The history of gold-glass

Ancient gold-glass has survived as a grave-good or grave marker. It has been found in pagan and, during the fourth century CE, also in Christian and Jewish burials, principally located in the catacombs of Rome and in the suburban cemeteries of Cologne, Germany. In broken or intact state, ancient gold-glass vessels were given to the dead, while purpose-made medallions and broken, sawn or grozed (clipped) vessel bases were used as grave markers. In both usages, the combination of gold and glass would surely have been appreciated not only as a sign of material wealth but also for the luminescent glitter of these materials in a dark, subterranean environment.

Late antique gold-glass was a revival based in Rome of a craft developed over six hundred years earlier in the eastern Mediterranean. Glass plaques decorated with gold leaf featured among the lavish ornament of the funerary couches discovered in the fourth-century BCE tomb of Philip II at Aigai, Macedonia; gold motifs also adorned glass set into finger-rings from Macedonia.1 Though lidded gold-glass vessels are known from the Acropolis at Athens, Greece,2 the complex technique of making gold-glass vessels most likely developed in Ptolemaic Egypt. Two gold-glass objects were carried in the procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (284–247 BCE), described half a millennium later as υάλινα διάχρυσα (glass shot through with gold) by the writer Athenaeus.3 Indeed, Egypt retained into Late Antiquity a tradition of making luxurious, colored glass.4 By the third century BCE, gold-glass vessels were used in southern Italy: a pair of double-layered glass bowls, decorated in applied gold leaf with acanthus, lotus and rosette, was found in a grave at Canosa, Apulia.5 Other glass vessels in this grave included a mosaic glass dish with gold leaf sandwiched amidst the canes of colored glass; with a cluster of other finds these are now known as the “Canosa Group.”6 But these are rare instances, with the use of gold in the later Hellenistic world typically taking the form of flowing bands set within coloured cast glass vessels.7

Gold-glass remained an exceptional product: a few, ill preserved, finds from France and Egypt are of early Roman imperial date.8 However, gold-glass medallions, small drinking cups and plaques of exceptionally fine quality were made in Rome for individual use in the second and third centuries CE, and gold-glass platters and shallow bowls of more variable quality, probably intended for communal use, in the fourth century.9 What prompted the revival in
Rome remains unknown, as does the inspiration for later antique design, which seems closest to the pictorial Canosan bowls (Figure 8.1); it could have been part of the much wider interest in classical Greek culture that so permeated later Roman imperial society, and it could also be linked to the change in burial practice (itself poorly understood) from cremation to inhumation of the dead.

**History of discovery and research**

The surviving corpus of late antique gold-glass (nearly 500 pieces) was mostly found during seventeenth- to nineteenth-century CE exploration of the catacombs of Rome. The long-neglected ancient cemeteries and early Christian shrines were hollowed out from former quarries of volcanic tufa, deposits of which were located on the outskirts of the city. The catacombs of Rome were rediscovered by the Maltese scholar Antonio Bosio (1575/6–1629), whose guardian uncle represented the Knights of Malta at the Holy See. After Bosio’s premature death, the publication of his pioneering account *Roma Sotterranea (Subterranean Rome)* was completed by Giovanni Severini, a follower of the sixteenth-century Saint Filippo Neri, who had spent ten years at prayer in the catacombs.10

In the early modern period care of the catacombs and the objects had not been so rigorously enforced and some pieces of gold-glass were sold or given to individual collectors in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, the mid-nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in the cult of Filippo Neri and renewed interest in the catacombs. The first systematic
archaeological exploration of the catacombs was undertaken by the brilliant archaeologist and epigraphist Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–1894), who modified Bosio’s title for his own magisterial survey. To control scientific exploration of the catacombs and the management of finds, de Rossi suggested to Pope Pius IX the formation of the Pontificia Commissione di Archaeologia Sacra (Pontifical Commission for the Archaeology of the Sacred), which was inaugurated in 1852. de Rossi became director of the Christian Museum that received the finds within the Vatican, and of the Pontifical Academy that managed research on early Christian art and archaeology. To this day the Pontifical authorities retain control of the Christian catacombs and the associated finds are mostly deposited in the Vatican Museums. The Vatican Museums therefore hold the largest collection of ancient gold-glass in the world with 219 catalogued pieces. Next in significance is the British Museum, with a gold-glass collection comprising fifty-five ancient pieces largely assembled in the mid-to-later nineteenth century from sales and gifts of private collections, most of which were first formed in Italy and Germany. The German nineteenth-century collections included recent finds from Roman cemeteries in Cologne (see below).

