

Reused from Banquet to Grave: Gold Glass, a “Popular” Medium in Late Antiquity?

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Abstract. Gold-glass bottoms generally found in Roman catacombs are some of late antiquity’s most enigmatic objects. Originally conceived as vessels, once they were broken, their bases were reemployed to be embedded in the mortar sealing of the slabs of certain *loculi*. Drawing on the different hypotheses on the origins of the bowls or glasses these bottoms were obtained from, and reflecting on the reasons for and ways of using these glass bottoms to decorate *loculi*, this paper aims to reassess the position of gold-glass in the culture of late antiquity by questioning its pertinence or link to “popular” culture.

Keywords: Late Antiquity; Gold-Glass; Drinking Vessels; Funerary Practices; Reuse; “Popular” Culture.

[es] Reutilizado del banquete a la tumba: el vidrio dorado, ¿un medio “popular” en la Antigüedad tardía?

Resumen. Los fondos de vidrio dorado que se encuentran generalmente en las catacumbas romanas son algunos de los objetos más enigmáticos de la antigüedad tardía. Concebidos originalmente como vasijas, una vez rotas, sus bases se reemplazan para empotrarlas en el sellado de mortero de las losas de ciertos *loculi*. Partiendo de las diferentes hipótesis sobre el origen de los cuencos o vasos de los que se obtuvieron estos fondos, y reflexionando sobre las razones y formas de utilizar estos fondos de vidrio para decorar *loculi*, este artículo tiene como objetivo reevaluar la posición del vidrio dorado en la cultura de la antigüedad tardía al cuestionar su pertinencia o vínculo con la cultura “popular”.

Palabras clave: Antigüedad tardía; Copa de oro; Bebederos; Prácticas funerarias; Reutilización; Cultura popular.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. A changing object: limits and perspectives. 3. For whom and why?. 4. In the catacombs: how and why? 5. Conclusions. 6. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

A specific product of Late Antiquity, so-called “gold-glass” is shrouded in uncertainty about its origins, its primary function, and how it was reused. These objects, which sandwich an engraved gold leaf between two layers of glass, form the bottoms of cups and glasses found mainly in funerary contexts, particularly in Roman cat-

acombs, where they were often inserted into the lime used to seal the *loculi* (Fig.1). Well-known thanks to the interest devoted to them by antiquarians, they have been systematically classified among the “minor” arts, thus remaining at the margins of artistic historiography. However, the interest in these objects shown in broader research on late antique culture conducted in recent years has made them an important topic for reflection².

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² Early studies on the subject include Filippo Buonarroti, *Osservazioni sopra alcuni frammenti di vasi antichi di vetro ornati di figure trovati ne' cimiteri di Roma* (Firenze: Stamperia di S.A.R., 1716) and Marco Antonio Boldetti, *Osservazioni sopra i cimiteri de' Santi martiri ed antichi cristiani di Roma* (Roma: Gio. Maria Salvioni, 1720). A major breakthrough in research on these objects appeared with Raffaele Garrucci's *Vetri ornati di figure in oro trovati nei cimiteri dei Cristiani primitivi di Roma* (Roma: Tipografia Salviucci, 1858), and Hermann Voepel, *Die altchristlichen Goldgläser* (Freiburg, Leipzig, Tübingen: Mohr, 1899). Essential remains the publication of the Vatican collection by Charles R. Morey, *The gold-glass collection of the Vatican Library, with additional catalogues of other gold-glass collections* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1959; posthumously published by Guy Ferrari). Recent studies include Daniel T. Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*, ed. Liz James and Chris Entwistle (London: The British Museum, 2015); *Saints and Salvation: the Wilshire Collection of Gold-Glass, Sarcophagi and Inscriptions from Rome and Southern Italy*. *Ashmolean Museum*, ed. Susan Walker (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2017); Monica Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses: Salvation and social dynamics”, in *A globalised visual culture?*, ed. Fabio Guidetti and Katharina Meinecke (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2020), 179-209 and the updated overview by Susan Walker, “Gold-glass in late Antiquity”, in *The Routledge handbook of early Christian art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 124-140.



