Utility, Liturgy, and Luxury

Olivia Brock
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arth3620_2021

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arth3620_2021/38

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the ARTH 3620: Early Christian and Byzantine Art at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYZANTIUM: Trade, Treasure, Tradition by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
Abstract: The material legacy of medieval Byzantium is one of intricate luxury objects made of precious materials. As was evident in many cultures and periods, including the Byzantine, high-quality luxury materials were used to promote the status of individuals and institutions. The Attarouthi Treasure out of the Church of St. Stephen in Syria presents an excellent case study of luxury liturgical objects used to promote the social status of the church, as well as imbied the church in a series of complex social networks that both enhanced and retracted from the church’s social role. These objects were also physically dynamic as they moved through the space of the church, and symbolically dynamic as they took on different meanings and functions as their owners changed – a concept of agency applicable to virtually all material objects historically and today.

Utility, Liturgy, and Luxury
By Olivia Brock

The use of beautiful objects to communicate status is a natural consequence of a wealthy and socially-divided society. As one of the most affluent, diverse, and economical societies in the late-Classical and early-medieval periods, Byzantium saw a swift introduction of precious luxury objects into its mainstream material culture. Wealthy, high-status Byzantines displayed these luxury objects as a way to identify their social position and visually separate themselves from those lesser. This use of luxury objects in a secular space to promote certain political, social, or economic positions in Byzantium was well-established, so much-so that the trend took hold in the religious sphere to raise and maintain the status of religion in the eyes of the laity.

Churches and monasteries incorporated luxury objects into their liturgy as a way to uphold the divinity of ritual and legitimize Christian spaces as being ordained by God, and thus holding the highest of any social status. The Church of St. Stephen in Attarouthi, Syria, specifically, maintained a large collection of luxury liturgical objects designed to create a physically luxurious space that would guide worshippers through a spiritual experience in a way that plain, undecorated objects could never achieve. Though they were designed specifically for the Eucharist, these luxury items were physically, socially, and symbolically dynamic. The objects were intended to be used in ritual and moved throughout the physical space of the church, thus constantly altering the viewer’s interaction with the object between the tactile and visual. In addition to their physical dynamism, these liturgical objects served as means for inculcating its owners within a large social network by being traded among individuals of varying social positions. And as these objects changed hands, they held a certain amount of agency allowing their inherent meaning and symbolism to consistently change to reflect the values and intentions of their owners.

Figure 1: The Attarouthi Treasure, Byzantine, 6th-7th c., Syria.
Typically known as the Attarouthi Treasure (6th-7th c.), the Church of St. Stephen’s collection of ten chalices, three censers, a strainer, and representation of the Holy Dove, serves as a prime example of luxury objects intended to facilitate a spiritual experience (figure 1). The ten chalices are of particular importance given their active role in the Eucharist and physical interaction with worshippers. All ten chalices are made of silver and consist of a bowl, stem, and foot. Holding approximately one-half-gallon of liquid, each bowl was decorated by hammering the images from the inside, followed by a gold gilding on the most visually notable external elements, such as the figures and arches (figure 2). At the top of the exterior bowl sits a gold frieze with a dedicatory inscription written in Greek. Below the frieze are six golden arches, supported by classical ionic columns, each containing a golden figure. Additionally, a gold knop protrudes from the stem below the bowl, followed by the foot, engraved with a golden band. Both the band and knop, as well as the arches and frieze, are decorated with a consistent braid-like motif.¹

Undoubtedly, the simpler physical and formal qualities of the chalice may undermine its designation as a luxury object, however, the object’s utilitarian function is aided by its easy physicality. As a chalice used for the Eucharist, it was not designed to exist statically.² The chalice would have been passed among worshippers as a vessel for the wine representing the blood of Christ. As such, it needed to be lightweight and easy to handle. Arguably, the knop on the stem of the chalice was not just an aesthetic decision, but a practical one to aide worshippers in holding the object. As a dynamic object, the vessel needed to be consistently robust – one did not want to worry about a gemstone falling off or the object shattering if mishandled. Thus, the use of a shiny hard metal with a lack of adornments allows for the chalice to serve in its role as a luxury, status-setting object designed to withstand frequent handling by Christian worshippers. While the object’s formal elements are alone indicative of its symbolic role, the figural and architectural engravings confirm its non-physical function to uplift the status of the church. The six figures sitting among the arches aide the message of the object. A youthful Christ sits prominently on the bowl surrounded by his cruciform halo and gesturing towards what looks to

be a Bible (figure 3). To his right sits St. Stephen, the saint to whom the church is dedicated, holding a censer, and to his left an unidentifiable youthful saint holding a staff. Directly opposite of Christ sits the Virgin, identified by her maphorion, posed in prayer. Finally, Mary is flanked by two archangels, each carrying a staff and orb.³

Though the figural engravings are simple, they serve a serious purpose to connect worshippers with the spiritual meaning and importance of their actions. As one takes a drink from the chalice, they see the divine images and remember whose blood they are drinking. The physical nearness of the image of Christ and the Virgin while partaking of the wine facilitates a direct and intimate encounter with God that forces the worshipper into a special spiritual space that could certainly be described as luxurious.⁴ This so-called “spiritual luxury” is not achieved by image alone, but rather through a whole sensory experience. The passing of the chalice, for instance, creates a tactile sensation – participants get to literally feel the divine images they are viewing through the physical nature of the engravings. As the silver and gold vessel is passed throughout the room, it will shine as it reflects the light from different angles, adding a sense of dynamism to the visual nature of the object. Finally, the strong scent of the wine combined with the prayers and hymns performed during the Eucharist add to an overwhelming environment of luxury and spirituality achieved through sensory engagement.

