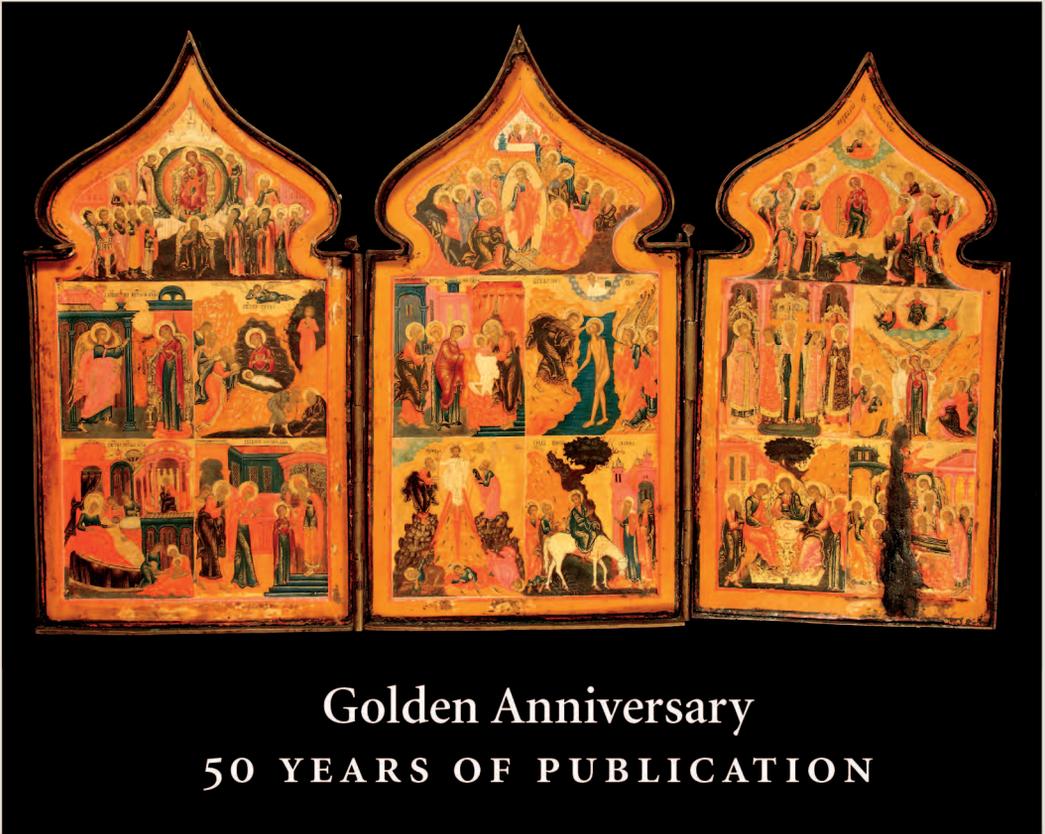


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Markings on Silver: The Study of a Byzantine Silver Dish*



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In the study of ancient artifacts, a question that constantly plagues researchers concerns the establishment of provenance. While many works of art have documents listing their history of ownership, such written evidence rarely accompanies ancient objects. In these instances, the scholar must determine provenance from the evidence left on the artifact itself. One such object, a small silver dish with a cruciform monogram, sits on display in the collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri, but very little is known about the date and place of its creation or its original function. The following article is an attempt to understand this beautiful piece better. It begins with a description of the object, including manufacturing techniques, current condition, and decoration. Then, a stylistic comparison to other artifacts and a brief consideration of the sociohistorical environment in Late Antiquity suggest a more precise date, region of origin, and function for the Missouri dish.

Although this round silver dish (Fig. 1) is fairly small with a diameter of 13.0 cm, height of 2.4 cm, and foot diameter of 5.7 cm, it is unusually thick and heavy, weighing



Fig. 1. Dish. Byzantine, seventh century C.E., silver and niello, H. 2.4 cm, D. 13.0 cm, D. foot 5.7 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Weinberg Fund (84.56). Photo: Kenyon Reed.