Figure 1. Rome, Catacomb of Panfilo, *Bowl base on a loculus seal*, 2nd half IVth ct. Source: Bisconti, “Vetri dorati e arte monumentale”, Fig. 9.

Because of their distribution, and especially because of the repetitiveness of the iconographic subjects, inscriptions, and stylistic elements featured (Figs. 2-9), it has generally been assumed that these were serial products, born of “popular” culture, i.e. linked to the lower spheres of society. This assumption deserves to be re-examined by studying the “double life” of gold-glass –first as containers, then fragments chosen for burials– thus shedding light on the birth of this apparently “popular” phenomenon.



Figure 2. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Bowl Base with Miracle Scenes*, 350-400. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, nr. 16.174.2.



Figure 3. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of art, *Bottom of a drinking vessel*, 350-400. Source: Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass*, pl. 64



Figure 4. London, British Museum, *Bottom of a drinking vessel showing a bride and a bridegroom*, 350-400. Source: The British Museum, nr. 1863,0727.11.



Figure 5. London, British Museum, *Bottom of a drinking vessel showing a family group*, 350-400. Source: The British Museum, nr. 1863,0727.5.



Figure 6. London, British Museum, *Bottom of a drinking vessel or bowl depicting Peter and Paul, 350-400.* Source: The British Museum, nr. 1863,0727.4.



Figure 7. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Bowl Base with Christ Giving Martyrs' Crowns to Saints Peter and Paul, ca. 350.* Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, nr. 11.91.4.



Figure 8. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Bowl Base with Saints Peter and Paul Flanking a Column with the Christogram, late 4th century.* Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, nr. 16.174.3.



Figure 9. Florence, Museo del Bargello, *Bottom of a drinking vessel or bowl depicting Peter and Paul, 350-400.* Source: Wikimedia Commons.

2. A changing object: limits and perspectives

Any reflection on the design, circulation, and therefore the primary use and reuse of these objects is complicated, given their preservation. Once in antiquarian collections and museums, the original contexts they were found in become generally vague: except for a few examples still *in situ* in the plaster of *loculi*, the information is at best limited to the name of the catacomb or cemeterial context where they were found. In any case, this information only reflects the secondary use of these objects, whose original function and reasons for reuse in the burial context still remain unclear.

The most important studies dedicated to gold-glass have therefore long featured a compilatory approach. Treated as a unique class of objects, often subdivided only by the type of depictions (biblical scenes, figures of saints, secular “portraits”, Jewish imagery)³, or on the basis of hypothetical production workshops⁴, a proper reflection on the original function of these objects and the mechanisms and reasons for their reuse has been difficult to develop. More recent studies, however, focused on the epigraphic evidence⁵, materiality⁶, condi-

³ See, for example, Stephanie Leigh Smith, *Gold-glass vessels of the late roman Empire: production, context and function*, PhD Graduate School-New Brunswick Rutgers (New Jersey: The State University of New Jersey, 2000); Jutta Dresken-Weiland, “Funerary iconography and its signification in christianization context of the Early Christian world”, *Antiquité Tardive* 19 (2011): 63-78 and Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique...*

⁴ Franca Zanchi Roppo, *Vetri paleocristiani a figure d'oro conservati in Italia* (Bologna: Patron, 1969); Lucia Faedo, “Per una classificazione preliminare dei vetri dorati tardoromani”, *Annali della scuola normale superiore di Pisa* 8, no. 3 (1978): 1025-1070; Hans-Jörg Nüsse, “Römische Goldgläser – alte und neue Ansätze zu Werkstattfragen”, *Prähistorische Zeitschrift* 83, no. 2 (2008): 222-256.

⁵ Especially Claudia Lega, “Il corredo epigrafico dei vetri dorati: novità e considerazioni”, *Sylloge Epigraphica Barcinonensis (SEBarc)* 10 (2012): 263-286.

