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## GLASS OBJECTS IN THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF THE MUSEUM OF BYZANTINE CULTURE, THESSALONIKI, OR HOW THE SAME OBJECTS ARE TELLING DIFFERENT STORIES



The Permanent exhibition of the Museum of Byzantine Culture, which is arranged chronologically and thematically in 11 rooms, includes a considerable number of glass objects. This material is used as a case study, in order to show how archaeological objects can be interpreted in several ways as museum exhibits.

Aspects of economic history, like trade, the distinction of local products and the origin of imports can be presented through these objects. But many other, small, private stories can also be told, shedding light on aspects of the private and personal spheres which history and archaeology seldom enter.

### **Early Christian Church**

In this room glass is presented in the form of lighting devices, as well as in the form of composite glass panes and mosaic tesserae, once decorating the walls of Thessaloniki's churches.

### **Early Christian Cities and Private Dwellings**

In this room metal tools and glass vases connected with glass-working activity are presented along with a series of vessels showing the use of glass as tableware or as containers for cosmetics and ointments. Glass implements, like coin-weights or jewelry, are also presented offering a different aspect of the presence of glass in early Christian society.

### **From the Elysian Fields to the Christian Paradise**

In this room, glass vessels used in burial contexts are presented. They include items placed in graves as grave goods or as part of burial rituals as well as those found atop graves as remains of memorials. Glass jewelry is also presented as a very common means of adornment found in graves.

### **From Iconoclasm to the Splendor of the Macedonian Dynasty and the Komnenoi. Byzantine Castles**

In these two rooms, glass bracelets and beads are presented offering examples of less expensive alternatives available to Byzantine ladies in terms of adornment.

### **The Twilight of Byzantium**

In this room large, close-shaped tableware vessels, occasionally used as unguentaria, are presented, along with a few glass or glass-adorned jewels and costume adornments.

### **"Byzantium after Byzantium": The Byzantine Heritage in the years after the Fall of Constantinople**

Glass lamps, found mainly in churches and monasteries, along with large tableware vessels and smaller ones devoted to medicaments and ointments found in habitation areas are presented in this room.

**Key words:** Byzantium, Glassware, Museology.

Glass has had a long history as a luxurious commodity, appropriate only for the highest social strata [16, p. 111, no. 179, pl. 20; 28, p. 4-101; 34, p. 19-20]. With the invention of free blowing during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, it developed a wider distribution, which peaked during the early Christian period [18; 19; 33, passim, esp. 446-47]. In this period, glass workshops were active in almost every city, covering the majority of local needs for glass objects. These workshops used raw glass, both importing raw glass and recycling local broken objects. By this time only special objects, technically or aesthetically, were imported from remote production centres.

Glass vessels were used as tableware, for transportation and storage of liquids, like oil, wine and unguents and also as lamps [7; 14; 15; 17]. Glass presented a cheap decorative medium, used either for the production of wholly glass jewels, or for the embellishment of metal jewels in the form of gems or enamel [32]. Glass was also widely used for window glazing in the form of simple, geometrical window panes, or as more complex compositions, like stained glass.

In addition, huge quantities of glass were used for the decoration of mainly public buildings in the form of colourful mosaic compositions [20].

There are indications that glass continued to be used for the production of tableware, storage vessels and lamps during the middle Byzantine period. Archaeological finds, however, are restricted almost exclusively to jewellery and mosaics, while in the late Byzantine period the situation alters drastically. Several vessels survive from this period, mainly tableware, which witnesses the flourishing of commercial relations among the Italian maritime cities, the Byzantine Empire and the Arab caliphates [4; 9; 13].

The Museum of Byzantine Culture's glass objects, just like almost all of its collections, are archaeological finds. They are mainly from salvage excavations conducted in the city of Thessaloniki, one of the major centres of the Byzantine Empire and the second most important city after Constantinople, and the wider region of Central Macedonia [22]. As is only natural, due to glass's fragility and the constant recycling of the broken objects, the Museum's glass artefacts are almost exclusively found in the excavations of necropolises.

