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## Connecting and contextualising copperware productions

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DRANDAKI, A. 2021. *Late Antique Metalware. The Production of Copper-Alloy Vessels between the 4th and 8th Centuries. The Benaki Museum Collection and Related Material*. Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité Tardive 37. Turnhout: Brepols. Pp. 410. ISBN: 978-2-503-56941-3

Chronological subdivisions are very often a grid superimposed on the flow of historical events, to make the task easier for those studying the material realities of the past. And yet

the production of objects, especially those for everyday life, knows no interruptions or changes that are not due to phenomena of taste or linked to problems relating to the supply of raw materials.

Hence, the study of material culture can sometimes prove more elusive for the specialist than the mere classification of finds aided by manuals organized by chronological subdivisions. Indeed, production uninterruptedly wound its way through the ages, and the relationships between objects – of different materials and periods – are much closer than our artificial partitions allow us to grasp. From the Introduction onwards, Anastasia Drandaki (D.) shows that she is acutely aware of these and other limitations that she overcomes as her work unfolds.

This 37th volume in the series *Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive* (BAT) presents copper-alloy objects from the collection of the Benaki Museum in Athens. Most are published here for the first time, and, like so many ancient objects in museum collections, they lack contextual information. The majority, however, were acquired in Egypt, where the Benaki family lived.

In her Introduction (13–16), D. opens with a series of interesting points and highly debated questions. After introducing the principal issues related to the study of bronze vessels and contextualizing the choices that led to the formation of Anthony Benaki's collection, D. locates her research within a broader debate on the chronological limits commonly accepted as marking the caesura between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (here called the "Early Byzantine period"). In doing so, she acknowledges the long technological tradition of copperware – with roots traceable to the first centuries CE – and the links with ceramic forms, with which copperware was closely interconnected in a mutual exchange of formal repertoires. D. rightly stresses how the economic, legislative, and productive framework within which these vessels were manufactured remained fully Graeco-Roman and was likely perceived as such by their producers and users.<sup>1</sup> Hence, D.'s wholly agreeable decision to identify vessels dating to this period as Late Roman rather than Early Byzantine, as the most correct way of looking at them from a wider, diachronic perspective.

The typological approach has long been almost the only method used for the study of bronze objects, and copper-alloy vessels are no exception. But D.'s book stands out among related publications right from its chosen subtitle, in which the word "production" features prominently. Although this might not come as a complete novelty – after all, other works, duly cited by the author, contain sections dedicated to production of Byzantine copper-alloy objects<sup>2</sup> – this volume nonetheless represents a rarity in a scholarly sector marked by a certain traditionalism in approach.

Indeed, metals research has always suffered from a significant gap between the chronological and technological reconstruction of production processes, aided by hard sciences (archaeometallurgy),<sup>3</sup> and the more traditional, stylistically based study of the

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<sup>1</sup> On aspects of technological continuity, stagnation, and innovation between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages see Lavan 2007.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Pitarakis 2005 for reliquary crosses; Xanthopoulou 2010 for lighting devices; while an edition of the International Congress on Ancient Bronzes (Giumlia-Mair 2002) was entirely devoted to the themes of production and technology.

<sup>3</sup> For an updated definition and an overview of the most recent issues related to the topic, see Roberts and Thornton 2014.

finished metal objects. As has rightly been argued, however, to study artifacts without knowing how they were made and marketed, and neglecting key social and economic issues, is to fail to tell their history in full;<sup>4</sup> on the other hand, the archaeology of production sometimes lacks an adequate reconnection with the final outcome of production processes, disregarding both the objects and the agents whose demands and needs underpinned production itself.

Part I of the volume deals extensively with all aspects of vessel typology, namely, manufacture, distribution, dating, function, and terminology. The subject matter is organized into 14 chapters, in which the fundamental characteristics of each group, based on function, are outlined. Given the heterogeneity of the material in the collection, D. has chosen to create rather broad groupings, probably in order not to fragment the treatment too much. Hence, Chapters 1–9 deal with vessels (mostly diverse types of bowls) and other tableware, such as bottles, ladles, and dining implements, while Chapters 10–13 present objects with different functions, perhaps linked to both domestic and ritual purposes, such as buckets, amphoriskoi, lighting implements, and censers. However, as elsewhere in the book, the author stresses the multi-functionality of many items that could be used in various contexts. Each chapter also features a general commentary, particularly rich in comparisons with both contemporary and older vessels (such as, for example, the items from the 1st-c. CE Boscoreale Treasure, or the typological links with the classical tradition, as highlighted for ladles), as well as interesting comments that clearly stem from detailed inspection of the items and careful reflections on their technical features. Many observations also derive from the scientific analyses performed on a selection of items (on which more will be said shortly).

In dealing with technological questions, D. makes extensive use of ancient sources, both Greek and Latin, such as Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*. The exploitation of contemporary papyri is particularly laudable, as these are often overlooked but can provide good information on issues such as the vessels' denominations and contexts of use, and the economic value they held for their owners, while also offering some interesting references to coppersmiths. These details reinforce the validity of a combined approach that utilizes both written documents and archaeological material.

