THE FEASTING CYCLE AND THE MEANINGS OF HYBRIDS IN BYZANTINE CERAMICS

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RÉSUMÉ : La première partie de cette communication examine le cycle des scènes associées aux banquets représentées sur les vaissaux en argent et sur les céramiques dans le monde byzantin aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles (scènes de chasse avec chiens, félins et faucons ; personnages à table ; femmes offrant des pichets ; musiciens ; danseuses ; acrobates). On trouve aussi des créatures hybrides, particulièrement des sirènes et des sphinx. Le cycle entier apparaît sur certaines pièces de vaisselle en argent, tandis que sur les céramiques les différents motifs apparaissent séparément, à raison d'un ou deux par pièce. La source de ce cycle est à chercher dans le monde islamique. La seconde partie de la communication propose une explication pour l'association des créatures hybrides avec les banquets ; elles servaient de métaphores aux splendeurs du banquet (la cuisine avec ces combinaisons exotiques ; les prouesses des acrobates). En même temps, les splendeurs du banquet représentaient métaphoriquement la puissance de l'hôte.

A striking feature of research into Medieval ceramics, as opposed to the study of ancient vases, is the comparative lack of iconographic studies in the Medieval field. The decorations of ancient Greek pottery and of Late Roman red ware are viewed as a rich source of information about Classical and Late Antique art and culture. However, in the case of Medieval pottery, while there is a wealth of studies on materials, techniques, production, provenance, and chronology, there is relatively little analysis of the motifs that adorned the ceramics. In part this may be because ancient Greek and even some Roman pottery has been inscribed within the modern field of art history, while Medieval pottery has tended to be the exclusive preserve of archaeology. A more significant reason for the relative disregard of the motifs on Medieval pottery, however, may be the view that they were essentially decorative in nature, and devoid of meaning. The true art of the Middle Ages has been seen as the religious art of mosaics, frescoes and icons in churches; the decoration of pots, on the other hand, has been seen as secular, frivolous, and devoid of significance. But any motif that appears on a pot, however decorative, has involved a choice, either on the part of the maker or the purchaser of the vessel, and where there is choice there is meaning. This paper, therefore, is a small attempt to redress the balance, by looking for meanings in a particular cycle of scenes that is common to vessels produced in both the Islamic and the Byzantine world, namely the scenes associated with courtly feasting and dining. I will first present this cycle as it appears on metal vessels and on their imitations in ceramic, and then I will consider a puzzling problem of meaning, namely why this cycle of dining scenes often includes hybrid creatures, such as sirens and sphinxes.

In Byzantine art, the feasting cycle appears in its most complete form on metal bowls, which were emulated by ceramics. A group of Byzantine silver bowls usually dated to the 12th century, and now preserved in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, presents the cycle in its entirety.

A good example is an elaborate vessel found near Beryozovo which is decorated with engraved motifs around the rim, and with a dense pattern of raised imbrications on its body, each filled with a different motif executed in repoussé (Darkevich 1975: 78-99). The scenes begin on the rim with the hunting of animals for the feast. Here dogs and spotted felines (hunting cheetahs) are seen pursuing game animals, such as hare and deer (Fig. 1). In the imbrications are shown motifs illustrating the feast at which the game is consumed, including a crowned woman at table with a goblet and food set before her (Fig. 2), and a servant pouring drink from a long-necked vase (Darkevich 1975: 85). There are also entertainers at the feast – including musicians with pipes and stringed instruments (Fig. 3), dancers with long floppy sleeves (Fig. 4), and acrobats doing somersaults and hand-stands (Darkevich 1975: 89-90).

This cycle of scenes of hunting, feasting, and entertainments is usually accompanied by depictions of hybrid beasts, especially, as on the imbricated bowl, sirens, that is birds with the heads of beautiful women (Fig. 5), and sphinxes, that is lions with women's heads (Fig. 6).

Most of these subjects appear also on the other Medieval Byzantine silver bowls that are preserved in the Hermitage, as well as birds of prey which evoke the hunting of food with hawks (Darkevich 1975: 24, 29, 32, 46, 52, 56, 120). The ultimate source of the cycle was Islamic. For example, it is almost certain that Islamic artists were responsible for the cycle of paintings that decorate the ceilings of the reception hall that Roger II constructed in the middle of the 12th century in his palace at Palermo – the hall now forms the nave of the palace chapel, the Cappella Palatina

Fig. 1. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. Silver bowl from Beryozovo, detail. Dog hunting hare. After Darkevich 1975: fig. 109.