A third large collection of thirty-six pieces is held in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the history of this collection illustrates the close connection in the nineteenth century between contemporary religious movements and the growth of early Christian archaeology. The collection was purchased in Rome from 1864–1894 by the English antiquary Charles Wilshere (ca. 1814–1906), a passionate follower of the Oxford or Tractarian Movement, which sought to revive Catholicism in England, with a particular focus on the practices of the early Church. Wilshere’s personal mission as a wealthy, highly educated collector was to acquaint the English with the art and archaeology of early Christian and contemporary Jewish Rome. To this end the finest pieces in his collection of ancient gold-glass were lent for some twenty-four years during Wilshere’s lifetime to the South Kensington Museum (the predecessor of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). The collection was subsequently bequeathed to Pusey House, the center of the Oxford Movement, with a view to educating young candidates for the priesthood and other students of Oxford University. The collection was purchased by the Ashmolean Museum in 2007.

Wilshere worked closely with de Rossi, who was revered in his lifetime and is still regarded as the founder of early Christian archaeology as a scholarly discipline. Wilshere corresponded with de Rossi for nearly thirty years and in 1893 returned a gold-glass to the Vatican in de Rossi’s honour. De Rossi had long objected to the export of this glass from Rome, which uniquely depicts St Genesius, an actor who had fatally displeased Diocletian by publicly confessing to Christianity at a performance attended by the emperor. Genesius enjoyed a cult in nineteenth-century Rome; even today his relics are kept in the church of Santa Susanna.

The glass depicting Genesius was one of twelve acquired by Wilshere from the sale in 1862 of the collection of antiquities assembled by Baron Alessio Recupero of Catania, Sicily. Recupero had bought the pieces about 1800 in an unauthorised sale of objects formerly curated by the Abbot Severini. Less happily, Wilshere worked with the demanding Neapolitan Jesuit scholar Raffaello Garrucci, a rival to de Rossi who published several well-illustrated accounts of gold-glass. Significant collections of ancient gold-glass are held in many other museums, including the Louvre, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Petit Palais, Paris; the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, and the Metropolitan Museum, New York; in Italy the Museo Bargello in Florence, the Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona and the Museo Civico, Pesaro hold important collections of gold-glass.

A corpus of gold-glass in the Vatican and other museums by the American scholar Charles Morey was published posthumously in 1959. Though poorly illustrated and occasionally confused, Morey’s work has remained indispensable for the modern study of late Roman gold-glass and his catalogue still provides the basic reference numbers for individual pieces. Much effort
has been made in subsequent years to develop Morey’s understanding of the gold-glass workshops, notably by the Italian scholar Lucia Faedo (1978) and the German Hans-Georg Nüsse (2008). All three scholars compared style, pattern, and textual content within the gold leaf to suggest relationships between individual gold-glasses, and hence to identify workshops that were placed in a much debated chronological order. In recent years Claudia Lega of the Vatican Museums has analyzed the lettering style of the texts on gold-glass, relating the letter forms to the workshops proposed by Faedo and Nüsse.

However, new methods of scientific analysis and imaging have opened up new paths to understanding the production of late antique gold-glass, allowing a focus on the chemistry of the glass in addition to art-historical and textual analysis of the gold leaf. In the last twenty years scientists have developed non-intrusive methods of analysis, notably XRF, in which the surface of the glass is bombarded with high energy X-rays, causing the emission from the glass of secondary or fluorescent X-rays, from which individual chemical elements may be identified, quantified, and compared. The XRF and other more intrusive analytical techniques have informed recent catalogues of gold-glass in the British Museum and Oxford.

