Silver Plate in the World of Late Antiquity, British Museum, 2nd - 4th March 1995

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I have to admit to a vested interest in this conference as many of the papers touched upon subjects close to my own research. I recently gave a seminar in this field in which I tried to look at the complete picture of late Roman plate by ignoring the aesthetics and looking purely at the pattern of hoarding across the Empire. Archaeological interpretation of this nature has generally been far down the list of priorities in plate research, a poor third behind iconography and prosopography. For me at least, this conference provided an opportunity to assess the direction in which plate studies are moving, particularly as most of the big names in the field were present.

The practicalities of the conference are worth a few lines. The setting was of course entirely appropriate, centring around the current ‘Byzantium’ exhibition and the recent acquisition of the Hoxne hoard found in Suffolk in 1992. Organisation was impeccable: papers as always over-ran, but that was the fault of the speakers not the organisers. Each speaker was also given an unusually long 50 minutes, which in some cases allowed ideas to be properly developed, but in others allowed wooliness where conciseness would have been preferable. Also fairly unusual was the combined use of three different languages; English, German, and French. Many of the speakers would not have spoken unless this had been the case. On the downside however, it often meant that discussions became somewhat confusing when a question was addressed in English but answered in German.

The conference opened on the Thursday evening with Kenneth Painter, who has undoubtedly over-reached himself in the past in his interpretations of late Roman plate. His most criticised work concerned Mildenhall, in which he tried to argue that the silver service had been deposited by a general on campaign in Britain in the late fourth century simply because the silver could not be linked with any known historical figures, or any known appropriate estates in Britain itself. On the prompting, I believe, of Martin Millet’s criticisms of plate studies (British Archaeological News, July 1994) Painter did a fairly good job of trying to contextualise the finds from Britain from a number of angles (‘Silver hoards from Britain in their late Roman context’). He used the large number of stylistic parallels with pewter vessels to suggest that the number of actual silver pieces which they were undoubtedly copying must have been much higher than we envisage. Similarly the hack silver from Traprain Law represents so many different vessels that the hoard attests to the existence of as many as six to ten table services. Painter then looked at hoarding itself. Past approaches (his own included) were criticised because the idea that hoards could represent savings (a well established interpretation of coin hoards) has never really been discussed. The careful burial at Hoxne for instance was used as a possible example. Painter also looked at the wider incidence of hoarding, which in East Anglia is high at every period; so are we perhaps witnessing the continuity of a hoarding tradition? That is not his own idea, but it illustrates that attitudes to the material are beginning to change. That is my nice way of saying Painter was to some extent hedging his bets.
I liked Stefanie Martin-Kilcher’s ‘Römisches Tafelsilber: Funktionsfragen’ because basic questions such as function are rarely discussed. Martin-Kilcher drew on a number of sources, not only the vessel sets themselves, but also parallels in wall paintings and sculpture. For example, the find from Boscoreale is a drinking service which has a nice parallel with a Pompeian wall painting depicting a whole set of drinking vessels on a table. A sculpture from Aquileia depicts a similar set, again allowing known vessel forms to be compared with relevant images. Martin-Kilcher then went on to look at the chronological development of table services; first with the second- and third-century French material like Chaource and Rethel. These sets of silver contrast sharply with the Italian material like Boscoreale because in such finds there are a small number of drinking vessels, but the majority of the pieces are bowls and plates. The fourth-century hoard from Kaiseraugst has only four small bowls and a number of very large plates. Therefore, over the course of three hundred years or so, we can see a move away from functional items to an increasing use of silver plate purely as display pieces. I believe such overviews of the material should be encouraged.

Along similar lines was Ernst Kunzl’s ‘Tempelschätze und Sakralinventare: Votive, Horte, Beute’. Although fairly descriptive in terms of different items found in temple deposits particularly in the Rhine/Danube frontier regions, Kunzl looked at the differences between material from different parts of the empire, for instance Water Newton in England and Malen in Germany, in order to discuss the similarities and contrasts in votive practices.