Fig. 2-3. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. Silver bowl from Beryozovo, details. Banqueter at table and musician. After Darkevich 1975: fig. 115 and 128.

(Tronzo 1997: 57-62). In these paintings, which cover both the nave and the aisles of the hall, we find the entire cycle that appears on the 12th-century Byzantine bowls. Thus there are game animals, such as deer (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 136), as well as scenes of hunting with hawks (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 247-248), and raptors with their prey – for example a bird which has seized a hare (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 157-158, 160-162). There are feasters eating and drinking (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 178-195, 225), who are entertained by musicians with stringed instruments of various kinds (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 201-217). There are also the dancers with scarves or long sleeves (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 219-220), and acrobats – in this case a pair of wrestlers (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 218). Finally, there are the hybrids, including sirens and sphinxes (Monneret de Villard 1950: fig. 8, 12, 241-244).

On the central ceiling, these motifs are accompanied by kufic inscriptions which convey messages of power, prosperity and well being: The inscriptions read "health," "blessing", "good fortune", "power", "magnificence", "prosperity" and "perfection" (Tronzo 1997: 60-61).

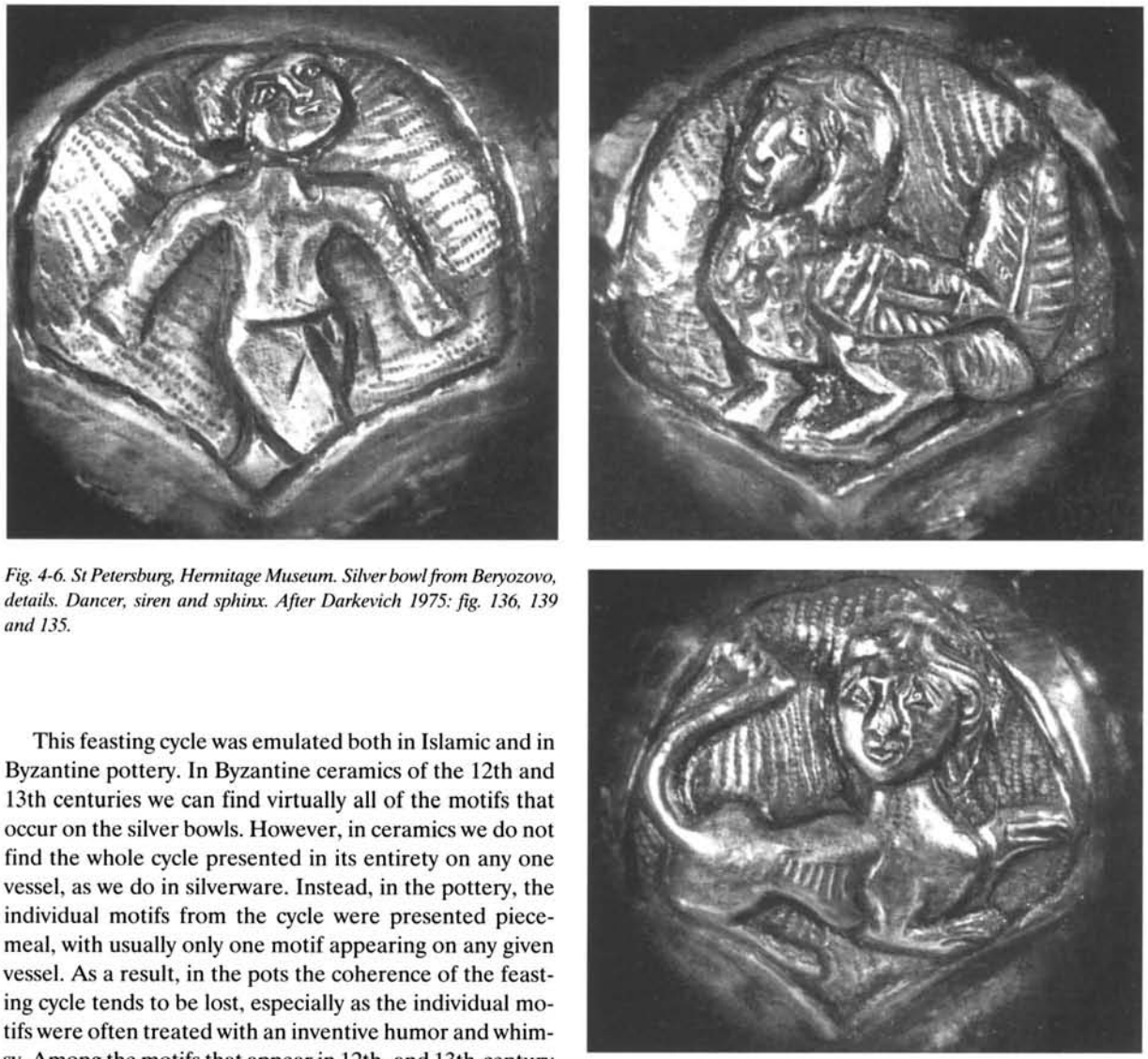

Fig. 4-6. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. Silver bowl from Beryozovo, details. Dancer, siren and sphinx. After Darkevich 1975: fig. 136, 139 and 135.

This feasting cycle was emulated both in Islamic and in Byzantine pottery. In Byzantine ceramics of the 12th and 13th centuries we can find virtually all of the motifs that occur on the silver bowls. However, in ceramics we do not find the whole cycle presented in its entirety on any one vessel, as we do in silverware. Instead, in the pottery, the individual motifs from the cycle were presented piecemeal, with usually only one motif appearing on any given vessel. As a result, in the pots the coherence of the feasting cycle tends to be lost, especially as the individual motifs were often treated with an inventive humor