One hundred eighty glass objects are presented (124 vessels and 56 jewels) in the permanent exhibition of the Museum. These, along with 2,725 other objects, out of the 42,882 which the museum possesses in all, are distributed throughout 11 rooms occupying an area of 3000 m<sup>2</sup>. Together they tell a story which unfolds from room to room proceeding along two parallel axes, the one chronological-starting from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and concluding in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and the other thematic [31; 35; 36; 37; 38].

Each room contains various types of material and gives an idea of aspects of the culture of a particular period in Byzantine history, stressing both the continuity and the change with each new era. Where feasible, details are provided about the production and technology of specific items, such as ceramics. Objects of a similar kind exhaust their potential to yield diverse information, being used in the exhibition in multiple ways, depending on the specific theme being set forth.

The archaeological exhibits are reinforced with a variety of information and visual material, making it easier to identify and create a context that recalls and evokes the exhibit's original setting. The accompanying texts are comprehensive and easy to understand; free of obscure technical terms which only experts would be familiar with. The captions are brief and easy to read, including just those details which visitors need in order to identify and date the exhibit.

The open display of most of the exhibits, including tools of all kinds, ceramic tableware, cooking utensils, and storage vessels evokes their original settings and functions, and at the same time creates in the visitor a feeling of immediacy and familiarity.

Particular attention was paid to the colour schemes and lighting of the rooms, since it is the handling of these two museographical parameters which gives each room its own special atmosphere. The colour scheme of each room was dictated by its theme, and resulted from research into the plastered or painted surfaces of the monuments of the period in question. The aim was to convey the atmosphere of the places from which the exhibits originate. This enhances visitors' reception of them; they are in a sense "reinstalled" in their "original" place and time.

Glass exhibits will be used as a case study, in order to show how archaeological objects can be interpreted in several ways as museum exhibits. Aspects of economic history, like trade, the distinction of local products and the origin of imports can be presented through these objects. But many other, small, private stories can also be told, shedding light on aspects of the private and personal spheres which history and archaeology seldom enter.

### Early Christian Church

The exhibition makes its approach to the architecture and decoration of Early Christian churches through a selection of sculpted architectural members, liturgical vessels, mosaics, and wall paintings, most of which come from churches in Thessaloniki (Fig. 1,1).

In the showcase with lighting devices used in Early Christian churches, along with clay and metal lamps, a glass lamp is presented. This, which in fact is a grave good, yet identical to the thousands of lamps found in excavations of churches all over the Mediterranean, could be used either suspended or standing. A different way of using glass lamps is presented, in a somewhat abstract way, by a conical lamp designed to be used in a metal holding, the so-called *polycandela* [29, p. 285]. Glass lamps were used equally in public and private buildings, both secular and religious ones [12]. The examples in the exhibit are grave goods, which attest to the universal use of successful products.

Very rare, stained windows from the Basilica in Philippi are exhibited in combination with lead stripes, originally used to mount them together, along with a mullion and a capital, evoking their original setting and use [11, p. 49-51, fig. 2; 21] (Fig. 1,2).

Glass was also used for the production of expensive wall mosaics. This use, of all other uses, was the one that consumed the largest quantity of glass, since 1,2 kg of glass was needed for the decoration of a square meter, equivalent to 10-15 big-sized vessels. Early Christian churches of Thessaloniki, those of Saint Demetrios and of the Acheiropoietos, were damaged over the centuries; part of their original decoration was detached and is now exhibited in the museum, presenting a rare exhibit and vividly illustrating this special and precious decoration of religious buildings of this era [24, p. 185-195, 153-174] (Fig. 1,3).

### Early Christian Cities and Private Dwellings

The focal point of the exhibition is a *triclinium*, the reception room of a wealthy house in Thessaloniki, with a mosaic floor and wall paintings. Around it develop such themes as town planning, water supply, commerce, minting, defence, the citizens' occupations and aspects of everyday life at home, with references to domestic

equipment (pottery and glassware) and activities (weaving, cooking), clothing, personal adornment and embellishment, and domestic architecture (Fig. 1,4).

In the section on marketplaces, commerce, and workshops, along with tools of other professionals like the jeweller and the blacksmith, glass vessels of locally produced forms are exhibited in connection with a metal tool which was unearthed at the site of a glass workshop from the wider region [1, p. 65-67; 8].