Richard Reece was given the curious task of providing us with a review lecture on two important interpretative works, Schneider’s Die Domäne als Welbild and Raecq’s Modernisierte Mythen in his paper ‘The myths and messages of silver plate’. Schneider’s main thesis is that the pictures on silver plate embody the late Antique individual view of the world, the estate owner being the lord and centre of his world, as a smaller version, and metaphor of, the emperor and his empire. So for example one of the Kaiseraugst pieces shows the estate centre at the top, which Schneider argues is shown drawing its whole income from the sea depicted below. Or in a more complex picture sequence, the Proiecta casket from the Esquiline board illustrates every aspect of the married couple’s life and relationship; no part of the decorative scheme is wasted. Raecq’s work is equally thought-provoking: for instance, he traces the development of the iconography of hunt scenes from realism (estate owner hunting wild boar) to exaggeration (estate owner hunting lions) to myth (estate owner hunting hippocampus). After discussing these ideas, Reece went on to put forward some of his own ideas relating more generally to silver. For example, he put forward the idea that the emperor ‘owned’ all the silver, and controlled who it went to, but ultimately it had to come back in. This could for example be backed up by the introduction of imperial stamps in the Byzantine period. He also posed the question: why does so little silver survive in churches?

Catherine Johns pointed out the main features of the Hoxne hoard and discussed some of the reconstruction work in progress (‘Hoarding: the Hoxne treasure as a case study’). Johns then went on briefly to look at the wider picture of hoarding. She was on the defensive with regard to the heavy concentration of hoards in East Anglia, offering the rather curious argument that this was all because of deep ploughing after the war. This still does not explain why the area is rich in hoards of all periods and why, despite the high concentration of villas and mosaics in the Cotswolds, not one piece of silver of the fourth century has ever come from that region.
I suppose I ought to be kind to Marlia Mango because she was battling valiantly against flu, but really her lecture was largely composed of a list of eastern material on which she is the undisputed expert. This was rather a shame, because the actual thesis was a very interesting one: ‘Continuity between the 4th/5th century and 6th/7th century silver in the Eastern Empire’ was geared towards the secular rather than the ecclesiastical material on which less research has been focused. When the wood could be distinguished from the trees, Mango made some good points: for example, consistency of weight standards throughout the period obviously implies imperial control but may also explain why iconography remains relatively conservative. Mango also pointed out that liturgical vessels began to be produced in the fourth century, representing a nice overlap between domestic and ecclesiastical vessel types.

I didn’t really understand the point of Michael Vickers paper on ‘Weight standards in the manufacture of silver in antiquity’. Vickers provided everyone with an interesting assortment of historical references to weight standards, that was all well and good, but most of his references were too early for the material on which the conference was based. I make no judgement on the interesting relationship between known weights of plates which appear „unusual” and the Persian sigloi as a weight standard because I am in no position to know if it is correct or not. If it is, it tells us something of interest about the relationship between the Roman and Achaemid Empires.

Also on a scientific note was the joint paper from Janet Lang and Mike Cowell, ‘Scientific examination of late Roman silver: case studies’. Both should be admired in this, given that almost all of late Roman silver plate was around 98 per cent pure, which could have made for a rather repetitive paper. Nonetheless, detailed analysis of trace elements can result in some interesting observations: for example, clear stylistic differences between spoons in Hoxne, which could suggest potential manufacture in different places and/or different time periods are paralleled by differences in their respective zinc contents. There are also some interesting exceptions to the purity rule; the votive plaques from Water Newton have a much lower silver content than is normal, which, I would suggest, implies production in a localised, non-official sense as opposed to the largely contemporaneous material from nearby Hoxne and Mildenhall. So some interesting points for discussion can result from such work.