149.7 g.¹ Its written provenance is brief. It was acquired as part of the Weinberg Fund in 1984 when it was purchased from Dr. Dan Barag in Israel as part of a group of forty-two items. Forty-one of these objects were from his parents' collection, but Dr. Barag had obtained this dish from the antiquities dealer Lenny Alexander Wolfe, before adding it to the set of objects he sold to the museum. The museum records this as a Byzantine item and dates it to the seventh century C.E.

Fabrication

The dish appears to have been made in two pieces, the body and the foot, which were separately hammered into shape and then soldered together. There is clear evidence of dents from the hammering process across the entire piece. The foot is not perfectly round, indicating it was hammered by a tool with a flat head. Although the soldering process effectively attached the foot to the body of this vessel, it was done with an excess of metal, so that where the foot meets the body there is no smooth curve or right angle, but rather some small uneven lumps of silver at the joint (Fig. 2a). It appears that the individual or individuals who made the dish attempted to smooth out these lumps, but some of them still remain.

It is unclear whether the decoration was added before or after the foot and body were joined. The fluting that covers the interior was added by chasing, most likely with a tool that had a small, rounded head to give the flutes a smooth curve. The rest of the decoration was incised. The grooves made by this process have right angles and a flat bottom, indicating they were made with a tool that had a flat rectangular head. In addition, niello, an oxidized black silver, was added to the monogram. The vessel was then polished to remove some surface imperfections. Most of the decoration on the dish is somewhat crudely executed, with clear marks where the tool slipped or a circle did not properly meet (Fig. 2b). This, along with the rough treatment of the shape of the vessel, especially its uneven thickness, suggests that it was not made by a master silversmith.



Figs. 2a and 2b: Details of Figure 1, evidence of the soldering process and tool slip marks. Photos: Kenyon Reed.

In order to understand the composition of the silver, a scientific analysis must be performed, which is beyond the scope of this project. Silver alloys from the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods, however, consistently contain 92–98 percent silver, with no significant exceptions in the archaeological record. Silver alloys of this purity are fairly pliable, so these vessels are easily damaged, sometimes even before leaving the workshop. When making vessels, silversmiths would prefer to use a silver of less purity that can be much harder and better retain its shape. The constantly high purity in silver alloys across the empire, despite the needs of silversmiths, suggests that the quality of silver was strictly controlled.² It is likely then, that this silver dish is also made of a silver alloy of 92–98 percent purity.

Condition

Although the dish is complete, it has suffered some damage. Across the entire body there are superficial scratches, as well as a few more significant scratches on the bottom of the lip. Much of the metal is dented or cracked, especially in the thinner, fluted areas (Fig. 3). There is some evidence of repair, in which someone attempted to hammer the metal back into shape around a few cracks. Although the entire surface of the dish has sustained damage, there is a concentration of dents and waves on the bottom left side of the vessel's body when it is viewed with the monogram upright (Fig. 1). It appears that the dish was folded at one point and later unfolded and repaired.



Fig. 3: Detail of Figure, 1, view of the underside. Photo: Kenyon Reed.

Quite a few examples of folded or cut silver vessels have been discovered in hoards. The Traprain Law Treasure, for instance, is an early-fifth century C.E. hoard that contains primarily broken or crushed pieces of silver plate, most likely valued for their silver content over their vessel forms and intended to be melted down.³ Since silver is an inherently valuable material, and silver vessels from this period are made from consistently high-purity silver alloys, silver vessels were often prized or traded only for their metal content. This dish probably was discovered in this poor condition, then was unfolded and repaired before being sold, which would explain why there is no indication of this in the museum's conservation reports.