As the chalice and its figural imagery connects worshippers to a certain spiritual situation it also connects them to the physical space. The arches on the bowl, for instance, most likely reference an ambiguous Byzantine church, the style of which would have been familiar to those partaking.⁵ The figure of St. Stephen is also reminiscent of the physical church dedicated in his name. The combination of the architectural features of the chalice with the divine figures suggests the literal presence of those figures in the space of the Church and causes worshippers to take their own presence in the space more seriously. Additionally, showing Christ, Mary, archangels, and the saints in a physical, terrestrial space, aides in the church’s legitimacy as a vessel for God’s work and a divine space. Undoubtedly, this same objective to legitimize the church and religion through a physical object, such as the chalice, could not have been achieved by a lesser object – it is the luxurious material and decoration of the vessel that give credibility and reverence to its argument.

While legitimizing both the spiritual and physical nature of the Church, the chalice also allows patrons and donors to personally connect themselves to the object’s divine purpose. The frieze at the top of each chalice notes the name of the donor and the institution to which it was given. In this particular case, the chalice reads, “For his salvation Diodoros of the village of Attarouthi has offered [this].”⁶ Notably, the high-quality, luxurious, nature of the chalice works in the favor of Diodoros and situates him as an affluent and spiritually-effective member of the community, in a way that a lesser object would be unable to achieve. By offering this chalice to the Church of St. Stephen, Diodoros is not only enhancing the mission of the church, but also permanently connecting himself to the divine figures and liturgical purpose of the vessel.

---

³ “The Attarouthi Treasure – Chalice.”
⁴ Evan Freeman and Anne McClanan, “A Chalice from the Attarouthi Treasure,” Smart History.
⁵ Freeman and McClanan, “A Chalice from the Attarouthi Treasure.”
⁶ “The Attarouthi Treasure – Chalice.”
Notably, the patronage of these objects places them – and by extension, their owners – within a dynamic social network. As the recipient of these vessels, the Church of St. Stephen is inherently connected to Diodoros, as the patron, and any prestige (or criticisms) the come with Diodoros’ social position. These objects, however, not only connect the church to the patron, but also anyone directly connected with said patron, complicating the network further. Similarly, the exchange of luxury objects aligns the patron with the prestige of the church and any connections the church may possess, such as with the imperial court or aristocracy, not to mention with Christ himself. This culture of patronage and gift-giving is give-and-take. Though the Church certainly benefits from being gifted objects, such as these chalices, they also lose a certain amount of social autonomy, indicating that they are, in fact, dependent on certain amounts of public support to run properly. This in turn gives the people a level of power over the church and its functions. By contrast, the object itself gains its fundamental value through connections with the church, and would not be viewed in the same light as a “prestige object” if it were not used for such an important ritual, implying that though people have a level of power over the church, they also depend on the church to give legitimacy and divinity to their gifts. This give-and-take associated with the movement of objects is indicative of complex social connections and transfers of power among individuals and institutions of varying social statuses.

The connections created by these objects are complex and consistently changing. As the church changes roles in mainstream society, the perception of the objects does as well. Additionally, if the utilitarian role of the objects is removed – and they are placed on display, for instance – then the symbolism of the objects as a physical bridge between worshippers and the divine is removed. Evidently, these objects possess a certain amount of agency that allows their meaning and symbolism to change as it transitions owners and functions. To a certain extent, the symbolic meaning of the liturgical objects does not transcend space, ownership, and time, but rather is entirely dependent on their current social situation, so-much-so that the objects essentially lose all meaning when they are no longer connected to an owner or institution.

By using physically and spiritually luxurious objects for liturgy, the Church of St. Stephen not only achieved the utilitarian needs of the Eucharist, but also created a visual and sensory argument to establish the legitimacy of the church and its divine contents. The combination of the physical materials of silver and gold along with the iconography of holy figures and spaces reminded worshippers of the purpose of their worship and facilitated an intimate experience with God. Additionally, the use of luxury objects to promote an idea aligned with well-established trends in Byzantium at-large to indicate one’s status, not with words, but with intricate imagery and eye-catching aesthetics. These objects ultimately had the power to take on varying meanings as they changed social and functional circumstances which allowed them to place their owners within large social networks that can lead to increased social, political, and religious power.

---

Bibliography