Significantly, over a century ago, the author of a prescient German study of late antique gold-glass had recommended chemical analysis of the glass as potentially a more effective means of distinguishing workshops than studying the gold leaf. In recent practice chemical analysis has delivered a framework for dating gold-glass in a broad chronological sequence of three bands, within which iconographical and textual observations can be made concerning workshops and response to pressure from the increasingly influential Church (see below). With regard to the role of the gold-leaf engraver in glass workshops, the results suggest that gold-leaf engravers specialized in decorating particular types of vessel. As with variation in quality, the function of a gold-glass object and the nature of the commission, individual or public, is likely to have determined the development of gold-glass workshops (Figure 8.2).

The burial context of gold-glass

The loss of original context and the subsequent incorporation of attractively gilded vessel fragments and medallions within church, state, and private collections naturally give rise to questions about the condition of gold-glass at the time of burial. Were gold-glass vessels deliberately broken in antiquity or, as some early drawings suggest, were they buried complete and only broken on or after removal from the tomb? Some gold-glass medallions were certainly cut after discovery. However, some broken gold-glass vessel bases remain bedded within the mortar used to seal the individual grave or loculus within the catacomb. Some of these vessel bases have been turned inwards so the gold-leaf decoration, always intended to be seen from the inside of the vessel, could be “read” by the deceased. Such an arrangement also meant that no jagged edges of glass threatened visitors to the narrow passages between the grave slots in the catacombs, and the broken walls of the vessels maintained a good grip on the mortar bedding. Indeed, most of the glasses facing out of the mortar were carefully trimmed in antiquity or purpose-made as medallions with smooth edges.

Surviving fragments set in the mortar to face outwards include smaller medallions with colored outer layers of glass. These were designed not as bases but to be set within vessel walls. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries complete glass vessels of this type were excavated in late antique graves in the cemeteries of Cologne (Figure 8.3). A clear glass plaque decorated in gold leaf but without a covering layer of glass was also found in a woman’s grave (Figure 8.4); her Christian affiliation is evident from the biblical scenes of salvation radiating around the center of the plaque.
Figure 8.2 Part of a gold-glass portrait medallion and a small cup: the lettering of the gold leaf is by two different hands, but the same batch of glass was used to make, respectively, the outer and inner layers of the two vessels. Max. dimensions (above) w. 3.9 cm and (below) h. 5.0 cm. Late 4th century ce. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN2007.24, 27.

Similarities in the gold-leaf decoration and technique of manufacture of the gold-glass from Cologne to finds from Rome suggest that the gold-glass vessels were imported from Italy to the river-port on the northern imperial frontier. The reason for their presence in fourth-century ce Cologne, itself a great centre of Roman glass manufacture, most likely reflects the proximity of Cologne to the imperial capital of Trier. However, other significant imperial centres in the
Figure 8.3  Part of a shallow bowl decorated with swirls of gold-glass medallions with colored outer layers, from the cemetery of St Severin, Cologne, Germany. Max. d. about 21 cm. British Museum PE 1881.6.24–1. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 8.4  Watercolor painting of the remains of an unprotected gold-glass plaque excavated in 1866 in the cist grave of a woman, Ursulagartenstrasse, Cologne, d. about 19 cm. British Museum BEP S.317. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Balkans have not produced quantities of gold-glass apparently imported from Rome, though isolated finds of gold-glass have been made within reach of the Rhine-Danube frontier and elsewhere in southern Europe.27

The social status of gold-glass

Much argument has arisen over the social status of gold-glass. Given by relatives and dependents of the deceased, gold-glass does not appear to have had the same cachet as, say, late antique silver tableware or ivory diptychs.28 Artistic quality is very variable within the corpus: portraits apparently intended as grave-markers and made from the second to the fourth centuries CE are of an exceptional standard of craftsmanship, easily comparable with the finest painted mummy-portraits from Egypt or to portraits carved in marble. Powdered glass and gold leaf were brushed to great effect to create shading and a sense of three-dimensionality in these objects of modest scale (Figure 8.5). Though loss of archaeological context impedes recognition of the users of late Roman gold-glass, two portrait medallions remain in place in the catacomb of Pamphilus. This and many other catacombs in suburban Rome were developed on land that was in imperial ownership in the third century.29 Many members of the wider imperial family of servants and courtiers were buried there, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the people portrayed in late second and third-century gold-glass medallions and drinking cups, which are only known from Rome, were members of that group of often wealthy freedmen who served the emperor and his family as musicians, scribes, bodyguards and so forth.