⁶ Paola De Santis, “Glass vessels as grave goods and grave ornaments in the catacombs of Rome: some examples”, in *Burial, Society and*

tions of production and⁷, more generally, the devotional context of the historical period in question⁸, have underscored the need for a differentiated and circumstantial approach: the vessels the glass bottoms in question belonged to were not necessarily created for a single purpose, and therefore did not always have the same type of circulation and reuse. It is necessary to consider this crucial premise in order to study the culture behind late antique gold-glass.

3. For whom and why?

Attempting to clarify the context of production – by whom, for whom and for what reason – is essential to understanding the culture behind these objects and whether or not it was “popular”. This question is further complicated by the lack of conclusive evidence on commissioning and dating, which does not allow us to determine the precise development of these artifacts during the fourth century, and especially in the second half of the century, when a real boom in the spread of engraved gold-glass occurred.

There are scholars who have associated gold-glass with the humblest spheres of late Roman society – the same spheres that were buried in *loculi*, as opposed to the more wealthy, who were buried in sumptuous *cubicula* – as well as scholars who instead consider them to be an elite production, linked to aristocratic families or the high ecclesiastical sphere⁹. In reality, even regarding the level of patronage, a wide range of possibilities must be left open, although it is indisputable that the incised glass in this essay is linked to a generally lower and broader social sphere than the brushed glass that was common earlier: the latter are real medallions with portraits, possessing an extraordinary plastic quality (Fig. 10)¹⁰. The amount of gold needed to make engraved glass was in fact not much, and though glass was a valuable material, it was still accessible even outside the aristocracy. Howells thus rightly identified the main users of these objects as being in a middle class of artisans and merchants, often buried in the cemeterial contexts where many of the known gold glass bottoms came from¹¹.



Figure 10. Rome, Catacomb of Panfilo, *Glass medaillon on a loculus seal*, IIIrd ct. Source: Fabrizio Bisconti, Vincenzo Fiocchi Nicolai, Danilo Mazzoleni, *Le catacombe cristiane di Roma: origini, sviluppo, apparati decorativi, documentazione epigrafica* (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 1998), 147, fig. 152.

These considerations highlight the need to cautiously consider the association of gold-glass with “popular” culture, and prudently regard the very concept of “popular”. It remains in any case difficult to be more precise about the context of commissioning and the recipients of these objects. Even pieces with portraits and inscriptions with the names of the recipients do not lead back to well-known figures in the society of the time. Even more complex is the question of objects representing figures of saints or biblical scenes, which hardly ever offer any signs of individualization. In some cases, the recipient was shown between biblical depictions (Figs. 2-3), without an inscription providing his or her identity, while there is a lack of data on whether the client or owner of the artifact could have actually been depicted between images of saints¹². We can only note that the diffusion of the type of glass decorated with leading figures in late antique Roman sanctums must have taken place in the years of the pontificate of Damasus (366-384), whose push for the development of the martyr cult is widely accepted¹³.

While the type of artifact and the repetitiveness of subjects and composition suggests, as has been said, an artisanal product – made in an almost serial fashion by workshops that would then sell these objects for the most diverse purposes – it has also rightly been noted

Context in the Roman World, ed. J. Pearce, M. Millett and M. Struck (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2000), 238-243.

⁷ Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*.

⁸ Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”.

⁹ The issue is summarized in Walker, “Gold-glass in late Antiquity”, 130-131; Lucy Grig, “Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome”, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 72 (2004): 203-230, sp. 212-213 suggesting that some pieces were commissioned by Bishop Damasus, while for others Lega, “Il corredo epigrafico dei vetri dorati”, 267-268 has demonstrated belonging to aristocratic families.

¹⁰ On these glasses, see e.g. Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique...*, 62.

¹¹ Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique...*, 52 and 60-65; Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”, 180. On the artistic production as cultural link between different levels of the Christian society see in general Gisella Cantino-Wataghin, “Biblia pauperum? A proposito dell’arte dei primi cristiani”, *Antiquité Tardive* 9 (2002): 259-274.

¹² See, in this respect, the gold-glass bottom of New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, nr. 18.145.2, where the praying figure in the center between Peter and Paul, identified by the inscription as PEREGRINA, may have been a saint, not otherwise known, or the recipient of the object. *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), cat. nr. 510.

