

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE GREAT
CHALICE OF ANTIOCH CONTAINING THE
EARLIEST PORTRAITS OF CHRIST AND
THE APOSTLES

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Reprinted from the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY, Second Series,
Vol. XX, (1916) No. 4

135763

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[PLATE XIX]

INTRODUCTION

Recent History of the Treasure.—The antique objects, known as "The Kouchakji Silver Treasure of Antioch," number six pieces: two chalices, three bookcovers, and a large ceremonial cross. These six objects were procured by the present owners, Kouchakji Frères, in Paris, directly from the excavators in 1910. A smaller cross, also of silver, supposed to be from the same find, was procured by M. Froehner, the well known French archaeologist. It is now in Paris and has remained in his possession. The Kouchakji objects were removed to New York for greater safety at the outbreak of the war.¹

Provenance.—The seven silver objects referred to above were all found together by Arabs digging a well in Antioch, on the Orontes in Syria, in 1910. At a depth of many metres the excavators came upon underground chambers, in which the treasure was discovered. Besides the seven entire pieces they found enough crumbled fragments of silver to fill a sack. These were smelted for the value of the metal.

Chronology.—The seven pieces belong to two distinct periods; the great chalice can with certainty be dated to the second half of the first century A.D., while the bookcovers belong to the fifth century A.D.

The Constantinian Cathedral.—The original owner of the treasure is not known, but local tradition refers to the site where the treasure was found as a place where there once existed a large Christian church, all traces of which above the soil had long ago disappeared. It is thus probable that these objects formed

¹ A fully illustrated memoir on these objects is in preparation by the present writer and is expected to appear in the early part of 1917.



SILVER CHALICE FROM ANTIOCH

part of the treasure of an ancient church, now buried. No excavations have been made to ascertain the nature of this edifice, but historical records¹ show that Constantine the Great after having removed the capital of the Empire to Constantinople erected a large cathedral in Antioch, intending it to be the centre of Christian worship in the East. The city of Antioch must have been dear to this Emperor on account of its associations with Peter, Paul, and other apostles who resided there. It was in Antioch that the word Christian was first used. The Constantinian cathedral remained intact until 526 when, during an assembly of 250,000 Christians, the whole city was levelled by an earthquake and so thoroughly destroyed that the inhabitants could not find the site of their old habitations. Visited by earthquakes repeated to our day and by the Persian invasion under Kosroes in 538, the city never regained any considerable degree of its former importance. The Christians, instead of worshipping in a splendid cathedral, had to content themselves with a cave, which was finally secured to the congregation by Pius IX. Whether the great silver chalice and the rest of the treasure can actually be traced to the cathedral of Constantine cannot yet be decided, but it does not seem improbable that an object of such importance as the chalice should have come into the possession of the first Christian emperor and have been donated by him to his great Christian sanctuary, nor that it was actually in the ruins of that sanctuary that the treasure was discovered.

THE GREAT CHALICE

Size.—It is 19 cm. high; greatest diameter at the top of the bowl is 18 cm., the narrowest diameter is 13 cm. This discrepancy is due to a considerable compression of the uppermost part of the bowl, evidently caused by a blow from falling débris. The original diameter can be calculated at about 15 cm. The diameter of the bowl at the bulge is 15.5 cm., that above the lotus cup 9 cm., below the lotus cup 2 cm. The depth of the bowl is 15 cm. Height of the stand is 3.5 cm. Width of the foot is 6.5 cm. It is thus seen that the chalice previous to being compressed would have held about 2.5 litres of liquid.

Composite Parts.—There are three distinct parts: (A) an inner bowl of plain silver, (B) an outer covering or shell of "chased-

¹J. M. Neal, *A History of the Holy Eastern Church. The Patriarchate of Antioch.* London, 1873. Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, London, 1845.

applied" ornaments, soldered on to the inner bowl, (C) the stand and foot, turned out of a solid block of silver.

Gilding.—The inner bowl was never gilt. The outer shell of ornaments, as well as the stand and foot, were covered with heavy gold leaf, much of which remains. Two kinds of gold were used: deep red for the sculptures of the bowl and pale yellow for the lotus cup, the stand and foot. Part of the gilding has peeled off, some has been worn off, and some seems to have been rubbed off through repeated touching by the worshippers.

Form.—A large truncate-ovoid bowl on a remarkably short and slender stem, rests on a very narrow foot disk. The stem consists of a compressed ball of solid silver which is connected with the foot disk by means of a short, slender neck. In general shape the chalice resembles the many ovoid cups of the Boscoreale treasure, now in the Louvre.¹

State of Preservation.—On the whole the preservation is remarkably good, except for the compression of the upper part of the bowl already mentioned. When found the whole surface was covered with a coating of oxide, several millimetres thick. This was skillfully removed by the renowned restorer M. André in Paris. A photograph taken before this coating was removed will be published later. The silver matrix has crystallized and become so very brittle that the chalice can only be handled with the utmost care, for even a slight tap would cause it to break into fragments. The heads and faces are unequally preserved: some, like Nos. 2, 4, and 11, are almost intact; one, No. 10, is much damaged by oxidation; while those of the principal figures, Nos. 1 and 8, have been worn, perhaps by repeated touch of the worshippers. The original gilding of some of the statues and of many of the ornaments is yet intact.

