THE SACRED VESSEL AND THE MEASURE OF A MAN

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In medieval Byzantium, it appears, household vessels were one measure of a man’s character. For the vessel, through its materiality, conjured an image of immutability and solidity; its contents, depending on the shape of the container, could be precious, exotic, or even life sustaining. In this paper, I would like to pay tribute to Jean-Michel Spieser’s abiding interest in ceramic wares and sacred arts. The subject of this short piece is the vessel in medieval Byzantium and how, when used metaphorically in text and image, a pot could transcend the base material from which it was shaped. At the core of this paper are hagiographic texts of the eighth to tenth century, whose incidental mentions of common vessels provide important evidence about the place of the pot in the Byzantine world, particularly the world inhabited by saints and monks.¹ For in these texts, vessels made primarily of clay help to create a setting for monastic and rural drama, serve as the locus of miracles of healing and wonder, and metaphorically represent the human body and soul.

The hagiographical texts are surprisingly precise in the terminology used to describe specific vessels. Pithos, amphora, stamnos, lekane, chytra and poterion (or, more commonly baukalion)—terms commonly used in the written sources—are vessels widely attested in the archaeological record.² The use of such mundane vessels as props within the saints’ Lives allows the reader to associate directly with the saint and to enter the narrative through shared experience. Testing the vegetarian tendencies of the young Loukas of Steiris, for example, his parents “cooked meat and fish together in a single cookpot (χύτρα), set it on the table

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² For a discussion of common ceramic wares and their illustration in medieval sources, see C. Bakirtzis, Βυζαντινά Ταουκαλολάγηνα (Athens, 1989).
and urged him to eat." An innkeeper in the Life of Stephen the Younger fries fish in a skillet as the saint is dragged through the Forum Bovis in Constantinople.\(^3\) The use of common vessels, however, is sometimes altered. The pithos, for example, a large storage vessel, is described as the site of daily mortifications. Gregory of Akritas, according to his Life, recited the psalter while submerged in a pithos containing water—presumably cold—in the garden.\(^5\)

The material of the vessel is apparently noteworthy. Accounts mention both precious and common fabrics. The value of the vessel helps to situate the narrative and reveals, in some cases, the saint’s economic status or social standing. A gold basin full of water (χρυσήν τινα λεκάνην πλήρη ὕδατος), for example, is held by two men dressed in white (i.e., angels) in the Life of Antony the Younger, a saint born into a noble family in Palestine.\(^6\) Theophano, daughter of the patrikios Constantine Martinakios and first wife of Leo VI, drinks from a glass vessel.\(^7\) Dounale-Stephen, a nobleman, uses a silver cup.\(^8\) In most cases, however, vessels mentioned in hagiographical texts are ceramic, a reflection of the rural backgrounds of many of the saints, the agrarian setting of many of the Lives, and the modest demeanor assumed by many holy men, especially those of monastic profession. The Lives of Loukas the Younger of Steiris, Ioannikios, Paul the Younger of Latros, and Philaretos the Merciful—all saints from modest backgrounds or those involved in agricultural activity—mention common vessels including amphoras, cooking pots, and cups.\(^9\)

The hagiographical sources provide ample information about the place of the ceramic vessel within monastic settings. For the monk, a single vessel might constitute one of his few worldly belongings. Ascetic

\(^4\) PG 100: 1177B.
\(^5\) Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae (hereafter SynaxCP), 372.
\(^7\) E. Kurtz, Zwei griechische Texte über die Hl. Theophano, die Gemahlin Kaisers Leo VI (St. Petersburg, 1898), p. 22.
\(^8\) SynaxCP, 319–320.
\(^9\) Loukas was born to a family of peasants. Both Ioannikios and Paul the Younger worked as swineherds. Born to a wealthy family, Philaretos had vast agricultural estates and raised livestock. See J.W. Nesbitt, “The Life of St. Philaretos (702–792) and its Significance for Byzantine Agriculture,” Greek Orthodox Theological Review 14 (1969), pp. 150–158.