¹³ See Lucrezia Spera, “Interventi di papa Damaso nei santuari delle catacombe romane: il ruolo della committenza privata”, *Bessarione* 11 (1994): 111-127; Marianne Sághy, “Renovatio memoriae: Pope Damasus and the Martyrs of Rome”, in *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum*, hrsg. von Ralf Behrwald, Christian Witschel (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012), 251-267. For a nuanced perspective on the Damasian interventions, see Nicola Denzey Lewis, “Damasus and the derelict relics”, *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no. 4 (2018): 417-439.

that no two identical specimens exist among the known examples¹⁴. It is therefore necessary to picture a production system open to specific demands, within which circulating models were reused and adapted, in both depictions and inscriptions.

To reframe these objects, therefore, we cannot assume a single primary function. It is precisely a view on this diversity that allows us to reconcile at least some of the proposals formulated to date. Due to the presence of scenes common to funerary painting, hagiographic images, and inscriptions of an augural nature, it has been thought that these vessels could have been used in funerary agape¹⁵, or to celebrate the feast days of saints¹⁶. The depiction of couples or family groups, on the other hand, suggest that these objects could have been created for wedding ceremonies or family celebrations¹⁷. These are hypotheses that should be evaluated case by case. The “festive” character of these objects, for example, seems to clash with the fact that some pieces present traces of wear too significant to suggest objects used only on specific occasions¹⁸. However, this problem can perhaps be explained in light of a logical differentiation: in the higher social spheres, where silver and ivory also circulated, a glass with a gilded bottom may have been used more frequently than in the lower spheres, where it would have been saved for special occasions. This is a hypothetical explanation, however, that confirms the need to evaluate these objects individually.

What bears repeating, moreover, is that nothing allows us to attribute these artifacts with certainty to the funerary sphere starting from the moment of their conception. In fact, the epigraphic formulas feature generic augural messages¹⁹, while the presence of iconographic themes attested in the funerary art of the time (miracles of Christ, paradigmatic images of salvation, *Traditio legis*, praying figures; Figs. 11-12) does not necessarily suggest an original sepulchral purpose, but is rather linked to the popularity of a transversal *imagerie*, shared during the second half of the fourth century, as an expression of the common wishes for a good life that characterize the inscriptions on these artifacts²⁰.

¹⁴ Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”, 199.

¹⁵ Garrucci, *Vetri ornati di figure in oro*, 13.

¹⁶ Voepel, *Die altchristlichen Goldgläsern*, 92.

¹⁷ On this question see e.g. Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*, 114-131. More in general, on the objects of the private sphere see Jo Stoner, *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019).

¹⁸ Walker, “Gold-glass in late Antiquity”, 131.

¹⁹ An exception to this rule is an artifact found in the Cemetery of St. Pammphilus (Musei Vaticani, inv. 60639.) with the inscription “Gregori, Simplici, conrecescat/es”: Smith, *Gold-glass vessels of the late roman Empire*, 357. See Lega, “Il corredo epigrafico dei vetri dorati”, 276-277, Fig. 7. This is, however, painted glass, most likely conceived as a medallion (on this type of gold-glass see Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*, 22-52), a type of object for which, with regard to the context of creation and original function, a different discourse applies from the discussion here on the bottoms of cups and glasses. Regarding the inscriptions on these artifacts, see more generally Susan H. Auth, “Drink May You Live! Roman Motto Glasses in the Context of Roman Life and Death”, in *Annales du 13e Congrès de l’Association Internationale pour l’Histoire du Verre* (Lochem: AIHV, 1996), 103-112.

²⁰ About this, see Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*, 61-62, who rightly draws attention to the



Figure 11. Rome, Catacomb of Commodilla, Cubiculum of Leo, *Painting with praying S. Agnes*, late IVth ct. Source: Johannes G. Deckers, Gabriele Mietke, Albrecht Weiland, *Die Katakomben “Commodilla”: Repertorium der Malereien* (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1994), pl. 32.



Figure 12. Rome, Mausoleum of S. Costanza, southwestern niche, *Traditio legis*, third quarter of the IVth century. Source: Joachim Poeschke, *Mosaiken in Italien, 300 – 1300* (München: Hirmer, 2009), pl. 9.