Figure 8.5 Gold-glass medallion of a mother with her children, about 250–300 CE, later mounted on the cross of St Desiderius. Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.
In contrast, many of the fourth-century Christian gold-glasses appear to have been mass-produced to a pedestrian standard rather than individually commissioned. Nonetheless, in terms of glass-making all gold-glass lies at the expensive end of the market (see further below).

Many scholars have taken the view that gold-glass vessels were commissioned or purchased for special events, from personal milestones such as weddings to gifts auguring good fortune for the New Year. Nonetheless, the similarity of the iconography of the gold leaf to the decoration of contemporary sarcophagi and wall-paintings within the catacombs indicates that much was ordered specifically for funerary use. Whatever its purpose, gold-glass offers evidence of conspicuous consumption, being rarely used, perhaps only once at the funeral feast and then buried with the deceased, if not specifically commissioned to accompany the dead (Figure 8.4).

Within the surviving corpus of gold-glass, we can trace some evidence in the decoration of the gold leaf of response from glassmakers and their clients to complaints by prominent bishops of the early Christian church concerning the sumptuous nature of Roman funerals and the continued cult of the dead. By the early fifth century CE, the church appeared to have won the arguments in favor of personal austerity; no doubt the glassmakers also lost their market to the relocation of the capital to Ravenna in 402, the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, and the consequent dispersal of many of the city’s wealthier inhabitants. Gold-glass does not appear to have accompanied the dead in inner-city burials of the fifth century and later. Rare survivals of leather bands, perhaps made in the sixth century CE, include tiny gold-glass medallions within their decoration, the gold leaf adhering to richly colored glass. By the time these were made (most likely in Egypt), the countryside around Rome had become unstable, the catacombs exposed to looting and ripe for abandonment.

Making gold-glass

Gold-glass is a term commonly applied to the bases of glass vessels and to glass medallions in which a layer of gold leaf, incised and cut with figures and/or text, is sandwiched between two layers of glass. The technique has inspired the alternative term “sandwich gold-glass”, in German “Zwischengoldglas”, distinguishing these vessels from other artefacts in which a layer of gold leaf was applied to an exterior surface with no covering glass layer. In sandwich gold-glass, one layer of clear glass served as the base to which the gold leaf was glued, cut, engraved and sometimes painted with coloured enamel. The gold leaf and its base were then fused to a second, covering layer of glass that formed the walls of the vessel, usually a shallow bowl. At the height of the late antique fashion for gold-glass in the middle years of the fourth century CE, smaller medallions were made in which the gold leaf was stuck to a protective layer forming the wall of a shallow bowl. As their gold-leaf decoration was cut in reverse, the small medallions offered no scope for text or embellishment with coloured enamel. Nonetheless, a sequence of medallions could deliver a narrative, and the careful arrangement of contrasting colours of glass produced attractive swirls of colour around the walls of the bowls (Figure 8.3, where the covering outer layers of glass were alternately coloured with blue-green copper and deep blue cobalt). It is likely that sandwich gold-glass vessels were designed for use by the living, even if only once, while unprotected gold-glass had no function other than to accompany the dead or embellish their graves (Figure 8.4).

Although levels of artistry in preparing the gold leaf were variable throughout the late antique period of production of gold-glass, the manufacture of gold-glass vessels required considerable dexterity and the careful control of temperatures in multiple kilns. Recent experimental
archaeology by Daniel Howells has clarified the likely process that baffled craftsmen and scholars for centuries. Early written accounts, while illuminating, are not entirely helpful. Chapter 13 of the second book of the treatise of the twelfth-century German monk Theophilus, *De vitreis Scyphis, quos graecia uro at argento decorant* (On glass goblets, which the [Byzantine] Greeks decorate with gold and silver) describes how glassmakers worked with gold leaf, as does the late fourteenth-century account by Cennino Cennini. However, neither scholar described the making of sandwich gold-glass. Fortunately, a tenth-century writer, the Italian monk Eraclius, did describe the process in *De coloribus et artibus Romanorum* (On the colours and arts of the Romans), part 5, 187–188; this last account proved the formative influence on Howells’ work.