As previously mentioned, the dish has a somewhat uneven shape, particularly noticeable in the profile view of the rim and foot (Fig. 4). It is difficult to say whether this was



Fig. 4: Detail of Figure 1, profile view. Photo: Kenyon Reed.

part of the original construction of the dish, or whether this unevenness is entirely the result of the damage sustained when it was folded. Certainly, the damage is a factor in the current shape of the vessel, but the thickness of the foot, which could not be easily crumpled, suggests that the original construction was not perfectly round either, especially in consideration of the somewhat hasty execution of the decoration.

Decoration and Vessel Form

The decoration is fairly simple. Perhaps the most notable feature is the monogram placed in a central medallion in the interior (Fig. 5). The monogram is in the shape of a cross, with Greek capital letters attached to the ends of each arm: an *alpha* to the left, *pi* to the right, an *omicron-epsilon* combination on top, and a *delta* on the bottom. Around the cruciform monogram are two sets of simple incised circles. Outside these circles, the interior of the dish is covered in fluting that ends in a scalloped border. On the exterior of the dish, the only decoration is a single incised circle just below the lip and an incised circle near the base of the foot.

Silver dishes with this type of decoration are fairly common in the Late Antique and Early Byzantine periods. In the third century C.E., one of the most popular types of dishes is a flat vessel with a beaded rim and a nielloed central medallion decorated with a swastika, rosette, or more elaborate, sometimes figural, pattern.⁴ In the fourth and fifth centuries, this design remained more or less the same, but the beading disappears in favor of nielloed geometric or vegetal designs. Dishes from this period were sometimes decorated with the monogram of the name of the owner in the central medallion.⁵ In the reign of Justinian (527–565 C.E.), the monograms on these dishes began to adopt a cruciform shape, perhaps reflective of an increasingly Christianized culture.⁶

This type of cruciform monogram with Greek letters attached to the ends of a cross's arms is found on numerous types of objects, typically of precious metal, including belt buckles, rings, spoons, bowls, and candelabra. The monograms are notoriously difficult to read, since they are not necessarily read in a certain order, and letters could be missing or those present could be read more than once. A suggested reading for the monogram on the Missouri dish is ΠΑΛΛΑΔΙΟΥ, (PALLADIOY), which translates as “of Palladios.”⁷ In this interpretation, the name is read *pi* on the right, *alpha* on the left, then twice as a *lambda* on the bottom, *alpha* on the left again, then on the bottom as a *delta*, and finally *omicron-upsilon* on top. In this interpretation, a *lambda* is superimposed on the *delta*.

The fluting on the dish is a more unusual form of decoration. Although fluting is fairly common through the end of the fourth century C.E., it is not a popular type of decoration in the following centuries.⁸ It is also more common on bowls than on plates or dishes. A number of fluted bowls with the central medallion decoration survive from the fourth and fifth centuries.⁹ Three basic types of fluting occurred in Late Antiquity: straight fluting, which is thought to be an imitation of earlier shell-shaped bowls; an alternating pattern of fluted and flat segments; and spiral fluting.¹⁰ To my knowledge, only three other early Byzantine plates with straight fluting and a central decorated medallion are known, all of which were discovered in southern Russia and are currently in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.¹¹

The first of these three plates, Hermitage Museum no. 283 (Fig. 6a) is larger than the Missouri one, with a diameter of 27 cm, where the Missouri dish is only 13 cm in diameter. Both dishes have straight fluting with a scalloped edge, a similar rim, soldered

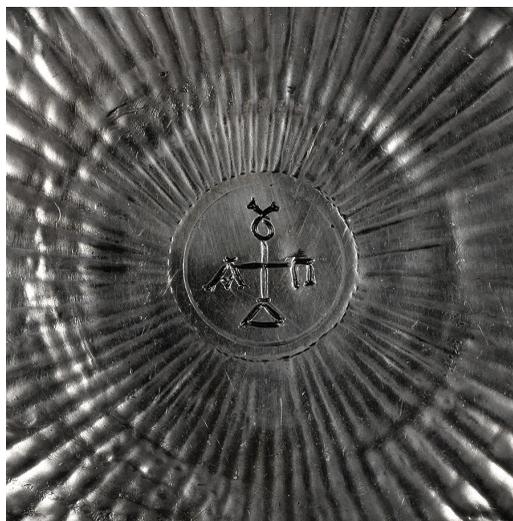


Fig. 5: Detail of Figure 1, monogram. Photo: Kenyon Reed.