The second part of the volume "The production of copperwares" – interestingly placed between the general typological classification and the catalogue itself – deals extensively with issues related to technological aspects of production and the places where manufacturing took place.

Chapter 15 "Technical data from the study of vessels in the Benaki Museum" is arguably the most innovative chapter in the book. It tackles technological and alloy-use questions rarely considered in research on copper-alloy objects, except for in specialist articles. D. discusses in full all the major questions concerning terminology and alloy composition of the collection's items, offering useful comparisons with similar vessels from contexts across Europe and making ample use of specialist literature on the subject. Scientific analyses performed on the vessels (these duly mentioned in each catalogue entry in other chapters) are synthesized here in a dedicated figure (276–77, fig. 233). The results of analyses of other, differently dated objects (from preceding and later periods)

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<sup>4</sup> Giannichedda 2015.

are also provided as comparanda for the data obtained; this shows that the analysis protocol was carefully designed, highlighting the substantial homogeneity of results on vessels from the Byzantine period.

Importantly, the author does not consider these scientific results a simple appendix to her work; rather, she endeavors to interpret them in terms of the operational and technological choices made by craftsmen, and also as they related to the stylistic preferences of the clients, without losing sight of a general economic framework in which the choice of certain materials may have been conditioned by their availability and cost.

The issue of recycling is also tackled with convincing technical arguments, with the textual sources for an extant commercial circuit of raw materials (namely, tin from Britain) considered when reconstructing productive cycles. The conclusions drawn on the alloy compositions perhaps deserve more careful analysis. The author argues that the data on the Benaki vessels reveal a difference in composition between vessels produced in western Europe, featuring a high lead content, and those manufactured in the eastern Mediterranean, showing a high zinc concentration. Although she stresses this discrepancy should not be considered proof of the vessels' provenance, the author implies it could signal a different metalworking tradition. Nonetheless, analyses performed on mid-imperial vases from Roman Egypt show a lead-rich alloy composition that is very similar to that of western European production.<sup>5</sup> The contrast highlighted by the analyses on the Benaki vessels could hint at a voluntary modification of alloys, perhaps related to some technological choice or change in taste, rather than a completely different tradition. It must be stressed that we still have insufficient analytical data to judge these matters securely, and D. shows her awareness of this lack when she calls for more scientific analysis of vessels at several points in her book.

Overall, there is a clear understanding in the book that archaeological science must be used to answer archaeologically – and historically – informed questions, and that the results of analyses should always be translated (and translatable) in a cultural-historical perspective.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, D. makes very good use of the analyses performed on the vessel collection. However, a word of caution is in order as far as the use of X-Ray Fluorescence is concerned: despite the undeniable advantage of being a non-invasive and non-destructive analytical technique (which makes it popular among museum curators), it has been highlighted on several occasions that it may have some pitfalls,<sup>7</sup> since it analyses only an object's surface.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the results might be subject to error due to surface geometry, alteration patinas, and/or conservation treatments.<sup>9</sup> In any case, the author states in her Foreword (12) that the full results of these analyses will be published in a separate study. We await this publication in order to know more about the methodology applied.

The chapter on copperware workshops (Ch. 16) makes extensive use of textual and pictorial sources to explore the role of coppersmiths, including their denominations,

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<sup>5</sup> Marti-Clerx and Mille 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Pernicka 2014, 262; Pollard and Bray 2014, 237.

<sup>7</sup> Artioli 2010, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Pearce 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Pollard and Bray 2014.

specializations, and guild organizations, as well as how their workshops functioned and were structured, and their location within the urban fabric of the major Late Antique cities. The author also surveys archaeological evidence to explore the functions associated with excavated workshops. She argues that craftsmen working in major cities were highly specialized, producing only certain kinds of objects, whereas in smaller centers or during periods of economic hardship, they would have resorted to the production and repair of a wider range of items, according to the needs of their clientele. Although her point is supported by some of the evidence presented, D. is aware that the evidence available so far is still fragmentary; therefore, we should be cautious in making such sharp divisions. In many cases, not all structures pertaining to a given workshop are conserved, because the more perishable ones, such as wooden scaffolding or counters, often disappear completely from the archaeological record. Perhaps more evidence is needed – and more carefully examined productive contexts – before we can arrive at firm conclusions about the range and scale of these units' production.

Chapter 17 surveys the shapes and functions of the vessels examined. From the outset, D. stresses the multifunctionality of these items according to specific, often domestic, needs. The author also tackles the question of the relationship between silver and copperware production, arguing that copper was manufactured independently of silver on the basis of different social and economic contexts. Given that copperware was produced on a wider, more standardized scale than luxury silver vessels, she also makes a convincing case when it comes to decoration and iconographical choices. Many scenes appear to have been generically conceived, suggesting pre-determinate, standard settings (for example, the decorative repertoire for buckets, also extensively treated in Chapter 10). The repetition of decorative motifs can be tentatively explained, the author suggests, by the circulation of model-books or, alternatively, by hypothesizing that there were leading production centers (imperial court workshops, perhaps?) disseminating decorative motifs and patterns all through the eastern Mediterranean.

