

Lin Ying

Title: The Gold Goblet with Imperial Tyches in the Avar Treasure

Date: 700s

Geography: Vrap, Albania

Culture: Avar

Medium: Gold metalwork

Dimensions: 16.8 × 12.2 × 12.9 cm, 421g

Current Institution: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.A.

Accession Number: 17.190.1710.

Link to Object: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464119> [last accessed 13th January 2025]



Fig. 1. Gold goblet with personification of Constantinople. The Tyche wears a mural crown and carries an orb topped with three small circles in her extended left hand. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal License. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

alt="Side view of a stemmed goblet made of gold with an image on the bowl of a winged female figure who is labelled Constantinople and is wearing a crown and holding a scepter and orb."

Keywords: Avars, Tyche, Mediterranean, cities, gender, burial

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Seeing the gold goblet with personifications of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Cyprus in the Avar Treasure collected from Vrap, Albania (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), is a sophisticated visual experience for visitors. The gold cup combines an iconographic theme frequently found in Roman art, that of the personified Tyche (the tutelary deity responsible for the prosperity and good fortune of a city), with a style of workmanship associated with Avar nomadic culture.

As Shelton has discussed, in the fourth and fifth centuries works of art that functioned as political propaganda often featured groups of Tyches: processions of goddesses representing provincial cities led by the Roma herself to bestow upon the emperor a wreath of victory. After 324, however, the capital of the Roman Empire shifted to Constantinople, whose personification then assumed the role of Roma. In the sixth to seventh centuries, goblets whose cup was adorned with figures and whose rim often bore inscriptions came to be used as chalices for the Eucharistic Sacrament and therefore became part of the plate required by the liturgy. However, the figures on these chalices were generally representations of Christ, the Apostles and the Saints. Firmly dated to before the end of the seventh century by the style of the rim inscription, the goblet found as part of the Avar Treasure features a conflict between the pagan figures decorating it and the Christian context in which vessels of similar construction were used. That Tyches should occupy the position by then more commonly reserved for sacred images meant that the object did not conform to the trends that were favored both Byzantines and barbarian converts to Christianity in the case of religious art—the iconography would have been not merely old fashioned, but also suggestive of blasphemy. For example, in the Pereshchepina Treasure, which was associated with Kubrat Khan, who was not only the founder of the Great Bulgarian Khanate (630-668) but also a Christian who received an honorary title from the Byzantine Empire, several gold goblets were included but none feature the figures of one or more Tyches. Given the strong religious meaning of the goblet already in the seventh century, we may conclude that the viewer of this golden cup was more likely intended to be an Avar.



Fig. 2. Personification of Alexandria. The Tyche only holds a sceptre in her right hand and there is no orb in her left hand, revealing her secondary status to Roma and Constantinople. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal License. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

alt="Side view of a stemmed goblet made of gold with an image on the bowl of a winged female figure who is labelled Alexandria and is wearing a crown and holding a scepter but no orb."

This leads to the question of why the Avars imitated an iconography prevalent in the fourth and fifth centuries, replacing the image of male saints with that of pagan goddesses. What could have been their intentions? What worldview did they wish this gold cup to exemplify? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the burial customs in the first period of Avar history (568-630). In tombs belonging to the Avar nobility, burial offerings show obvious differences depending upon the gender of the tomb owner. Males were buried with horses, harnesses, heavy cavalry armor and other accoutrements that reinforced the image of the deceased as a mounted warrior. Females, by contrast, were buried with clothing, jewelry, and everyday essentials that often included foreign cultural elements, such as those of Germanic, Slavic and Byzantine origin. Indeed, a large variety of grave goods featuring elements associated with Byzantium have been recovered from female tombs. For example, a necklace whose composition of red stone is set in a frame of beaded gold wire resembles the style favored by women belonging to the Byzantine court was unearthed in the tomb of an Avar girl in Kiskőrös, Hungary, while a gold temple ornament featuring a common motif of early Byzantine Christian art—that of birds flanking the Tree of Life—was unearthed in the female tomb at Cibakháza. In the staging of funerary rites, we thus can identify the presence of telling distinctions defined by the gender of the protagonist being buried. Male burials were of a type that symbolized the nomadic tradition and military skills considered to be the foundational virtues that made the conquest of territory and the establishment of the khanate possible. For their part, female burials provided the opportunity to display the loot or tribute that had been collected and therefore indicate visually the extent of the tribe's political influence—with the rich variety of alien cultural elements in a single burial symbolizing dominion the entire known world. The symbolic spaces occupied by deceased men and women can be argued to have interacted with each other in order to express the Avars' domination of the Germans, Slavs and Romans.

The application of these different burial customs respectively to men and women may not have been an invention of the Avar Khanate, but instead originated more generally with steppe peoples of Turkic origin. Analyzing the early seventh-century grave of the "wandering soldier" in Corinth, Florin Curta has argued that the presence of "Slavic" bow fibulae in the tomb did not point to a Slavic migration into the southern Balkan region, but rather to the presence of Slavic or indeed Greek women who had married Avar or other Turkic warriors serving in Byzantine army. The exotic brooches marked out the possession of such women of a distinctive social identity--of a member of the family of a respected barbarian general or other officer fighting with his subordinates for the empire—that set them apart from the local civilian populations.

Gazing at the image of Tyches on the gold goblet produced in a workshop far from Constantinople, what we see is not merely a vision of the Byzantine Empire seen through the eyes of the Avars, but also a declaration of the political subordination of that empire to their own khanate. The incorporation of foreign components into female dress codes—so that women belonging to the household of elite warriors were expected to wear the costumes of

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neighboring peoples—served as one of the visual markers of the Avars’ rule over other nations.

Biography

Lin Ying is a Professor of Ancient World History in the History Department of Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou, China) who specializes in Byzantine History and China-Byzantine contacts along the Silk Road.

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