Saint Demetrius cult. It has been demonstrated that many likenesses of him were made for the devoted there. Also, the high detail of the hair arrangement is to be seen in some of the earliest mosaics, still existing in the Saint Demetrius Church in Saloniki. Naturally, an artist would seize upon the opportunity to copy a personal detail so familiar to everyone in that locality. This is a small detail, but it adds to my conviction that one may suggest Saloniki as a place of origin for the bowl.

We have few dated Byzantine glyptics. Comparative material is, therefore, difficult to find for dating. No corpus of glyptics has been made as for ivory carvings. The only object that occurs to me—the one most nearly comparable—is the illustration of a jasper cameo in the Catalogue of the de Gruneisen Collection where a device of cross-hatching presents the figure as it does the armour of Saint Demetrius on our bowl.³ The cameo is inscribed with the name Alexis Ducas, who, it has been suggested, was the Alexis V. Ducas who reigned briefly in 1204. A date in the late XII or early XIII Century would fit perfectly the style of the carved figure of Saint Demetrius in

²"Die Reliefikonen den Westfassade von San Marco" *Jhb. "Osterreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft*, III (1954), 87-107.

³Paris, 1930, no. 434, pl. XXVI.

the serpentine bowl, a period also indicated for the stone relief on the facade of Saint Mark's, where the saint is shown again in the act of drawing his sword. The date is of special interest because both representations of the saint were made at about the same time. Bowls like the serpentine one dating from the XII-XIII Centuries are rare. It is of great beauty and elegance, affirming that the art of hardstone carving survived late in the Byzantine Empire.

The original purpose of the bowl is not recorded. It is unlikely that it was ever put to secular use. The Venetians gave it an ornate silver mounting during the Gothic period and it then served as a vessel to hold incense before it was put in the thurible to burn. Possibly the Venetians thought that it was first of all made for this purpose and reverently continued it in that service.

Saint Demetrius, the saint of protection, was invoked also for healing. It is not impossible that the artist associated with the belief in the curative power of incense another idea—that of the condition of the bodies of saints after death. "For as is well known, a fragrance . . . is one of the criteria of sanctity defunct"—an idea which in the very early Christian era was credited, as in later times. Perhaps the artist combined these two concepts of faith and created the figure of Saint Demetrius to suggest reassurance and comfort to those in peril. In medieval pictures showing the altar, as in the Monastery of Studenitsa, and in an embroidered Epitaphios Sidon at Ochrida, a small figure of Christ lies in the paten, intended, of course, to suggest the whole mystery of the Eucharist. In the same way, it is not altogether unlikely that the figure of Saint Demetrius in the serpentine bowl was meant to call to mind the efficacy of his protection and power to heal, the sweet odor of sanctity combining with that of the incense, a concept that would have suited the mentality of the devout in that particular period.