In the section which represents the interior of a house, along with ceramic tableware, glass bottles and jugs, two of the most common, generally speaking, forms of Early Christian glass vessels are presented [29, p. 318] (Fig. 1,5). The glass vessels are the only ones placed behind a glass showcase on account of their fragility and because it is quite certain that in the Early Christian house they were kept and secured in cupboards.

Glass *unguentaria*, both plain ones and other more elaborate ones imported from the East, are exhibited in the showcase/boudoir, among other toilet implements.

In the same section, glass jewels, objects widely distributed in both urban and rural societies, are presented among metal, stone and bone ones. Some of them are made entirely of glass, like bracelets, rings, pendants and beads, while others are metal, embellished with glass elements, like rings, earrings and pendants. They are exhibited in relatively large numbers and in a multitude of forms, which evokes the actual situation of that era [5, illustrations of 46<sup>th</sup>-51<sup>st</sup> weeks; 6; 26; 27, p. 130-139, pl. 44-46].

### **From the Elysian Fields to the Christian Paradise**

The exhibition presents such themes as the cemeteries of Thessaloniki, the typology of the tombs, grave inscriptions, and the objects that accompanied the dead in the tomb, as well as grave painting through the museum's rich collection of detached burial frescoes (Fig. 1,6).

Late antique Thessalonians, worshipers of various religions, offered banquets in the cemeteries over the graves of their beloved ones within the context of their burial rituals, using vessels from their houses for pouring and drinking liquids, as well as for presenting food [23, p. 132-142; 29, p. 470-471, 556]. These vessels were not considered clean any more and they were not allowed to return them to their houses, so they used to break them and leave them on site. Identical vessels, usually intact, are located in the graves, where they were deposited during the funeral. For pagans they presented the necessary means to participate in the eternal banquets of the Elysian Fields, while for Christians they were merely remains of the burial ritual (Fig. 1,7).

The number of glass jewels in burials of that period is considerably reduced, just like all other means of personal adornment, in comparison to their larger numbers, typical for burials of earlier centuries, a change apparently made as a result of the alteration of beliefs on the afterlife. Nevertheless, almost all types of glass jewels and amulets known today are grave goods, which are also exhibited in the room *Early Christian Cities and Private Dwellings*, due to the scanty and fragmentary character of the finds of this kind from habitation areas and cities in general [23, p. 132-142; 29, p. 553] (Fig. 1,8).

### **From Iconoclasm to the Splendour of the Macedonian Dynasty and the Komnenoi**

In this exhibition, archaeological material, labels, and wall panels illustrate and comment on such subjects as iconoclasm, the architecture, painting, and sculpture of Middle Byzantine churches, monasticism, the conversion of the Slavs to Christianity by Saints Cyril and Methodios, two brothers from Thessaloniki, cemeteries, ceramics, lead seals, and coins (Fig. 2,1).

Glass jewellery, especially glass bracelets, which were very popular during the middle Byzantine period (the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries) is exhibited along with their metal counterparts, in relatively large numbers, in order to achieve the appropriate feeling of their common and ordinary nature [6; 10; 25, p. 156, 173, 210, 215; 29, p. 413, 416-418, 420] (Fig. 2,2).

A different use of glass, that of enamel decoration on metal jewelry, is presented through a unique pair of golden armbands. They are exhibited in a prominent showcase which houses the entire hoard of golden jewels which were found along with the armbands [29, p. 411; 30] (Fig. 2,3).

### **Byzantine Castles**

The exhibition presents the organization of a castle, as well as related everyday life and production activities. The archaeological material on display comes from various castles in Macedonia, most notably the one at Redina. The subject is supplemented by a video installation on the castles of Macedonia and Thrace. Glass jewellery and especially glass bracelets are presented in this room giving another aspect of living in Byzantine castles.

## The Twilight of Byzantium

For Thessaloniki the Late Byzantine period (the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries) was a time of artistic creativity, the influence of which spread as far as Mount Athos and the neighbouring Slavonic peoples (Fig. 2,4).

The exhibition presents representative works of art from the period, such as embroideries, icons, frescoes, and relief marble icons. A number of works for use in burials furnish information about the burial customs, painting, sculpture, and portraiture of the period. The exhibition also presents Thessaloniki's mint, its glass industry, and pottery workshops that have been located in Macedonia and Thrace.

