

A Small Box in John Moschus

John Duffy and Gary Vikan

I

JOHAN 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 (3093_{A-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; 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 μου ζικία*. An

¹ Also known as the *Leimon* or *Leimonarion* or *Neos Paradeisos*. The text is in Migne, *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,” *JThS* 25 (1974) 41–74, reprinted in his *History and Thought in the Early Church* (London 1982).

² See R. Browning, “The Language of Byzantine Literature,” in S. Vryonis, ed., *The Past in Medieval and Modern Greek Culture* (Malibu 1978) 112.

accompanying note in Migne³ explains that the word *ζικία* is unattested and that, to judge by the Latin version *capsulas*,⁴ it may be a mistake for *βικία*.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 *φέρετε τὰ μου ζικία*? Hardly: then as now one would expect *φέρετε τὰ 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 *φέρετε τὰ μουζίκια*.⁶ This again confronts us with a rare word, *μουζίκιον*; 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 *Pratum*:

παραγενόμενοι εἰς Σελεύκειαν τὴν πρὸς Ἀντιόχειαν, συνετύχομεν τῷ ἄββᾶ Θεοδώρῳ ἐπισκόπῳ τῆς αὐτῆς Σελευκείας πόλεως καὶ διηγήσατο ἡμῖν λέγων ὅτι, “Γέγονεν ἐπὶ τοῦ μακαρίου Διονυσίου τοῦ πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἐπισκόπου ταύτης τῆς πόλεως τὸ τοιοῦτον· ἦν τις ἀνὴρ πραγματευτῆς ἐνταῦθα πάνυ εὐλαβῆς καὶ πλούσιος· ἦν δὲ αἰρετικὸς τῶν Σεβήρου δογμάτων, ἔχων δὲ πιστικὸν κοινωνοῦντα τῇ ἀγίᾳ καθολικῇ καὶ ἀποστολικῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. οὗτος ὁ πιστικὸς κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς χώρας ἔλαβεν κοινωνίαν τῇ ἀγίᾳ πέμπτη, καὶ βαλὼν αὐτὴν ἐν μουζικίῳ, ἀπέθετο ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ ἄρμαρῳ. συνέβη δὲ μετὰ τὸ ἅγιον πάσχα τὸν πιστικὸν πεμφθῆναι ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει διὰ πραγματείαν, ἐάσαντα κατὰ λήθην τὰς ἀγίας κοινωνίας ἐν τῷ ἄρμαρῳ αὐτοῦ. δέδωκεν δὲ τὸ κλειδίον τοῦ ἄρμαρίου τῷ αὐθέντῃ. ἐν μᾶ οὖν ἀνοίξας τὸ ἄρμαρῖον ὁ αὐθέντης εὗρεν τὸ μουζίκιον ἔχον τὰς ἀγίας κοινωνίας . . .”

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

³ The note is taken over from the seventeenth-century edition of Moschus by J. B. Cotelier.

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

⁵ That is, a diminutive of ὁ βίκος (jar, cask). Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon s.v. ζικίων*, evidently accepts this suggestion, listing the one occurrence as an “error for βικίον, vessel, box.”

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 *mouzikion*, 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 *μουζίκιον* 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 putting forward the idea Du Cange may well have been following the lead of Traversari, who rendered *βαλὼν αὐτήν ἐν μουζικίῳ* by *involvit in linteo mundissimo* (where the adjective is interpretative) and *εὑρεν τὸ μουζίκιον* by *invenit 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 *μουζίκια*, the father spreads a piece of linen (*ἀπλοῖ σινδόνα*); when the *μουζίκια* 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 ‘opening’. 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 depend only on the assumption that *μουζίκιον* is derived from the term for mosaic work (*μουσεῖον* or *μουσίον*). This is a tempting idea, but

⁷ 2936C–D Migne; only the relevant first half of the story is quoted here. The phrase *ἔλαβεν κοινωνίαν τῇ ἁγίᾳ 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 *Μοῦσα*).

⁹ Du Cange in his entry *ζίκιον* 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 *μουζίκιον* 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?¹¹ The obvious candidate for identification with Moschus' *μουζίκιον* is the ivory pyxis.¹² For decades it has been supposed that those pyxides with Christian iconography were intended for eucharistic or eulogia bread;¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

¹¹ Archaeology provides interesting leads but no answers for the etymology of *μουζίκιον*. 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 *μουζίκιον*. Yet here too the problem of *zeta* applies. For the Pannonian caskets see H. Buschhausen, *Die spätromischen Metallscrinia und frühchristlichen Reliquiare* I (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, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantiken und frühen Mittelalters*³ (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 *πύξις* which can be directly linked to Volbach's ivory boxes. For the antique use of the word see H. Graeven, "Pyxide en os," *Mon Piot* 6 (1899) 161ff.

¹³ See most recently V. Elbern, "Altar Implements and Liturgical Objects," in Weitzmann (*supra* n.11) 596f and no. 549; and A. St Clair, "The Visit to the Tomb: Narrative and Liturgy on Three Early Christian Pyxides," *Gesta* 18.1 (1979) 132.

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. *πύξιον*.

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 box¹⁹ 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 *μουζίκιον* 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 *μουζίκιον* was kept in order to gain access to the consecrated bread.

¹⁷ See Graeven (*supra* n.12) 163.

¹⁸ See L. Kötzsche 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.

²⁰ See W. M. F. Petrie, *Objects of Daily Use* (London 1927) pl. LVIII.52; Volbach nos. 83–85, 138; Buschhausen (*supra* n.11) B5, B13, C21; and M. H. Rutschowskaya, "Boîtes à poids d'époque copte," *La revue du Louvre* 29 (1979) 1ff.

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 Τιβερινῆς διακο(νίας) τῷ ἁγίῳ Στεφάνῳ*, "offering of the Tiberine diacolate 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

the Etchmiadzin Gospels: A. Durnovo, *Armenian Miniatures*, tr. I. J. Underwood (London 1961) 33.

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. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* I (SubsHagiogr 32 [1962]) 151*.

²³ Buschhausen (*supra* n.11) C3, Weitzmann (*supra* n.11) no. 573. For *προσφορά* as 'donation' see *P.Oxy.* XVI 1899.23 n.; Preisigke s.v.; *P.Ness.* III 79.25 and p.227.

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 (1981) 21.

The ivory pyxis and the *μουζίκιον* 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 *μουζίκιον*, whether to hold bread, gems, incense, offerings, or something else of value, were probably determined, and changed, at the discretion of the owner.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND AND DUMBARTON OAKS
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²⁷ See A. Cutler, "Observations on the Production of Ivory Carvings in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," in *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au moyen-âge* (Rennes 1983) 966ff.