As revived by Howells, the process for making glass vessels with sandwich gold leaf bases is as follows. A bubble of glass is gathered and blown, with a constriction (parison) formed with metal pincers between the blowpipe and the bubble. The bubble is then slowly cooled in an annealing oven, after which the pad can be separated from it, in the process creating a shallow, downturned foot-ring. The upper surface of the pad is painted with vegetable gum or animal glue and a very thin layer of gold leaf is brushed upon it. The design is cut into the gold leaf with a needle or stylus, using guidelines for lettering and/or grids for the composition. Additional details painted in coloured enamel may be added. Excess gold leaf is trimmed for recycling. The decorated base is slowly reheated in the annealing oven. It is then placed in a box on the floor while the much larger and hotter clear blown glass covering layer is lowered onto it. This process is especially tricky: some gold-glass vessel fragments show evidence of at least two covering layers, suggesting that the glassmaker was not always satisfied with the first attempt. The fused whole vessel is then removed from the blow-pipe and slowly cooled in the annealing oven. Any excess glass is later removed for recycling, leaving a shallow bowl.

To make the medallions decorating the walls of vessels, the inner layer of transparent glass of the entire bowl is first blown, detached from the blowpipe and cooled in the annealing oven. A grid of medallion locations is marked on it and the gold-leaf decoration applied. The decoration of each medallion is cut retrograde, inhibiting the use of text; no enamel paint can be added to it. The bowl is then slowly reheated, and small gathers of colored glass are applied with a rod to seal the medallions into position. In the finer medallions, decorated with brushed, powdered gold leaf and coloured glass, both layers of glass are blown in near-identical fashion, the gold-leaf decoration sealed and the edges clipped, beveled and ground smooth.

**Primary and secondary production of Roman glass and the use of decolourants**

Recent chemical analysis of late antique gold-glass bases and medallions set into the walls of vessels shows that all Roman glass used in the manufacturing process was decoloured. From prices given for glass in the Edict on Maximum Prices issued on behalf of the Emperor Diocletian in 301 ce, the consistent use of decolourants indicates that gold-glass invariably fell within the more expensive, “Alexandrian” category of glass, listed at twice the price (twenty-four *denarii* per pound) of “Judaean” glass (twelve–thirteen *denarii* per pound): a good account of the likely application of the Edict to late antique glass-working, with citations of the relevant section of the text of the edict in Greek and Latin and English translation, is given by Stern. “Judaean” glass is understood to have been used in its natural state, the glass coloured a bluish green from deposits of iron within the sand used in the primary manufacturing process. To remove the iron, a chemical agent was required. As decolouring agents are known from stratigraphically
dated glass to have changed over time, a relative chronology of Roman gold-glass may be constructed from recording the decolourants. Roman glass is very consistent in character, allowing comparison across much of Europe and the Mediterranean region; the lack of variability is understood to be the result of large-scale manufacture in a two-stage process. Primary glass was largely produced in kilns located within an arc ranging from northern Egypt to Syria. Here the sand was considered of suitable quality for glass-making, and there were plentiful natural deposits of natron for use as a flux. The sand in question was alluvia dumped by the Nile in its delta, whence it was blown by the prevailing winds onto the beaches of the south-east sector of the Mediterranean coast. Decolouring took place as part of the primary production process. Raw glass was produced in this region in enormous kilns (excavated examples are of very late antique date). Glass was exported in its raw state to Europe, where secondary workshops of glassmakers melted down the lumps, blocks and slabs to make vessels and other products. Here there were plentiful resources of timber and metal, both commodities lacking in the area of primary production, which could be used respectively to fire kilns and make heavy-duty blowpipes of a weight to pick up large gobs of molten glass. Production was thus able to expand from perfume and oil flasks to bottles large enough to be used for transporting oil used for cooking and lighting, or wine.