The highly developed commercial activities of Thessaloniki's harbour during the Late Byzantine period (the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries) are indirectly, but still quite vividly, presented through the exhibition of glass vessels. They are arranged in groups depending on their place of production. Venetian products of that time were superior in terms of quality, transparency, delicacy and finesse, as is known from written sources, and as it becomes obvious when compared to the Islamic or local products presented next to them [2; 29, p. 579]. The Islamic products, heavier, made of low quality, bubbly glass, yet very skilfully painted, attest the connections with the Arabs and South-eastern Mediterranean (Fig. 2,5). Also presented is a group of enigmatic *unguentaria*, possibly Venetian products intended for the East, which imitate Islamic lenticular omoms [3; 29, p. 576, 578, 580] (Fig. 2,6). Finally, a few small vessels, probably *unguentaria* connected with the cult of the myrrh-producing Saint Demetrios, patron of the city, attest to the local glass production of the 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The remains of the embroidered decoration of a dress present a unique archaeological find, otherwise known only through paintings and written sources. Three types of beads were used: mainly blue and colourless hexagonal ones, while in few places the decorative motive was stressed with spherical beads, covered internally with a layer of lead, which transformed them into tiny mirrors. No other similar finds are known and both the dress and the beads may present an import from the West.

The same forms of vessels, open and close-shaped, which are exhibited in the showcase of the typology referring to the commerce and the imports in the city, are also exhibited among the grave goods, as, in fact, they all were found in graves. In the same graves were found glass bracelets, exhibited in the showcase of jewelry. They represent the last examples of a mainly middle Byzantine fashion, which at least in Macedonia vanishes after the 13<sup>th</sup> century and in contrast to what happened to other areas of the Ottoman Empire, it never regained its popularity [10].

### “Byzantium after Byzantium”. The Byzantine Heritage in the years after the Fall of Constantinople

This exhibition concerns the period between the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Byzantine legacy was especially apparent in the domain of religious painting, which developed in different approaches and styles in different areas and under different regimes (Ottoman or Venetian) (Fig. 2,7).

Apart from religious paintings, the display includes some outstanding examples of ecclesiastical gold embroidery, silverwork and liturgical books. Most of the latter artefacts are long-term loans from the Benaki Museum. Lastly, an attempt is made to document the continuity of aspects of Byzantine culture in the private domain, with references to private worship and everyday life.

During this period, it seems that glass was mainly utilized for the production of lamps, most often used in public buildings and in the houses of the wealthier classes. Although in the museum only finds from Christian churches are presented, it appears that the same types of lamps were also used in mosques and synagogues (Fig. 2,8).

Glass transportation and storage vessels are found only sporadically, as fragments of broken vessels were collected meticulously and recycled. Yet, it appears that they were relatively common objects of average households, used for storage of liquors, medicaments and holy water, which was considered to be a very powerful cure by the general populace (Fig. 2,9).

Finally, glass gems continued to embellish cheaper jewels as well as spectacular creations, like the ones used as part of the prelatric vestments.

Ending this article, and trying to reach a more theoretical, and therefore more valid conclusion, we could say that this example outlined a phenomenon long noted and discussed in museological circles. It is rarely discussed, however, as it undermines one of the cornerstones of the museums' existence, their supposed objectivity and the one-dimensional nature of their narrative, and consequently the public's obligation to accept it.

This conclusion is drawn from the acknowledgement that every find incorporates different stories that are not only related to itself and its course through time, but also to the views of the time and the society in which it would be exhibited. Moreover, they are related to the subject and texture of the exhibition in which the find will be integrated, to the views of the society and, ultimately, of the curator who, as its representative, will place it in the exhibition.

What is, therefore, more explicitly illustrated in this article, is the degree of flexibility in the Museum's/or the curator's options, which story he/she chooses to narrate from the wide range of stories that each object and each archaeological find, in particular, can present when used as a museum exhibit. This is ultimately a personal question for each of us that has to do with our judgment and our ability to distance ourselves from the current or dominant ideology and narrative, when through museum exhibitions we act as historians of art or society. Of course, and without any claim to objectivity, this Correct/"just" course could be defined by choosing to illuminate or at least hint at other aspects besides the primary aspect, which pertains to the subject of the exhibition, or, even better, by using the same objects in more than one section of the exhibition, in the most possible ways, illuminating the multifaceted nature of the works of art of the past.