and whimsy. Among the motifs that appear in 12th- and 13th-century Byzantine ceramics are scenes of hunting with dogs and with felines. For example, on a fragment of cut slip ware from the Agora excavations, a hunting hound can be compared with those engraved into the rim of the imbricated silver bowl in the Hermitage (Fig. 1, 7). We also find many scenes of hunting with hawks, including engraved depictions of hawks seizing hares on plates from the Alonnesos shipwreck (*The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 126-127; see also Maguire 1998: 387, fig. 15). In addition, there are depictions of game animals, such as the famous bowl excavated at Corinth, showing a deer and hares in a park-like setting (*The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 181; see also *Glory of Byzantium* 1997: 255-269 and Armstrong 1997: 9-13).

Musicians make relatively frequent appearances on Byzantine pottery – for example, there is a fragment of cut slip ware from Corinth with two players of wind instruments (Morgan 1942: 163, 337, fig. 53m) and another musician with a lute on a shard from Thebes (*The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 31). Dancers also occur. A fragmentary 12th-century sgraffito plate recently excavated at Marmarion, near Amphipolis, is decorated with a male musician playing a harp in accompaniment to a long sleeved female dancer (Fig. 8; see *Archaeological Museum of Amphipolis*: 8). Acrobats appear on the chafing dishes excavated at Corinth (Morgan 1942: 38). Byzantine potters also depicted the hybrids that were associated with the feasting cycle on the silver bowls and in Roger's reception hall at Palermo. For example, there is a pair of sirens, back to back, engraved into the bottom of a bowl now in Berlin (Elbern 1972: 43, fig. 3). On a well-known bowl from the Corinth excavations there is a more active siren, apparently seizing a long-legged water bird that is eyeing a passing fish (Fig.

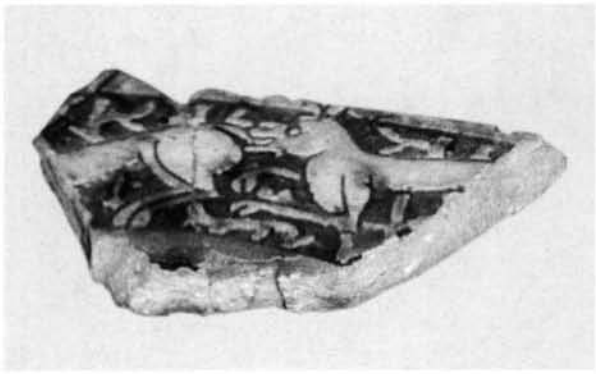

Fig. 7. Athens, Agora excavations, sgraffito shard. Hunting dog.
Fig. 8. Amphipolis, Archaeological Museum. Sgraffito shard. Musician and dancer.

9; see *The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 169, and for another siren, *ibid.*: 30). A fine bowl with a sphinx was discovered at Veria, Chalkidiki (Fig. 10; see *The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 61).