One of the conference themes was ‘Aspects of hoarding’. Roger Bland was the only person talking about coin hoards, the very valid justification being that coin hoards also represent hoarding of precious metals in late Antiquity, and are often found in association with other precious metal objects. Simply by its presence this paper reminded us of the need to look at silver plate in the context of other background material, although I wonder how many of the researchers in the field feel a desire to do so. ‘Changing patterns of hoards of precious metal coins in the late Empire’ was an intricate paper embracing a huge amount of material, some of the threads from which could have perhaps been more clearly drawn out. Having said that, there were lots of good ideas, such as the breakdown of the relationship between gold and silver in the third century as an explanation for an increased use of coins for intrinsic purposes, for example as jewellery items, and an obvious movement of precious metals beyond the imperial frontiers. Major regional contrasts were also examined, for instance the fact that siliquae hoards of the late fourth century are only known from Britain and Romania, whilst stray losses of siliquae are much more common in the core regions of the Empire (such as northern Italy).
A number of papers dealt with specific material from particular regions and specialist fields of knowledge. Max Martin looked at the differences between the Gallic and Germanic hoards of the fourth to seventh centuries in order to look at wider questions of social differences and migration activity (‘Zum Silbenern Tafelgeschirr des senatorischen und fränkischen Adels in Gallien vom 4. bis zum 7. Jahrhundert’). Ivana Popovic from the Narodni museum in Serbia covered the products of the two known Balkan mints in her paper ‘Les produits officiels et privés des ateliers de Naissus et de Sirmium’. Popovic not only discussed the better known ‘official’ products (in particular the five plates commemorating the decennalia of Crispus and Constantine II now residing in Munich), but made some interesting links between the style of stamped and unstamped pieces. For example, there are enough stylistic links between the inscribed plate from Kaiseraugst, definitely manufactured at Naissus, and the Ariadne dish from the same hoard, to suggest production of the latter piece at the same workshop. Given that there have been few attempts to identify the products of particular workshops in this manner, this looks like being extremely fruitful research. Popovic also discussed the links between the production of silver coinage and plate, another area hardly ever covered, and raised interesting questions concerning the official control of silver resources in the post-Diocletian period; to what extent did Diocletian’s coin reforms affect silver plate too?

François Baratte delivered two papers, one of which aimed to be descriptive and one of which ought to have been interpretive but was rather disappointing (‘Les trésors d’argenterie en Gaule: nature et contenu à la lumière de quelques trouvailles récentes’ and ‘L’argenterie romaine: commanditaires et possesseurs: quelques réflexions’). It was useful to be able to see the French hoards, particularly more recent finds such as Vienne being compared to more well known finds like Chaource and Rethel. Unfortunately, Baratte did not seem to integrate the background archaeological material or place the hoards in their historical context, although I have to admit to not always being able to follow a speedily delivered and very dense text.

Although Alan Cameron’s paper, ‘Silver plate in its social context’, which closed the conference, was beautifully delivered and full of some wonderful literary references, it had little to do with plate in its social context because Cameron didn’t bring in the background archaeological evidence. Sidonius, for instance, was used to illustrate how, in fifth century Gaul, silver items were used as functional pieces, which somewhat contradicts the usual view that silver was used purely for display purposes. However, we don’t have any silver from fifth century Gaul so Sidonius is rather irrelevant given that most of the material we have is from the late third century. Therefore, I think it would have been more appropriate to entitle the paper ‘Silver plate in its historical context’.

To conclude: like many specialist areas of research, silver plate suffers from trainspotter syndrome. Too often during this conference it felt as though the speaker was giving us a shopping list of items which he or she has personal knowledge of. The aesthetic beauty of the objects in question, coupled with their relative scarceness naturally leads us to see them as precious. But as Richard Reece pointed out, if this conference had taken place in 1895 rather than 1995 our perception of the ‘precious’ nature of silver items may have differed, given that many people of a similar social bracket to the delegates here would have used silver table services or at least have had a silver centre piece to their dining table. He wanted to suggest that we are ‘looking up’ too much at these items, something which I would entirely agree with given that many
very basic questions such as distribution of material were not really addressed.

Verdict: not a runaway success, but any conference bringing together such a diversity of scholars from a large chunk of Europe is going to have both positive and negative sides. Main gripe: not enough 'world of late antiquity'; too much 'silver plate'. Hoxne after all consisted of jewellery, silver plate, coins and other items such as bone inlay, and all these elements ought to be discussed in their entirety and in relation to the archaeological and historical background. I hope this is something that we all wish to move towards in the future.