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#### **ПРЕДМЕТЫ ИЗ СТЕКЛА В ПОСТОЯННОЙ ЭКСПОЗИЦИИ МУЗЕЯ ВИЗАНТИЙСКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ В САЛОНИКАХ ИЛИ КАК ОДНИ И ТЕ ЖЕ ЭКСПОНАТЫ РАССКАЗЫВАЮТ РАЗНЫЕ ИСТОРИИ**

Расположенная в одиннадцати залах постоянная экспозиция Музея византийской культуры содержит значительное количество стеклянных предметов и организована по хронологическому и тематическому принципам. Эти предметы служат конкретным примером того, как археологические материалы могут быть по-разному интерпретированы в качестве музейных экспонатов.

Благодаря этим предметам можно представить не только аспекты экономической истории, торговые отношения, характерные признаки изделий местного производства и происхождение импорта, но и осветить более частные, личные истории, малодоступные для археологии.

##### *Экспозиция «Раннехристианская церковь»*

В этом зале стеклянные предметы представлены как устройства для освещения, а также составные элементы витражей и мозаичной смальты из декора церквей города Салоники.

##### *Экспозиция «Раннехристианские города и частные жилища»*

В зале представлены металлические инструменты, а также стеклянные сосуды, связанные непосредственно с производством стекла; ряд сосудов, показывающий использование стекла в качестве столовых приборов или ёмкостей для косметики и масел. С целью примера разнообразного применения стекла в раннехристианском обществе здесь также выставлены монетные гирьки и украшения.

##### *Экспозиция «От Елисейских полей к христианскому раю»*

В экспозиции зала представлены стеклянные сосуды, используемые в контексте погребального обряда: это предметы, помещенные в погребения в качестве элементов погребального инвентаря или используемые в самом ритуале похорон, а также найденные на поверхности остатки погребальной тризны. Выставленные стеклянные предметы ювелирного искусства обычно также использовались как элемент погребальных украшений.

##### *Экспозиции «От иконоборства до величия династий Македонской и Комнинов» и «Византийские дворцы»*

В двух залах представлены более дешевые варианты украшений для византийских дам – стеклянные браслеты и бусы.

##### *Экспозиция «Сумерки Византии»*

В экспозиции зала представлены большие столовые сосуды закрытых форм, флаконы для косметики (*unguentaria*), а также некоторые образцы стеклянных ювелирных изделий, использовавшихся для украшения и отделки одежды.

##### *Экспозиция «Византия после Византии. Византийское наследие после падения Константинополя»*

В зале представлены стеклянные светильники, найденные, главным образом, в церквях и монастырях, крупные столовые сосуды и небольшие сосудики, найденные в жилых районах и используемые для медикаментов и масел.

**Ключевые слова:** Византия, стеклянные изделия, музееведение.



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Fig. 1,1 – Permanent Exhibition: Early Christian Church; 2 – Window Panes, Philippi, 6<sup>th</sup> c.; 3 – Wall Mosaic, 5<sup>th</sup> c.; 4 – Permanent Exhibition: Early Christian Cities and Private Dwellings; 5 – Glass Vessels 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc.; 6 – Permanent Exhibition: From the Elysian Fields to the Christian Paradise; 7 – Glass Vessels 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc.; 8 – Glass Jewelry 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cc.



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Fig. 2, 1 – Permanent Exhibition: From Iconoclasm to the Splendour of the Macedonian dynasty and the Komnenoi; 2 – Glass Bracelets, 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> cc; 3 – Golden Armbands with cloisonné enamelling, 10<sup>th</sup> c.; 4 – Permanent Exhibition: The twilight of Byzantium; 5-6 – Glass Vessels, 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> cc.; 7 – Permanent Exhibition: “Byzantium after Byzantium”. The Byzantine heritage in the years after the Fall of Constantinople; 8 – Glass Lamps, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> cc; 9 – Glass Vessels, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> cc.