

Title: A 10th-Century (?) Amulet of St Phocas from Cherson (?) (modern Sevastopol) in Crimea

Date: 10th century (?)

Geography: Black Sea, Crimea

Culture: Byzantine

Medium: Glass

Dimensions: 37 x 41 mm; thickness 2 mm, 7.785 g

Current Location: Leibniz Zentrum für Archäologie, Mainz

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Fig. 1 Mainz, Leibniz Zentrum für Archäologie. Glass amulet of St Phocas. Left: Front with a bas-relief of St Phocas standing with hands upraised in an attitude of prayer inside a crescent-shaped ship and flanked by rudder and anchor. Right: Back with a blank surface. © LEIZA. Photograph by V. Iserhardt.

“The illustration shows a slightly oval object made of greenish-blue glass with a diameter of about 40 mm. On the front is a bas-relief of St Phocas, while the back is blank. The bas-relief shows a male figure with a halo and without a beard, dressed in a short tunic with a chlamys thrown over his shoulder. The figure stands in an attitude of prayer in a crescent-shaped ship with a rudder to his right and an anchor to his left.”

Keywords: Pilgrim token, Byzantium, Crimea, glass

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In 2006, the Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie (LEIZA, formerly the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum) in Mainz acquired an amulet (or perhaps a type of charity token) of St Phocas from the Vienna art dealer Gilbert Hamamciyan. The amulet was alleged to have originated from the Byzantine city of Cherson, near modern-day Sevastopol. The oval object made of bluish-green glass (37 x 41 mm; thickness 2 mm, 7.785 g) shows a stamped bas-relief of the saint on the obverse, the reverse side is plain. A haloed, beardless figure dressed in a short tunic and with a chlamys thrown over his shoulder is depicted standing in an attitude of prayer within a crescent-shaped ship whose rudder can be seen on his right and dropped anchor on his left. The piece was sold as late antique or early Byzantine. However, the latest analyses of the chemical composition of the glass suggest that it may date from the

10th century.¹ Certainly, the material composition of the object, with its low Na₂O content, is extremely atypical for glass from late antiquity.

St Phocas (died 2nd c. / ca. 300 ?) was a martyr of Sinope who became the patron saint of sailors in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. According to the legend, Phocas lived a life of solitude and was also a talented gardener. The saint was later recognized as the patron saint of sailors because his father was said to have wanted him to become a shipbuilder or the captain of a ship.²

The amulet of St Phocas closely resembles another object described as a clay medallion with a full-length depiction of St Phocas standing in a boat with his hands raised. This second object was found in 1896 by Karol Kościuszko-Waluszyński in the port area of Byzantine Cherson, now Sevastopol.³ On its edge is a circular inscription: “Ἐὐ(λο)γία τοῦ ἁγίου Φωκᾶ τοῦ πτωχ(ε)ίου Χερσ(ῶ)νος” (“*Eulogia* [i.e. blessing] of St Phocas, patron saint of the Ptocheion [i.e., the poorhouse] in Cherson”). The overall impression of the iconography is similar to other *eulogiae*, such as those of St Daniel, St Isidore, or St Menas, individual examples of which were also found in Crimea. In general terms, these *eulogiae* were devotional objects that were made for pilgrims from what were for the most part relatively inexpensive materials. They derived their sacred value from contact with a relic etc.

In this specific ceramic example, the saint is depicted, as on the glass amulet, in an attitude of prayer. He wears a tunic held together by a wide belt, while cloak hangs down from his left shoulder, billowing out around him. Moreover, the detail above the bow of the boat is likely to represent an anchor—rather than a harpoon, as V. V. Latyshev had assumed.⁴ It is a remarkable coincidence that, in addition to the ceramic medallion of St Phocas, which is now kept in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, a clay stamp that was its exact negative was found in 1963 not far from a church in the same port area. Not only do the diameters (9.8 cm) of both objects match, but the arrangement of the image is also exactly mirrored, so that one can assume that we are dealing with a matrix and an impression. The suggestion may be advanced that both the ceramic medallion and the clay stamp date from the 6th century, since they bear a stylistic resemblance to earlier or contemporary pilgrim tokens, particularly those of St Menas, which were widely circulated in the eastern Mediterranean. The medallion could have been intended as a sort of small icon intended to protect the wearer at sea. It is also conceivable that sailors donated money to the Poorhouse of St Phocas in Cherson and