Based on similar considerations, Hellström identified possible elements linked to the ritual of baptism in the gold-glass produced in the decades when conversions multiplied around the elaborate ritual of baptism²¹. This hypothesis is enticing – though not valid for every single glass example, as admitted by the author herself – and provides a common functional substratum, potentially

fact that scenes of this type are attested at this time on embroidered clothes as well.

²¹ Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”, 199. On the complex question of the diffusion of baptism in the late fourth century, see at least of the most recent contributions: Juliette Day, “Entering the Baptistry. Spatial, Identity and Salvific Transitions in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Baptismal Liturgies”, in *Sacred Thresholds: The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity*, ed. E. van Opstall (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 66-90; *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism. Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, ed. D. Hellholm and T. Vege (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

pertinent to the main types of objects, from those with portraits to those with biblical scenes and those with figures of saints. From this suggestion, it is possible to further develop reasoning on the context of creation of this glass: while its link with coeval monumental art has long been recognized²², a recent interpretation has even proposed explaining their manufacture in relation to the mosaic production sites of the time, in particular that of Saint Peter's²³. This is a possibility which deserves to be investigated further, and which opens up yet another pathway regarding the origin of these objects, connected to sanctuaries and the dynamics of pilgrimage; this is consistent with Hellström's reading, if we consider that this is precisely in the years when gold-glass can be found in baptisteries and other sanctuaries²⁴. A production of gold-glass linked to martyr shrines could liken these objects to lead ampullae from the Holy Land, or to the terracotta ampullae of St. Menas and St. Thecla, widespread in their great shrines in the East²⁵. In light of this context, it is tempting to see the bottoms of cups with the image of praying Agnes – among the most widespread, and potentially related to the image that marked the tomb of the saint starting with the time of Pope Liberius (352-366) (Fig.13)– as the result of a similar dynamic²⁶. This hypothesis is complicated, however, by the fact that the bottoms of cups and connected glasses do not seem to share any devotional component, linked to the cult of saints or with *loca sancta*, with the oriental examples. The potential production of glass in the context of sanctuaries also clashes with the lack of systematic correspondence between the saints depicted on the glass and those venerated in the catacomb where they were found²⁷: The main gold-glass pieces with the

figure of Agnes praying still *in situ* are found, for example, in the catacombs of Novatian and Pamphilus.



Figure 13. Rome, S. Agnese fuori le mura, Marble slab, 352-66. Source: Bisconti, “Vetri dorati e arte monumentale”, fig.10.

This last piece of information leads us to address the broader and more substantial problem of the reasons for and mechanisms of the reuse of cup bottoms in catacombs: a problem that must be addressed considering a class of objects that is indeed more heterogeneous than we have tended to consider.

4. In the catacombs: how and why?

The reasons for and modalities of the reuse of these objects in catacombs thus raise two substantial questions. The first concerns the link between the object and burial: not only do the saints depicted on the glass not necessarily coincide with the catacomb where they were found, but some examples show the insertion of glass with “portraits” of specific characters in the plaster of burial niches with painted inscriptions that indicate their belonging to a deceased person with another name²⁸. Paradoxically, therefore, this means that glass bottoms could be used for graves other than the one belonging to the object's original owner. Another apparent paradox is the same use, in this funerary practice, of objects that are basically fragments of cups and glasses, whose existence presupposes their breakage and therefore the loss of the container's original function. Since we are dealing with containers with a double bottom layer, it is logical that this part of the object was the part able to survive the break²⁹ – this is sometimes clearly perceptible in the jagged edges of the bottom, while at other times it is blunted, as if to create a sort of medallion. It remains to be understood whether the breakage that produced the glass bottoms under examination was voluntary or accidental. The diffusion of these “broken” glasses in the catacombs is indeed one of the main elements that has led to imagine a use of cups and glasses providing these bottoms in funeral banquets. This evidence has even led

²² On this aspect, see Fabrizio Bisconti, “Vetri dorati e arte monumentale”, *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 74 (2001-2002): 177-193.