Technique.—The inner bowl was probably hammered out of a thick sheet of silver, the upper rim of which was turned outwards over itself to form a narrow collar about 1 cm. wide. The sculptures were executed by the method known as "chased-applied," that is, the ornaments were carved on a sheet of silver, the edges cut through, and then the background removed. This sculptured openwork was then soldered on to the bowl. The strokes of the artist's tool are in most places still distinct and fresh. They

¹A. Héron de Villefosse, *Le Trésor de Boscoreale*. Institut de France, Acad. d. Inscr. et B. Lettres, *Monuments et Mém. (Mon. Piot)*. Vol. 5, pp. 7-290. Paris, 1899-1902.

show the touch of a master hand, unfailing in steadiness and delicacy. The stand and foot were turned on a lathe.

The Inner Bowl.—The inner bowl, while of highly artistic shape, is remarkably crude in workmanship, and was apparently made hastily and without any effort in regard to finish. The edge of the lip-collar was left uneven and was not even bevelled off as on the Boscoreale cups. As the other sculptures are exquisitely designed and executed, we must conclude that the inner bowl and the affixed sculptures were made by different artists, because it is absolutely incredible that the great artist of the sculptures should have done the crude work of the bowl. There must have been weighty reasons for leaving it in its crude condition when there was the opportunity to alter its appearance and give it a proper finish. The simplest explanation seems to be that the inner bowl was a sacred object which it would have been sacrilege to alter. The owners who decided upon its ornamentation were probably influenced by legends which they believed and by tradition which had long been dear to worshippers. The chalice must have been a communion cup, which in its primitive state might have been used by persons venerated by the church, perhaps since its very origin.

The Applied Sculptures.—The ornamentation consists of a complicated framework of grape vines, the stems of which form twelve loops in each of which is placed a seated personage. Between the loops, as well as inside, are scattered grape leaves, tendrils, and bunches. There are also doves, snails, a rabbit, a butterfly, and a grasshopper. A large eagle rests on a basket of Eucharistic bread, and vertically above it is a descending dove, symbolizing the Holy Ghost. There are twelve vines rising in pairs from the ground border, their upper ends joined and represented as tied in a natural manner. All these sculptures are executed and designed in a highly naturalistic style, with consummate skill and taste, and the assemblage is one of surpassing beauty.

Above the ornaments runs a free band composed of 57 rosettes of about equal size, which seem crowded in an unnatural manner, as though the artist had found it difficult to find place for a certain required number. Their sequence is interrupted by an object of about the same size, which resembles the star seen on some coins of Antioch of the pre-Roman period. The rosettes may stand for years and the star may be an indicator, or the star of the nativity, or both.

Below the main sculptures is a lotus cup with flat petals, fitting the lower part of the bowl. This cup connects directly with the short stand, the nodus of which is ornamented with a palm wreath. The foot is also ornamented with lotus petals similar to those of the cup.



FIGURE 1.—THE GREAT CHALICE; APOSTLE, No. 2, ST. PETER
(Above, Christ as the Lamb and Figure No. 1. Over the Lamb a dish with
eight loaves and two fishes)



FIGURE 2.—THE GREAT CHALICE; APOSTLE, No. 3

The Figures.—The figures, like the loops, are arranged in two horizontal alternating rows, one above the other, and in two groups, each containing five apostles facing a central figure. One of the latter represents Christ, the other Christ or the Baptist. One of these groups is more prominent than the

other and was undoubtedly intended as the front face of the chalice; the other occupies the opposite face. The two central figures can be identified as two different representations of Christ, or as Christ and the Baptist. Both are represented as enthroned. Beside the principal statue stands the Lamb, while over its head descends the Dove. The arms of Christ are stretched sidewise and the feet are resting on the footrest of the throne. This figure resembles that of the Emperor Augustus on the "Augustus Cup" of the Boscoreale treasure of Baron Rothschild in Paris. The Christ figure on the opposite side represents Christ as a boy of perhaps twelve years, holding in his hand an open roll or scroll. Five apostles are grouped around him in the same manner as around the other figure. The throne of the youthful Christ resembles that of the youthful Augustus. Those of the apostles have rounded high backs and closed sides. Many of the apostles hold scrolls in their hands; one seems to hold a purse; one possibly the handle of a sword. All the figures of the apostles have more or less the same pose,—one hand at rest, while the other is raised.