The use of decolourants and the development of gold-glass from the third to the fifth centuries CE

Gold-glasses of the second and third centuries CE were decoloured with antimony alone. Some small medallions forming the narrow bases of chalices were simply decorated in gold leaf with a text toasting the named honorand, with an injunction to “Drink! May you live!” written in Greek rendered in a Latin script, the style resembling modern stencilled lettering (Figure 8.6). That toast is often understood to have the implied Christian sense of “May you live [forever]!” though this sense cannot be verified without overtly Christian iconography, present in some later glasses (Figure 8.7). Some larger bases, apparently of straight-walled beakers, were elaborately decorated with similar texts rendered in trailed gilding. Both vessel types appear to have been used at feasts honouring the deceased before burial. The larger, shallow bowls typical of later gold-glass vessel production are not much seen at this period, though unprotected gold-leaf plaques for placement on the corpse were certainly made (Figure 8.4; the Christian narrative scenes indicate a fourth-century date for this piece). Some very high quality gold-leaf portraits were crafted of individuals or family groups (see above and Figure 8.5). These medallions appear to have been used as tomb markers and did not form the base of vessels.

In the fourth century CE, antimony was replaced as a decolourant with the more widely available and less toxic manganese. Gold-glass was then widely used to decorate the bases of shallow bowls that appear to have been used at funeral feasts. The bowls and dishes are of open form, more suited to food than to drink, a characteristic of late antique dining observed in other media. Overtly Christian themes appeared, recounting stories from the Old and New Testaments of individuals such as Isaac, Jonah, Susannah and the paralytic healed by Christ, among others who had been saved by divine intervention (Figures 8.4 and 8.7).

Vignettes from these biblical stories of personal salvation were also popular subjects for the small medallions set in the walls of glass bowls (Figure 8.3). An engraved glass bowl found in a tomb in Podgoritsa, Montenegro, and now in St Petersburg includes above the vignettes lines from the commendatio animae, or prayer for the commendation of the soul, one of the earliest surviving Christian prayers (Figure 8.8).
Figure 8.6  Backlit, detailed photograph taken from above of the base of an inscribed chalice enjoining Heraclides to drink and live (photo: Dana Norris), with a drawing of the fragmentary chalice by Yvonne Beadnell. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN2007.38.

Figure 8.7  Gold-glass base of an oval dish: one of an unnamed couple in the central medallion is enjoined to drink and live; around them are vignettes of stories of personal salvation taken from the Old and New Testaments, d. 10.8 cm. Photo: David Gowers, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN2007.13.
Similar biblical narratives of personal salvation appear painted on the walls of the catacombs, and carved on the personalized lids of marble sarcophagi; in a funerary context, these too surely evoke the prayer commending the soul of the deceased. Within the circular format of the bases of gold-glass vessels the vignettes sometimes surrounded portraits of an individual or a couple, one or both of whom might be toasted in the old fashion (Figure 8.7). It is striking that all such figures portrayed in gold-glass are sumptuously dressed in contemporary style (Figures 8.2, 8.5 and 8.7). However, these apparently wealthy individuals were the recipients rather than the commissioners of gold-glass, which cannot therefore be used as evidence for self-representation. Those who gave the glass vessels might be of considerably lower status.

In the mid-fourth century CE gold-glass reached its acme of popularity, and workshops in Rome expanded to produce a wider range of goods, including flat inlays and perfume jars. The inlay illustrated here (Figure 8.9) was cut down for reuse in a Christian context. Originally the engraver depicted a secular scene of fishing; in second use the Christian symbol of paired fish was retained.44

In the mid-fourth century CE Jewish clients commissioned gold-glass vessels of the same shape, using the same toasts and apparently the same workshops. However, the gold-leaf decoration, sometimes further embellished with enamel paint, was restricted to objects of Jewish liturgy in sacred settings (Figure 8.10).
As happened with Christian decoration of gold-glass, Jewish motifs complemented the decoration of contemporary funerary memorials in stone and the painted walls of catacombs in Rome. It is likely that the appearance of sacred symbols in Jewish funerary art at Rome
reflected growing awareness of Jerusalem in the city, following the legalisation of Christianity and the arrival in Rome of Christian relics from Jerusalem.