²³ Penelope Filacchione, “Dalla materia all'immagine: fondi d'oro tardo antichi e arte cristiana monumentale”, in *Arti minori e arti maggiori*, a cura di Fabrizio Bisconti (Todi: Tau, 2019), 551-572.

²⁴ Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”, 200. On glass with figures of saints and its hypothetical distribution in martyr shrines, see also Javier A. Pérez, “Gold-glass medallions and the development of early martyrial iconography”, in *Costantino e i costantinidi. L'innovazione costantiniana, le sue radici e i suoi sviluppi* (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2016), 2373-2380, sp. 2377.

²⁵ On Holy Land ampullae, see Alžběta Filipová, “On the origins of the Monza collection of Holy Land “ampullae”: the legend of Gregory the Great's gift of relics to Theodelinda reconsidered”, *Arte lombarda* 173-174, no. 1-2 (2015): 5-16, with previous bibliography. On those with the figure of St. Thecla, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); on those of St. Menas Monica Gilli, *Le ampolle di San Meno: religiosità, cultura materiale e sistema produttivo* (Roma: Paolombi, 2002).

²⁶ On the possible link between the diffusion of glass with the figure of Agnes and the slab of her tomb, I allow myself to refer to Chiara Croci, “Portraiture on early Christian gold-glass: some observations”, in *The face of the dead and the early Christian world*, ed. Ivan Foletti (Rome: Viella, 2013), 43-59. On glass pieces with the figure of St. Agnes, see now more generally Eileen Rubery, “From catacomb to sanctuary: the orant figure and the cults of the Mother of God and S. Agnes in Early Christian Rome, with special reference to gold glass”, *Studia Patristica* 73 (2014): 129-174.

²⁷ See on this point the catalogue collected by Leigh Smith, *Gold-glass vessels of the late roman Empire*, 338ff. See also Umberto Utrio, “Raffigurazioni agiografiche sui vetri dorati paleocristiani”, *Rendi-*

conti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia 74 (2001-2002): 207-208.

²⁸ Leigh Smith, *Gold-glass vessels of the late roman Empire*, 176.

²⁹ See Joseph Engemann, “Bemerkungen zu spätrömischen Gläsern mit Goldfoliendekor”, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 1 (1958): 7-25, sp. 7.

to the hypothesis of a ritual breaking of these containers, which would explain the wide availability of glass bottoms for closing the *loculi*³⁰. The hypothesis, though without any archaeological or literary evidence, is enticing, and could perhaps explain the fate of some objects, without necessarily reflecting a systematic process. Funeral banquets were generally held above ground, but it is not impossible that containers of this kind circulated in the catacombs for functions like the lighting of the spaces, or the diffusion of oils and perfumes at the tombs³¹.

The hypotheses mentioned here are therefore viable and not incompatible, given the assorted nature of the objects. In order to further clarify the context of their reuse, however, we must ask ourselves about the reasons leading to the affixing of these glass bottoms in the plaster of the *loculi*. It is generally agreed upon that glass bottoms were used as “markers”, that is, signs of recognition of burials that would otherwise be anonymous³². However, this hypothesis clashes, on the one hand, with cases where the characters depicted on the glass do not reflect the identity of the deceased person they are associated with, and on the other hand, with the iconographic repetitiveness in known gold-glass bottoms, which would therefore have made it difficult to identify and distinguish a tomb. De Santis has therefore taken these vitreous objects rather as “grave goods”, destined to accompany the deceased: objects from daily life associated to burial to emphasize the link between the world of the living and that of the dead, in clear continuity with ancient funerary practices. Being containers and glasses, the reuse of such objects could also take on a special meaning, recalling the idea of *refrigerium*³³.