¹ Na₂O 7,65; SiO₂ 73,2; K₂O 1,65; CaO 9,24. Analysis kindly provided by Roland Schwaab at LEIZA. Note that BYM23/40 comes quite close to our object in chemical composition. See Petros Karalis, Elissavet Dotsika, Athanasios C. Godelitsas, Anastassios Ch. Antonaras, and Stavros Oikonomidis. “Mineral Natron, Plant-Ash and High-Alumina Byzantine Glass Bracelets: Possible Byzantine Primary Glass Production in Asia Minor”, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 54 (April 2024): 104452.

² Tatjana Starodubcev, “Свети вртлар и свети епископ: представе и поштовање светих мученика са именом Фока [Sveti vrtlar i sveti episkop: predstave i poštovanje svetih mučenika sa imenom Foka / Holy Gardener and Holy Bishop: The Images and Cult of Holy Martyrs Named Phocas]”, *Zograf* 37 (2013): 37–53.

³ Osharina, Ol'ga Vladimirovna, “О символическом замысле глиняной евлогии с изображением св. Фоки из собрания Эрмитажа. [О simbolicheskom zamisle glinianoj evlogii s izobrazheniem sv. Foki iz sobraniia Ėrmitazha / On the Symbolic Design of a Clay Eulogia with the Image of St Phocas from the Hermitage Collection]”, *Античная древность и средние века [Antichnaiâ drevnost' i srednie veka]* 34 (2003): 54–66.

⁴ See <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E07064> (last accessed on 4th June 2026).

received in return such pious tokens as blessings and souvenirs.⁵ That would fit well with the ninth sermon of Asterios, which states that on board the sailors would each set aside a portion of their daily meal for Saint Phocas and then buy it in turn. When they came ashore, they distributed the money “saved” in this way among the hungry; it was the “portion of Saint Phocas”.⁶ One should therefore not exclude the possibility that the glass object may have been a kind of voucher or charity token intended to provide for the poor.⁷

This poorhouse appears to have been also a regional pilgrimage center that sailors visited in order to place themselves under the protection of the saint. Later, in the 13th or 14th century, there was a church complex at Cape Ay-Foka, about 10 km west of Sudak in Crimea, which attests to the fact that St Phocas was still venerated in the late Middle Ages.⁸

A limestone block recently found in Sevastopol with the inscription “Ἄγιε Φωκᾶ, βοήθησον τὸν δοῦλόν σο[υ] Εὐθά[λιον] [Saint Phocas, help your servant Euthalios]”, which may date from the 5th century, adds to the list of finds that prove the veneration of Phocas on the northern littoral of the Black Sea (fig. 2).⁹

⁵ For the poorhouses, including those on the Black Seas coast, see, for example, Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare*, Rutgers Byzantine Series (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 261.

⁶ Asterios of Amasea, *Homilies I-XIV: Text, Introduction and Notes* by C. Datema, ed. C. Datema (Leiden: Brill, 1970), IX,11.

⁷ Simon Bendall and John W. Nesbitt, “A ‘Poor’ Token from the Reign of Constantine V”, *Byzantion* 60 (1990): 432–35.

⁸ Vadim Maiko, “Христианский храм на мысе Ай-Фока у с. Морское в Юго-Восточном Крыму [Khristianskiĭ khram na myse Aĭ-Foka u s. Morskoe v Īugo-Vostochnom Krymu / A Christian Church on Cape Ay-Foka near the Village of Morskoye in Southeastern Crimea]”, *Античная древность и средние века [Antichnaĭa drevnost' i srednie veka]* 43 (2015): 264–74.