A



B



C



Figs. 6a–c: Three Dishes from the State Hermitage Museum, all with cross within wreath and fluting: (a) Byzantine, 610–629/30 C.E., silver and niello, D. 27 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Stroganov collection (W-283); (b) Byzantine, 629–641 C.E., silver and niello, D. 30.9 cm. The State Hermitage Museum (W-824); (c) Byzantine, 610–629/30 C.E., silver and niello, D. 14.2 cm. The State Hermitage Museum (W-217). Photos: Erica Cruikshank Dodd, *Byzantine Silver Stamps: With an Excursus on the Comes Sacrarum Largitionum* by J. P. C. Kent (Washington, D.C., 1961) pp. 172, 196, 208, nos. 55, 67, 73. <https://archive.org/details/byzantin00dodd>.

foot, and two concentric circles around the central medallion. The only significant difference between the two is the decoration in the medallion. While the Missouri dish has a cruciform monogram, plate no. 283 is decorated with a simple niello cross with flaring arms surrounded by an ivy wreath. It also has nine control stamps inside the foot on the bottom, which definitively date it to 613–629/30 C.E.¹²

Control stamps are stamp impressions made on the bottom of some silver vessels from the early fourth to mid-seventh centuries C.E. They typically bear the name of an emperor or government official and can consequently be dated precisely. Their exact purpose is unknown but is thought to show some sort of imperial control on the purity or weight of silver objects. Silver without control stamps, like the Missouri dish, is fairly common and was probably made by private artisans rather than state-controlled workshops.¹³

The second dish from the Hermitage Museum, no. 824 (Fig. 6b), closely resembles the previous one. It is the largest dish of the three, with a diameter of 30.9 cm. It has a similar ivy wreath and cross with flaring arms in the center. The only difference in decoration from the previous dish is an extra concentric circle around the medallion and an additional one outside the scalloping at the edge of the fluting. Plate no. 824 has the more typical five control stamps inside the foot, which date it to 629/30–641 C.E.¹⁴

The third plate, Hermitage Museum no. 217 (Fig. 6c), is closer in size to the Missouri dish, with a diameter of 14.2 cm, although it is significantly heavier, weighing 295 grams, almost twice the weight of the Missouri dish. The medallion is nearly identical to that of the previous two dishes, although the cross is much smaller in relation to the ivy wreath, and the medallion is surrounded by four concentric circles. Plate no. 217 also has five control stamps on its bottom, which date it to 613–629/30 C.E.¹⁵

Although similar in shape and decoration, none of these plates has a cruciform monogram, but quite a few vessels from this period have the monogram without the fluting. For example, three dishes with identical decoration were found in Cyprus. Most likely, these dishes were part of the same set, with the name of the same owner. The first dish, currently in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection is 13.5 cm in diameter (Fig. 7a), a second with a diameter of 13.3 cm is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 7b), and a third from the Walters Art Gallery has a diameter of 25.5 cm (Fig 7c). All three of the dishes have an identical cruciform monogram surrounded by an ivy wreath. The largest dish has a central medallion that is much smaller relative to the size of the plate but actually slightly larger than the medallions of the two smaller plates. Control stamps date the dishes to 610–613 C.E.¹⁶