The potential to take on a new function may have been intrinsic to cups and glasses, whose vitreous bottoms became “spoliae” of objects related primarily to toasts and conviviality, encompassing a wish for prosperity. As Howells has well shown in his attempt to emulate production techniques, these glass bottoms were like medallions, which the glass or cup was then developed from³⁴. This is flagrantly demonstrated by the so-called “Nuppengläser” of Cologne (Fig. 14), where dozens of small gold-glasses depicting scenes similar to

those found on bottoms of cups, were included in the walls of the vessel. Like the pendant of a necklace, the decorated glass bottom was almost an independent entity, which then became part of a cup or glass, only to return to being a sort of medallion at the moment the container was broken, voluntarily or not. By breaking the original object, a new and favorable paradigm arose: the fragments of the edges acquired a certain market value, as they were sought after for fusion and the production of new glass³⁵, while the remaining bottoms were transformed into portable images. It has even been thought that this process gave rise to a logic of collecting these glass bottoms³⁶; something that probably cannot be generalized, but that could explain the fact that we find glass used in tombs other than those belonging to the objects’ original recipients. In this context, it is noteworthy that the apparent paradox of using glass that was not originally conceived for the deceased is particularly seen in pieces of brushed glass, created in all likelihood as true medallions and not made from cups or glasses. The attention to the bottoms of cups and glasses and their use in the plaster of *loculi* must therefore be seen in wake of a practice born in the third century with medallions, conceived as real portable images that could brand the tomb of the deceased³⁷.



Figure 14. London, British Museum, *Bowl from S. Severin* (Köln), 360-400. Source: Sebastian Ristow, *Frühes Christentum im Rheinland. Die Zeugnisse der archäologischen und historischen Quellen an Rhein, Maas und Mosel* (Köln: Aschendorff Verlag, 2007), pl. 35a.

³⁰ Already Thümmel Hans Georg. “Tertullian’s Hirtenbecher, die Goldgläser und die Frühgeschichte der christlichen Bestattung”, in *Bild und Formensprache der spätantiken Kunst. Hugo Brandenburg zum 65. Geburtstag*, hrsg. Martina von Jordan-Ruwe (Münster: Archäologisches Seminar der Universität, 1994), 257-265, sp. 262 and note 68. An idea taken up by Philippe Cordez and Ivan Foletti, “A Convivium with Herbert L. Kessler. Sharing Objects, Sensory Experiences, and Medieval Art History”, in *Objects Beyond the Senses. Studies in Honor of Herbert L. Kessler*, ed. Philippe Cordez and Ivan Foletti (Brno: Masaryk University, 2021), 17-27, sp. 19-22.

³¹ De Santis, “Glass vessels as grave goods and grave ornaments”, 241-43. On the funeral banquet and the reasons to held it above ground see for example Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971); Katherine M. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), sp. 188.

³² Hellström, “Baptism and Roman gold-glasses”, 181-83, with previous literature.

³³ De Santis, “Glass vessels as grave goods and grave ornaments”, 241-243.

³⁴ Howells, *A Catalogue of the Late Antique Gold Glass in the British Museum*, 41-52.

5. Conclusions

Recalling the idea of a universal “toast to life”, the bottoms of cups and glasses were thus conceived as widespread objects with great visual and semantic potential.

³⁵ On the use of broken glass for the production of new glass in late antiquity, see De Santis, “Glass vessels as grave goods and grave ornaments”, 242.

³⁶ Natalie Boymel Kampen, *Family Fictions in Roman Art: Essays on the Representation of Powerful People* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 174, note 31.

³⁷ On “medallions” see above, note 19.

Suitable for reflecting light, they also assumed, practically and symbolically, the role of a guide in the dark corridors of a catacomb³⁸. The most favored images on these artifacts made use of concepts in which Christians of the second half of the fourth century recognized themselves, appropriating the characteristic “wish for life”. Compatible with the devotional and salvific scenario of the time, the images in question were also able to express the buried subject’s belonging to a distinct

social sphere. Objects that were born into a sphere that is difficult to define as “popular”, as they were not easily accessible, became “popular” insofar as they were vectors of a culture that was shared and accessible, being based on a series of common visual codes. During this change of function, the bottoms of glasses and cups lost part of their material value, though it was preserved in part by the fragments intended for remelting and acquired an even more powerful value as talismans.

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³⁸ On the link between this glass and the reflection of light cf. Walker, “Gold-glass in late Antiquity”, 124.

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