Several of the motifs from the feasting cycle appear in other ceramic traditions within the sphere of Byzantine influence, especially in Levantine pottery produced in the Crusader orbit and in wares from Cyprus, although in these cases their origins may as well be Islamic as Byzantine. Among the finer examples may be noted: a falconer with his birds, depicted on a 13th-century bowl from the workshops of Paphos (Papanikola-Bakirtzis 1996: 87); a woman holding a cup in her left hand on a cup of the 14th century, now in the Pierides collection of Larnaca (*Βυζαντινή Μεσαιωνική Κύπρος* 1997: 143); a dancer holding clappers, or castanets, in a bowl from Paphos (Papanikola-Bakirtzis 1996: 102); and a sphinx in a 13th-century "Crusader" bowl of St Symeon Ware (*Βυζαντινή Μεσαιωνική Κύπρος* 1997: 151).

Most of the individual motifs that make up the feasting cycle – the hunting of game, the eating and the drinking, and the dinner theater – belong together according to an apparent logic. But what is less obvious is the rationale that connects the hybrids – the sirens and the sphinxes – with the other motifs. Sirens could be associated with the pleasures of music and song (Darkevich 1975: 322), but this still leaves us without an explanation for the sphinxes. In the remaining portion of this paper I will explore the significance of these hybrid creatures within the feasting cycle – and at the same time try to suggest some of the ideas conveyed by the whole cycle to Byzantine observers.

Even though such creatures as sirens, sphinxes, centaurs, and tritons had their origins in pagan antiquity, their connotations changed over time. In both Byzantine church literature and secular literature, these hybrids signified the concepts of novelty and invention. For ecclesiastical writers, this was a matter of blame. The early 9th-century iconodule Patriarch Nikephoros, for example, wrote in his first Antirrhetic: "The idol is a fiction of those things that do not exist and have no being in themselves. Of such a kind are the shapes that the pagans fatuously and irreligiously invent, such as of tritons, centaurs, and other phantoms that do not exist" (*PG*: col. 277B). But Byzantine writers of secular texts found the novelty of such creatures admirable. The historian Niketas Choniates, for example, in praising the ancient statues of Constantinople which were destroyed by the crusaders in 1204, includes among what he calls "marvelous works of art" sculptures of sphinxes. He says that the sphinxes are "like comely women in the front, and like horrible beasts in their hind parts, moving on foot in a newly-invented manner, and nimbly borne aloft on their wings, rivaling the great winged birds" (Dieten 1975: 650.22-26).

Thus Byzantine writers condemned, or praised, depictions of hybrids in art because of the novel ways in which they mixed what cannot normally be mixed in nature. Just the same qualities, of innovation and unnatural combinations, were stressed by Byzantine writers in their descriptions of banquets – especially in their accounts of the cuisine, where the host displayed his power by mixing together ingredients that in nature could not be found together. Psellos, for example, when describing the culinary abilities of the Emperor Constantine VIII, declared in his *Chronographia*: "He was wonderfully skillful in the art of concocting rich sauces, embellishing the dishes with colors and perfumes, and summoning all of nature to excite the palate" (Renauld 1926: 29). In the 10th century, Liudprand of Cremona, on his second embassy to Constantinople, was greatly impressed when the emperor Nikephoros Phokas sent him a curiously concocted dish. This dish was a combination in which a fat young goat stuffed with garlic, onion, and leeks was drenched with a copious fish sauce. The gift was all the more impressive since during

that summer Constantinople was suffering from a severe food shortage (Chiesa 1998: 196.322-327, 201.529-531; Koder, Weber 1980: 85-91). A letter written by the 12th-century intellectual and court rhetorician Michael Italikos graphically describes the combination of opposites to create a novel cuisine. He lists the dishes of a banquet where, in his words, "fish [are] forced to take the forms of birds, and birds remodeled into fish, those novel confections and enchantements of the new artistry" (Gautier 1972: 157).

Perhaps the clearest statement of the significance of such novel combinations in the feasts given by the powerful is a curious passage in the Romance, *Rodanthi and Dosikles*. The *Rodanthi and Dosikles* was written by Theodore Prodromos, who was active as a court poet in Constantinople during the reign of John II Komnenos, in the second quarter of the 12th century. Since Theodore Prodromos composed many panegyrics of the emperor and of prominent members of his court, he was well acquainted with the symbolism of imperial power.