⁹ Alexej Īurevich Vinogradov and Ekatarina Sergeevna Lesnaĭa, “Новая надпись с обращением к св. Фоке из раскопок Херсонеса [Novaĭa nadpis' s obrashcheniem k sv. Foke iz raskopok Khersonesa], in *Под омофором Первозванного: от апостола Андрея к Андреевскому флагу: Материалы круглого стола, приуроченного к 325-летию учреждения в России Андреевского флага [Pod omoforom Andreĭa Pervozvannogo: ot apostola Andreĭa k Andreevskomu flagu. Materialy vserossiĭskoiĭ nauchnoiĭ konferentsii, priurochennoiĭ k 350-letiiu uchrezhdeniia v Rossii Andreevskogo fлага]*, ed. V. V. Maiko and T. Ī. Īashaeva (Simferopol: Arial, 2024), 19–22.



Fig. 2 The State Museum-Preserve “Tauric Chersonese”. A limestone block (18×16×10.5 cm) bearing an invocation to St. Phocas, 5th century. © Andrey Vinogradov.

“alt=A block measuring 18×16×10.5 cm, the upper edge and lower section of which are chipped away: from half the height on the right to a third on the left. On the front face, a carved image of a pointed cross is partially preserved; there are five small chips on the surface. In the corners between its arms is a Greek inscription, of which four and a half lines have survived.”

The veneration of Phocas was widespread, so that Cherson was part of a cult network that connected sailors who traveled along the coasts of the Black Sea and beyond, at least as far as the eastern Mediterranean. In Sinope itself, the remains of a church have been excavated that was probably dedicated to St Phocas. It must have been known in Constantinople from the beginning of the fifth century, when written sources refer to churches there that were dedicated to a saint of this name. Indeed, St Phocas was considered the second patron saint of Trebizond after St Eugenios. He was celebrated in an encomium written either by Andreas Libadenos or Cardinal Bessarion in the 15th century. According to this text, not only did locals come to Sinope, but travelers as well—including visitors from Galatia, Lydia, Asia,

Paphlagonia, and Bithynia; from the Hellespont and the Bosphorus; from among “the Hyperboreans”; and, finally, from the Caucasus, Indus, Egypt, the Ionian Sea, the Adriatic, Italy, Ravenna, and “the great Encircling Ocean” beyond the Straits of Gibraltar.¹⁰ Early spread of the cult is evinced by archaeological finds and toponyms in the Cyclades, the Sporades, the Dodecanese, Cyprus, Lebanon, the Peloponnese, and Sicily. Epigraphic evidence of a cult is attested from a range of places including the island of Syros.¹¹

Despite the fact that the cult was so widespread, the veneration of St Phocas specifically in Cherson may be considered to have been of notable duration and importance.

Biography

Stefan Albrecht is a member of the research staff at the Leibniz Zentrum für Archäologie (Leibniz Center for Archaeology) and supernumerary professor of Eastern European history at the University of Mainz. His main areas of interest are the Black Sea in the Byzantine period and Byzantine-Slavic relations in general.

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¹⁰ Rafal Quirini-Poplowski, “Seaside Shrines in the Late Mediaeval Black Sea Basin. Topography and Selected Historical and Art Historical Questions,” in *The Holy Portolano: The Sacred Geography of Navigation in the Middle Ages = Le portulan sacré / Fribourg Colloquium 2013*, ed. Michele Bacci and Martin Rohde (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 95–120 and 368–374, at 104-107; Van de Vorst, Charles. “Saint Phocas.” *Analecta Bollandiana* 30 (1911): 252-295, at 286.

¹¹ Rachael Helen Banes, “Personal Responses to Danger in Greek Graffiti: Inscriptional Formulae and Self-Expression at Three Late Antique and Byzantine Sites”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 49 (2024): 1–22, at 14.

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