Records survive of senior Christian clerics railing against the continued practice of pagan funerary cults by Christian families.45 The Christian Fathers urged the faithful to remember the martyrs rather than toasting their loved ones with wine served in inappropriate chalices, and to spend money on the living poor rather than wasting it on the funerals of the rich. Apparently in response, the decoration of some gold-glass moved from themes of personal salvation to celebrate the martyrs and saints of the Church. Though much glass of this sort was carelessly produced, some examples were of higher standard and decorated with added enamel paint. The illustrated fragment (Figure 8.11) was cut in half, a phenomenon also known in late antique undecorated glass. Perhaps its value had to be shared. The edges of this fragment were clipped at an unknown date.

Despite increasing interest in saints and martyrs, portraits of individuals continued to be commissioned until the end of the fourth century (Figure 8.2). Unlike private individuals, martyrs and saints were invariably labelled with their names, though it is not always clear whether unnamed miracle-workers should be identified as Old Testament prophets or as Christ (Figures 8.3 and 8.7). In the later fourth century, Christian figures became overwhelmingly dominant, with a clear focus on the rise to prominence of Peter and Paul as patron saints of Rome (Figure 8.12).

Though by this time much glass was recycled, with a mix of decolourants visible in the chemistry, it was still possible to commission gold-glass vessels of high quality (Figure 8.2). The prominence of Saints Peter and Paul and the sometimes outstanding quality of the latest gold-glass recall the outstanding craftsmanship of some marble sarcophagi of the age of Theodosius. These exceptional works show that individual commissions by wealthy patrons could still produce art of a high order even within a decade or two of the demise of the art of making gold-glass.
Figure 8.12  Clipped gold-glass base of a vessel: Saints Peter and Paul watch over medallion portraits of the martyred popes Julius and Sixtus, d. 10.5 cm. Photo taken from the more visible outer surface of the glass, with text reversed, by David Gowers. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN2007.7.

Notes


6 David F. Grose, *Early ancient glass: core-formed, rod-formed, and cast vessels and objects from the late Bronze Age to the early Roman Empire*, 1600 BC to AD 50 (New York, NY: Hudson Hills and Toledo Museum of Art, 1989).


Gold-glass in Late Antiquity

13 Morey, Gold-glass collection.
14 Howells, A catalogue of the late antique gold glass, 12–21.
15 Morey, Gold-glass collection, no. 79.
17 Raffaele Garrucci, Vetri ornati di figure in oro trovati nei cimiteri dei cristiani primitivi di Roma, Rome, 1858; idem, ‘Un vetro cimiteriale’, La Civiltà cattolica 13, serie 5.1 (1862): 691–703; idem, Descrizione dei vetri ornati di figure in oro appartenenti al sig Tommaso Capobianchi, seguezzante d’antichità in Via del Babuino n. 152, Rome, 1864; idem, Vetri ornati di figure in oro, trovati nei cimiteri dei cristiani primitivi di Roma, 2nd ed., Rome; and idem, Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa, V. 3, Piture non cimiteriali, Prato, 1870–1876.
18 Morey, Gold-glass collection.
22 Walker, Saints and Salvation.
24 Howells, Entwistle and James, A catalogue of the late antique gold glass, 24–25.
25 Morey, Gold-glass collection: nos 11, 24, 42, 68, 103, 166, 170, 220–225, the last group still located in the Catacomb of Pamphilus.
26 Morey, Gold-glass collection: nos 166, 170.
27 See most recently Howells, Entwistle and James, A catalogue of the late antique gold glass, 153–162, Appendix A.
30 Stephanie L. Smith, Gold-glass vessels of the late Roman Empire: production, context, and function (PhD diss., Rutgers, NJ: The State University of New Jersey, 2000).
33 Morey, Gold-glass collection, no. 444, now in Vienna.
34 Ignatiadou, Glass and gold.; Walker, Saints and Salvation, 76–77.
35 Howells, Entwistle and James, A catalogue of the late antique gold glass, 43–52 with Appendix C.
41 Freestone, Gorin-Rosen and Hughes, “Primary glass from Israel”.

139
Further reading