As just discussed, there are three known plates from this period with straight fluting and a central medallion, a good number with a cruciform monogram in the center, but no other examples with the fluting and the monogram as seen in the Missouri dish. It has been suggested that the medallion with a small cross and the cruciform monogram were interchangeable in the same period. While the monogram had to be commissioned to show a specific name, dishes with the small cross could be bought ready-made.¹⁷

Another notable feature of the Missouri dish is its relatively high ring foot, which accounts for 1.0 cm of the 2.3 cm height of the vessel. This feature cannot be compared

A



Figs. 7a–c: Three dishes from Cyprus:
(a) Dish, Byzantine, 610–613 C.E., silver and niello, D. 13.5 cm, D. foot 6 cm. The Dumbarton Oaks Museum (BZ. 1960.60). Image © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C. (Bz. 1960.60);
(b) Plate with monogram, Byzantine, 610–613 C.E., silver and niello, D. 13.4 cm, D. foot 5.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1952 (52.25.2), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468387>; (c) Dish, Byzantine, 610–613 C.E., silver and niello, D. 25.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum (57.652), <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/21703/dish-2/>.

B



C

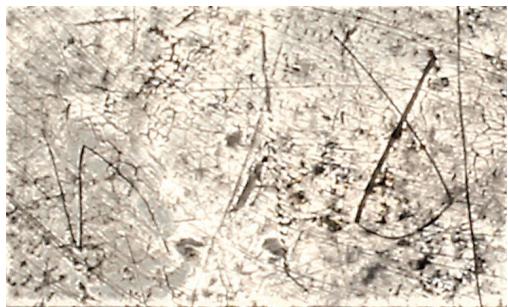


with the examples above because standard descriptions of these plates list diameter and weight, with no indication of height. Pictures are likewise problematic, since they almost always feature the top design of the dish and occasionally the bottom stamps or inscriptions, but profile views are rare. Although many scholars gloss over this feature of silver plates, more comprehensive studies of silver vessel forms from this period by Donald Strong and Marlia Mundell-Mango show that the high foot is a common feature on plates, bowls, and cups from the fourth to seventh centuries C.E.¹⁸

These similarities in form confirm a Late Antique date for the Missouri dish. More specifically, it most closely resembles the three dishes from the Hermitage Museum and the three from Cyprus in its form and monogram decoration. All six of these plates date to 610–641 C.E., which suggests that the Missouri dish likewise belongs to this date range. The date for this dish should therefore be revised to the first half of the seventh century C.E.

Weight Inscription

Additional support for this dating comes from the weight inscription on the bottom of the dish. Initial descriptions of the object mention the more obvious *kappa-pi* scratched on the bottom of the vessel inside the ring foot (Fig. 8a).¹⁹ This could have been added at any point in the life of the dish. Most likely, these are the initials of an individual who owned the dish at some point, and they are too generic to be very informative. A closer inspection of the surface, however, revealed a few marks in the midst of the scratches that did not appear to be marks from use (Fig. 8b). In comparing these to other Greek inscriptions on silver, the mark on the right appears to be an *omicron-epsilon*, similar to the one at the top of the monogram on the inside of the dish, and the mark on a left is a *sigma*. In Greek weight inscriptions, the *omicron-epsilon* designates an *ouggia*, or ounce, and the *sigma* is the number six.²⁰ Six Greek ounces converts roughly to 152–165 g.,



Figs. 8a and b: Details of Figure 1, inscriptions on underside of dish. Museum of Art and Archaeology (84.56). Photos: Kenyon Reed.

which is extraordinarily close to the observed 149.7 g. weight of the dish. Considering probable mass loss due to oxidation and scratching and a margin of error in weighing the object, this difference in weight corresponds well with other weight inscriptions on silver vessels from this period. It is likely, then, that this second inscription indicates the original weight of the vessel as 6 oz.