The fourth book of the *Rodanthi and Dosikles* is mainly devoted to a long description of a royal reception, in this case given by a pirate named Govryas on behalf of his master, the pirate king Mistylos. Their guest is Artaxanes, an envoy who was sent to Mistylos by Vryaxes, the king of Pissa, in order to demand tribute from the pirate. Mistylos and Govryas entertain the ambassador, Artaxanes, at a banquet, which is designed to intimidate him. This is how the verses of Prodromos describe the feast: "The dinner was full of delight and wondrously prepared. For a roast lamb was set in the middle, but when Artaxanes lay hold of it and started to cut and separate it so as to eat it, newborn sparrows peeped out from the midst of the [lamb's] belly, and, rising on their wings, flew around the head of the satrap [Artaxanes]."

For Prodromos, the strangely stuffed lamb demonstrates the supernatural nature of imperial power. The poet continues his tale as follows: "Govryas [the host] said: <So you see, greatest Satrap, the power of my master Mistylos, how he has the might to change even nature with novel changes and in manifold transformations, turning everything and changing it as he wishes. For you see how the lamb is pregnant with little sparrows, having contradicted the law of nature, namely [the law] that a winged bird should bring forth a winged bird. But rather the lamb obeys the law of Mistylos and engenders winged creatures from its insides... My greatest master ... in presenting this monstrous invention, forms what nature does not know, nor any law>".

Finally, Govryas makes the symbolism more specific, and concludes with a threat, when he says that Mistylos: "...if he commanded, even perchance in the midst of battles, could cause warriors, strong men at arms with their swords and their shields, to bring forth many little dogs

Fig. 9. Ancient Corinth, Archaeological Museum. Sgraffito bowl. Siren with water bird and fish. After Morgan 1942: no. 668.

Fig. 10. Ouranoupolis, shipyard of the Prosphorion Tower. Sgraffito plate from Veria. Sphinx. After The Art of Sgraffito 1999: no. 54.

and he could induce their bellies, though protected by cuirasses, to become pregnant with strange offspring, for he can pull nature this way and that way, as he wishes" (Conca 1994: 150.122-152.172).

As Roderick Beaton points out, the word employed by Prodromos for the "little dogs", σκύλακες, is very close to σκώληκες, which means worms, and presumably the pun was intended (Beaton 1996: 74-75). That is, Mistylos could cause the bodies of his enemies to putrefy on the battlefield.

So the dish, with its mixture of opposites, is evidence of the pirate-king's mastery over nature, which in turn is expressed by his prowess on the battlefield, where he transforms his enemies into worm-ridden corpses, which would be eaten by dogs. We may imagine that the dish that Nikephoros Phokas sent to Liudprand was intended to convey a similar kind of message; its richness in a time of shortage and famine, and its marvelous combination of ingredients, a goat, fish, and vegetables, was evidence of the emperor's power and control over the elements of nature. While the actual cuisine of the imperial court was obviously more subtle and less outlandish than that of the fictional pirate king, the subtext may have been similar.

In a similar way, the entertainments at imperial banquets carried the message of the host's extraordinary power. Liudprand recounts his amazement at the acrobatic entertainment that accompanied a banquet given by Constantine VII in the *Decanneacubita*, the dining room in the Great Palace in Constantinople. The performance consisted of a man balancing a long wooden pole on his head while two small boys climbed up it and performed various tricks at the top. Liudprand admits that these feats left him astounded because they seemed to him marvelous and scarcely possible (Chiesa 1998: 148.130-136). In the *Rodanthi and Dosikles* the pirate king's banquet also concluded with a seemingly impossible performance, but this time the trick involved a simulated suicide and resurrection (Conca 1994: 154.215-156.242).

The pirate's feast in the *Rodanthi and Dosikles* is a kind of parody of a Byzantine imperial banquet. The same elements are there – the food with unnatural combinations of ingredients, and the entertainments with marvelous tricks, but they are exaggerated for literary effect. However, the symbolism that Prodromos proposes for these elements of the feast is not an exaggeration. In the real Byzantine court also, the imperial banquets gave food for thought about the extraordinary nature of imperial power, and even the aftertaste of a threat.

It is this aspect of imperial banqueting, the exotic, the amazing, and the unnatural, that is represented by the hybrid creatures that are associated with the feast cycle on Byzantine silver bowls and their ceramic derivatives. The sphinxes and the sirens, which subverted the natural order with their novel combinations, were metaphors for the marvels of the banquet, just as the marvels of the banquet were metaphors for the power of the host. On the plate from Corinth, therefore, our siren had several roles (Fig. 9). She represented the hunt that provided the food, she represented the bewitching songs that accompanied the feast, and, last but not least, she represented the cuisine, those marvelous combinations that surpassed nature.

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