The Heads.—By far the most interesting parts of the decoration are the heads of the figures. They are not only works of great artistic merit, but show an individuality that cannot be the result of accident. Such individuality has until now been unknown in antique Christian art, for the first attempts at portraiture hitherto discovered are not older than the fifth century A.D. It seems improbable that any sculptor could have depicted twelve heads and faces, so varied and strongly individualized, had he not known the persons portrayed or had authentic portraits to inspire him. Each one of the portraits on the chalice shows most uncommon characteristics rarely found outside of classic sculpture. The face of Christ seems divine; no subsequent artist has succeeded in imparting that sweetness and gentleness which tradition gives to the Savior's features and which we here for the first time see realized. The heads of the apostles are equally remarkable. We seem to read the character of each of them; the very soul of man is here portrayed in the metal as perhaps never before or after in Christian art. Still each head is but a centimetre high! What must they have been when fresh and new! In one of these heads we seem to see the great thinker, the ready doubter, perhaps; in others the enthusiasts and ready believers. In one (No. 12) we have the face of a man of tremendous force; in No. 11 one of

great gentleness and personal beauty; in No. 5 a man of business; in No. 2 a preacher and organizer, and so on. Can these por-



FIGURE 3.—THE GREAT CHALICE; APOSTLE, NO. 4

traits be identified with anything like probability? We must perforce leave the answer to the future.

The ornaments seem to symbolize the origin, rise and fulfil-

ment of the Christian religion. The nativity, the baptism, the Evangelium, the institution of the Eucharist, the dispensation, the resurrection and the eternal life in paradise are here referred to by symbols which have remained in use to our day. The presence of only ten apostles can be explained by assuming that reference is made to an occasion when only ten were present, or that the sculptor lacked portraits of two of them.

Chronology.—The date of the bowl is earlier than that of the applied ornaments, the execution of which must fall between the middle and end of the first century A.D., possibly between 57 and 87 A.D. The following are some of the reasons for such conclusions:

(A) The truncate-ovoid form of the chalice is not uncommon before the time of Augustus. From the time of Augustus and Tiberius we have the numerous Boscoreale cups, similar in shape to the chalice but with horizontal handles. After the first century this form is rare.

(B) The small size of the stand and foot is common in the first century A.D. as demonstrated by numerous specimens of glass ware, and also by the Boscoreale silver cups in the Louvre. After the first century the stand becomes higher and the foot wider, these proportions increasing till the fourth century A.D.

(C) The two figures representing Augustus as an old man and a very young man respectively, on the Augustus cup, have their correspondence in the two central figures of our chalice.

(D) The figures of Christ and of the ten apostles show a distinct similarity to the two Augustus figures. This similarity, while not exact, is nevertheless so apparent that we can conclude that these or similar, but contemporary cups inspired the master who sculptured the chalice ornaments. The similarity is especially apparent in our figures Nos. 1, 3, and 8, as well as in the others. It concerns the pose, the heads, the toga, the girdle folds, the hand with the scroll, the high rounded backs and the open sides of the thrones in two of the figures, and the foot-rests. In fact all the principal details of the two Augustus figures are found repeated with slight variations in the figures on the chalice.

(E) The admirable treatment of the heads and faces is strictly classical, and could not have been executed after the time of Hadrian. Some of them show an actual resemblance to some on the Augustus cup. They were probably made by a converted

Greek artist of great merit, whose enthusiasm and faith in his new religion blended admirably with his classical training as a sculptor.



FIGURE 4.—THE GREAT CHALICE; APOSTLE, No. 12

(F) The design and technique of the grapevines, as well as the manner of placing statues inside loops formed by vine branches,

is often seen on pottery of the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. I have lately copied a green glazed cup with these features.

(G) The nimbus and other symbols not known or used by the Christians of the first century are absent.

Antiquity and Genuineness of the Chalice.—With those who have seen the chalice these points need not be discussed, as even a hasty inspection will convince the discerning critic that the work is antique and not mediaeval or modern. But on account of the great importance of this object, many who have not had the opportunity to inspect it, will no doubt question its antiquity, and *a priori* declare it impossible that such an object could exist. The mitra of Olbia is too recent to be easily forgotten! Many facts could be adduced which will demonstrate the age of the chalice, but the best proof is in the crystallization of the metal and its great brittleness. A slight tap with a pencil might cause it to fall into fragments, the silver having lost its tensile strength. When discovered, the chalice, as well as the rest of the objects, was heavily covered with oxide of silver, as already mentioned. In that state it was photographed, and these photographs will be published in the near future. The chalice was once compressed by a heavy blow, and such compression could not have been effected after the matrix was crystallized, but must have been a blow from falling débris in ancient times. Thus the present state of the chalice shows that it is not mediaeval or modern, while the nature of its sculptures proves it to be antique.

Several prominent archaeologists examined the chalice before the oxidation was removed by M. André in Paris; among them can be mentioned M. Froehner of Paris, M. Migeon of the Louvre, and Sir Charles Read of the British Museum, who unhesitatingly declared the chalice genuine and antique. Dr. Edward Robinson, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has examined the chalice since it was brought to the United States, and has kindly permitted me to mention him among those who are willing to testify to its genuineness.

CONCLUSION

A chalice was found at Antioch in Syria with portrait figures of Christ and ten apostles, datable to the second half of the first century A.D. The inner bowl is of inferior workmanship and older than the exterior ornaments, which were affixed somewhat

later. The latter show the technique, skill and taste of a Greek master. The heads and faces show such individuality and character as to suggest that they are portraits. The bowl was undoubtedly a sacred relic, and the sculptures were added to help preserve and ornament it.

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NEW YORK.

September 18th, 1916.