Greek weight inscriptions of this type are found scratched or dotted on silver objects from the third to seventh centuries C.E. and are typically crudely marked on the bottom of the vessel. Since silver plate was often prized for its metal content, these weight inscriptions would allow for easy identification of the value of the object. Late Antique Greek inscriptions are more often dotted, not scratched, into the surface of the vessel. Dotted would suggest the inscription was applied carefully at the time of manufacture. The scratching on the Missouri dish, then, could indicate the weight was marked on this dish by its owner. Greek weight inscriptions from the third to seventh centuries C.E. also have very specific symbols to identify the unit of measurement, such as *lambda-iota* for “pound,” *gamma-rho* for “scruple,” and *omicron-epsilon*, as seen on this dish, for “ounce.”²¹ Although not as precise as the stylistic comparison to other dishes of this type, the weight inscription does confirm a dating of no later than the seventh century C.E.

Region of Manufacture

It is much more difficult to pinpoint a place of manufacture for the Missouri dish. Some silver vessels have inscriptions indicating their workshop, and some have control stamps that likewise attribute them to a certain city.²² There are no such inscriptions or stamps on the Missouri dish. Even if the find spot of this plate was known, silver circulated easily in this period or stayed in circulation for centuries and could have come to its burial place from anywhere in the empire. Dishes from Constantinople, for instance, are found in Russia, Asia Minor, Britain, and Cyprus. Without a workshop stamp or inscription, the only indication of a region of manufacture comes from stylistic similarities and the condition of the dish. All of the plates that possessed stylistic similarities to the Missouri dish come from the eastern half of the empire, and the Greek letters in the monogram and graffiti are also indicative of an eastern origin, but little can be said beyond that without a scientific analysis of the silver composition.²³

Function

The stylistic comparison to other silver plate discussed previously also helps inform the function of the Missouri dish. One suggestion for this type of flat dish is that it could have been used in a liturgical context as a paten, associating the cross or cruciform monogram with Christian use. Patens from this period, however, almost always have a flat interior with a straight, raised edge. In addition, they are decorated with large or medium-sized crosses, not a small medallion, and often bear a dedicatory inscription.²⁴ In contrast, the Missouri dish, like others of its type, has a smoothly curved interior, a

small central medallion, and no dedicatory inscription. Instead, the Missouri dish was probably a domestic object, a piece from a set of silver dining ware. Domestic silver plate was typically sold in a set, called a *ministerium*, of up to 100 objects, divided into *argentum escarium*, vessels for food, and *argentum pitorium*, silver for drinking. Owning a *ministerium* was a sign of wealth and culture, to be displayed in the context of a banquet, an important event for the exhibition of social status. Although it was a display of status, silver was not necessarily reserved for the elite.²⁵ There are literary descriptions of silver owned by a sailor and his wife in the sixth century and a prostitute in the seventh century C.E.²⁶ The original owner of the Missouri dish was not necessarily a member of an elite class, but at least was wealthy enough to commission a personalized monogram on a set of silver dining ware.

A number of examples of identical plates like the dishes from Cyprus (Fig. 7) have been found in multiples and in different sizes that would have been part of an *argentum escarium*. In the fourth to seventh centuries C.E., these plates generally came in four standard diameters of approximately 50 cm, 35 cm, 26 cm, and 15 cm. Some of the plates are inscribed with the weight of the set rather than the individual vessel, and these inscriptions indicate that sets typically included four dishes of each size.²⁷ The variation in size, sets of four, and presence of the monogram of an owner, all suggest that these plates were sold for dinner service, rather than for the liturgical use that is sometimes hypothesized for dishes bearing a cross or cruciform monogram. The Missouri dish clearly belongs to the domestic set of vessels. With a 13 cm diameter, it would have been the smallest of the plates. The Missouri dish consequently was part of a set of silver dining ware, most likely with matching monograms commissioned for the owner.