The last part of this chapter addresses one of the thorniest issues in the study of Late Antique copper-alloy vessels, namely, the long-standing debate on the alleged exclusively Egyptian provenance of certain types of so-called Coptic vessels – a subject that, although widely studied and discussed, remains a matter of heated discussion among scholars of Late Antique and early medieval bronze production (a succinct account of this debate is given, citing the main bibliography in the footnotes). After compactly outlining the issue, as well as pointing out misinterpretations that have created a series of “artificial problems,” D. next proposes that far from being an isolated production, typical of Egypt alone, these copper-alloy products followed parallel lines of development in the East and in the West. Their different stylistic features were nevertheless rooted in their common membership of the Greco-Roman tradition. D. argues that disagreements in the past were mainly due to the lack of a systematic typological classification for these vessels. Her argument appears convincing in its theorization of different production centers, each with its own formal tradition within a general, unitarian framework, but its main strength resides perhaps in the parallels drawn with contemporary productions in other materials, such as sculpture or textiles. This confirms the breadth of D.'s approach to the topic and urges us to recall that the material culture of a given historical period, far from being made up of singular and independent productions, represents a unity, drawing inspiration and models from contemporary socio-economic phenomena and historical circumstances. Furthermore, while dealing with the presence of these vessels as grave goods in Late

Antique and early medieval western European burials, D. also makes interesting observations on the different value and status these objects enjoyed once they were traded beyond the boundaries of the Empire. Their role as high-status markers among foreign elites implicitly suggests the biography of objects as a further angle from which to consider them.

The concluding remarks before the catalogue represent an effective summary of discussions in the previous chapters. The author again highlights the difficult task of deciphering the multiplicity of functions of the objects she deals with – a multiplicity that, necessarily, escapes us today. The classification she proposes is valuable but also anticipates that new findings and associations from dated contexts will hopefully shed further light on the topic. In addition, D. again emphasizes that the production of bronze vessels was not the exclusive prerogative of Egypt and these objects must be considered from the perspective of a natural continuity with the Greco-Roman tradition, together with the other expressions of the material culture and art of Late Antiquity.

One of the main merits of this substantial and well-produced publication is its attempt to reconnect production traditions usually separated by traditional chronological divisions. To this end, D. introduces numerous abundantly illustrated comparisons with well-known vessel specimens and deposits, often dating to earlier or later periods.

Ultimately, the book achieves two objectives. On the one hand, it can be used as a reference manual to identify forms and types and their relative dating quickly and effectively; this is thanks especially to the layout of the catalogue, which is accompanied by detailed line drawings of each piece, as well as beautiful color images. On the other hand, the extensive cross-referencing to other collections and the broader technical reasoning provides a fundamental tool for contextualizing individual pieces within productive and economic circuits of the Late Roman world.

As D. states in the Introduction, her aim is to lay the foundations for “a wider debate about production, circulation, and use of copper-alloy vessels in Late Antiquity” (13). This goal is certainly fulfilled, and it is what makes this book stand out from most others, which adopt a merely chrono-typological approach.

Finally, the way that D. manages to move between different source types (literary and iconographic) and the chronological reconstructions she draws make this book an important step forward among publications devoted to metalware. More generally, her approach represents a valuable example of how to investigate museum collections.

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## Headquarters, office space, and desks in ancient Rome

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COARELLI, F. 2019. *Statio: i luoghi dell'amministrazione nell'antica Roma*. Rome: Edizioni Quasar. Pp. 490. ISBN 987-88-7140-941-2.

Filippo Coarelli (C.), whose scholarly merits are legion and who truly needs no introduction, has written a book which anyone interested in the topography and archaeology of Rome will do well to consult. The book is also relevant for the physical and material aspects of Roman government and administration, even though it does not quite go into detail about archival practices and the functioning of the imperial bureaucracy in the tradition of Fergus Millar's *The Emperor in the Roman World*.<sup>1</sup> C. is focused on the spatial dimension, which surely is why the book is dedicated to the memory of Claude Nicolet. The same initial page presents quotes from two renowned scholars, one by Angelo Brelich about the disadvantages of “hypercriticism,” the other a short dictum by Nicholas Purcell: “No ancient office building and no ancient desk will ever be discovered.” This sentence was chosen, however, because it stands in such strong contrast to what C. sets out to show.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Millar 1977 (2nd ed. 1992). More of the Millar approach is found in Mazzei 2009, a massive contribution relevant for the subject of the book but not quoted by C.

<sup>2</sup> Purcell 1986. Purcell's quote is attributed to the year 1996 by Coarelli, but the work consulted must be a reprint. That statement, which today seems fairly irrelevant, originated in the