It is possible, however, that the function of this dish changed over time. Domestic silver plate was often donated to a church or the poor when its owner converted to Christianity.²⁸ Additionally, as discussed above, silver vessels were often traded, acting as silver bullion with a value connected to its weight. The presence of a weight inscription that was probably added to the bottom of the dish after manufacture indicates that the Missouri dish could have been weighed and traded at some point. That it was never cut or melted, however, proves that the plate was buried before it was reduced to simple silver bullion.

The burial of the Missouri dish in a hoard, indicated by its previously folded condition, is also suggestive of its function at the end of its circulation. Hoards are collections of silver plate and other valuable objects that were buried or hidden. They have traditionally been thought of as groups of treasure that were hidden in a time of crisis, such as a barbarian invasion. This would prevent anyone from stealing valuables, so that the original owners could return for the collection when the threat has past. More recent scholarship has suggested that the reasons hoards are buried are more nuanced than this. No hoards have been found in villas throughout the Roman Empire, and only one hoard, that from Vienne, has been discovered near a house. This Vienne hoard, however, was also in the vicinity of a temple or sanctuary, so it is difficult to attribute it to either structure.²⁹ If domestic silver plate was hastily buried, one would expect to find it near or in a home, especially around villas of individuals who almost certainly would own domestic silver.

The absence of silver hoards in the area around houses indicates that hoards might have been buried under different circumstances than is commonly assumed.

Hoardings have been found in religious structures, perhaps signifying that these could have been a type of offering. Some found in rivers, pools, or bogs might have served a similar purpose. Other hoards were carefully packed, so they could not have been buried hastily, although this does not exclude the possibility of taking precautions in a time of crisis. These more carefully packed hoards, or hoards that include cut silver plate, could have served as a type of savings buried for safe keeping. In addition, although silver is not as easily misplaced as other materials, hoards could be lost, especially during transportation on land or over water. Silver hoards consequently require a more careful analysis of their provenience to determine the reasons for their burial.³⁰

The circumstances surrounding the burial of the Missouri dish are not known. Since it was never reduced to silver bullion, it was probably buried within a few centuries of its manufacture. Certainly, significant numbers of finds of silver plate from the East were buried in the seventh century. The eastern half of the late Roman Empire had remained fairly stable and prosperous until the early seventh century, when Sassanian attacks plagued the region, reaching as far as Constantinople. Sassanian attacks were quickly followed by the Arab conquest, which overran the Levant and Egypt by 651 C.E., effectively ending the Sassanian Empire and Byzantine hold of the East. Through all this turmoil, silver plate was the primary method of funding armies, and was one of the first items taken by invaders. The Persians, for instance, confiscated 112,000 lbs. of silver plate in the 620s C.E. when they conquered Edessa.³¹ It is likely that the Missouri dish was one of the items buried in the midst of the turmoil of the seventh century C.E. Never melted or cut up, it could have still been in use as a piece of dining silver, although it had probably changed hands at some point. Most likely it was buried as a type of savings or to protect it from an advancing army, of which there was no shortage in the seventh century.

Conclusion

With nothing known of its provenience, the silver Byzantine dish in the collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri presents significant issues with its identification. Based on stylistic similarities to other silver plate, it probably dates to the first half of the seventh century and was part of a set of dining silver. The absence of control stamps on the bottom suggest that it was manufactured in a private, not imperial workshop, although the region of that workshop cannot be determined without a scientific analysis of the silver alloy composition of the dish.³² The new identification of a weight inscription on the bottom of the vessel suggests that it was traded at some point before being buried, possibly in the chaotic eastern Byzantine Empire in the seventh century C.E. Although the exact provenance of the Missouri dish is lost to history, it continues to reveal traces of its story through the markings on its silver.

NOTES

- * I would like to thank Benton Kidd and Kenyon Reed for facilitating my work with this silver dish at the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri, and for Kenyon Reed's wonderful photographs of the object. Additionally, I would like to thank James van Dyke, Marcus Rautman, and Marcello Mogetta for their guidance throughout this project.
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