

Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis, Eunice Dauterman Maguire, and Henry Maguire, *Ceramic Art from Byzantine Serres*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois Byzantine Studies III, Urbana and Chicago 1992, pp. X+75, 4 plates, 52 figures.

In October and November 1992, on the initiative of the Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in association with the Krannert Art Museum, an exhibition of Byzantine pottery from Serres was held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The exhibition was accompanied by the volume under review here, which consists of the following separate parts: 1) 'Byzantine Pottery in the History of Art' by Eunice Dauterman Maguire and Henry Maguire, pp. 1-20; 2) 'Serres: A Glazed-Pottery Production Center during the Late Byzantine Period' by Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis, pp. 21-35; 3) 'A Note on the History and Culture of Serres during the Late Byzantine Period' by Charalambos Bakirtzis, pp. 36-9; there follows a detailed catalogue of the twenty-five objects in the exhibition, pp. 41-65; 4) 'The Materials Analysis of Byzantine Pottery' by Sarah Wisseman, pp. 66-9; a glossary of terms and technical vocabulary used in the book, pp. 70-1; and a selected bibliography, pp. 72-3.

Apart from the twenty-five photographs of the individual exhibits, the volume is also enriched by four full-page colour plates and twenty-seven illustrations distributed amongst the texts.

In the preface (pp. IX-X) Eunice Dauterman Maguire and Henry Maguire briefly discuss the exhibits, most of which were found in the course of archaeological excavations in Serres. They were all produced by a local workshop, operating in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From this point of view, the finds are justifiably considered to be of exceptional interest, not only for the picture they present of local artistic production in the period in question, but also for the information they provide about how mediaeval pottery was made.

In their essay on 'Byzantine Pottery in the History of Art' (pp. 1-20), the Maguires conduct a brief, though comprehensive, analysis of the nature of Byzantine pottery. From the manufacturing techniques they move on to the thematic repertory of and the sources of inspiration for the decoration, and finish with the relations between and mutual influences of this type of Byzantine art and other, comparable art forms—such as metalwork and painting—as also pottery of other cultures, both eastern and western.

Given that most of the pottery was intended for domestic use, the selection of the decorative themes—in marked contrast to official religious art—

is remarkably free and imaginative. Motifs tend to be taken from the natural world and everyday life, and the sources of inspiration are frequently contemporary romances and the folksongs about Digenis Akritas. Apotropaic signs are also favoured, and there is no lack of purely imaginative decoration.

The writers point out that Byzantine pottery was influenced both by the Islamic world and by other forms of Oriental art, notably Persian and Chinese. Apart from decorative motifs based on Cufic designs, for instance, Byzantine pottery also presents striking chromatic effects (particularly the use of white slip as a background), which hark back to the three-colour ware of Tang China.

Known centres of Byzantine pottery production were Corinth, Thessaloniki, Serres, Didymoteichon, and Cyprus. As well as being objects of trade and commerce both within and outside the Byzantine Empire, ceramic ware was also an important means of transporting technology from the Eastern Mediterranean to Western Europe, particularly with respect to firing, glaze, and decoration. The writers adduce evidence to show that the influence of Byzantine pottery in the West, and particularly in the urban centres of Northern Italy, increased considerably during the period of the Crusades (12th-13th cc.), when Venice and Genoa controlled the trade in Byzantine pottery.

The next chapter, Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis' 'Serres: A Glazed-Pottery Production Center during the Late Byzantine Period' (pp. 21-35), is in two parts. The first part discusses the techniques of production of Byzantine glazed pottery in general, and the second describes and analyses the techniques, the aesthetic and the specific characteristics of Serres ware.

After a long period when Byzantine pottery was a much neglected art form, in recent years specialists have been showing more interest in it. The international conference on Byzantine pottery that was organised in Athens in 1987 by the French Archaeological School was the first opportunity for a more systematic review of Byzantine pottery and provided an impulse for further research into this particular genre of art.

Research now concentrates on locating workshops and recording the characteristics of their products. Papanikola-Bakirtzis points out that 'Byzantine glazed pottery is a low-fired earthenware' and information about its production comes from archaeological finds and from observation of modern traditional pottery workshops, which use techniques that have not changed much since the Byzantine period.

The quality of the pottery is determined by all the aspects and stages of its production: the type of earth selected, its processing into clay, the wheel and the potter's skill in shaping the clay, and, of course, the kiln and the suc-

cess of otherwise of the firing. Half-finished pots found in various places (including Serres) testify to the existence of pottery workshops. The thin walls of the Byzantine pottery presuppose the use of a foot-operated wheel, though no potter's wheel of the Byzantine period has yet been found.

From a technological point of view, a major innovation in Byzantine pottery was the use of tripod stilts, small earthenware devices which separated the vessels during firing and kept them from sticking together. The technique was introduced into Byzantium from the Islamic world in the 12th c. and led to more efficient, mass production of Byzantine pottery.

The most common decorative technique used on Byzantine pottery was *sgraffito*: the fresh pot was covered with a fine layer of white slip, through which the design was cut into the dark (usually red) clay. It was the width of the engraved line that determined the various decorative techniques. The Fine Point Sgraffito technique is characterised by a very thin line with delicately rendered details and was employed between the 9th and the 12th c. In the middle of the 12th c. the line, or incision, became broader, first to emphasise details and later to render the whole subject. There are also cases of the sgraffito technique's being used to render figures in a way that makes them appear to be in low relief on the dark-coloured bare clay (a technique known as *champlevé*).

At the end of the 12th c. colour began to be used, first yellow-brown (made from iron oxides) and soon afterwards green (from copper oxides). Before long colour was a major factor in the decoration of Incised Sgraffito ware (the pigments being applied with a brush onto the incised design after the first firing and before the second). The final effect, however, was determined by glazing: the decorated surface of the pot was covered with a lead glaze, which gave it, after the third and final firing, an impermeable, lustrous film.

It is to precisely this category that most of the Serres ware belongs, produced by workshops operating mainly in the late Byzantine period (13th-14th cc.). The existence of workshops in Serres is attested by the discovery and identification of a large number of ceramics with common features in terms of clay, shape, and decoration. Further confirmation is supplied by the discovery of wasters (half-finished vases), and of clay rods and tripod stilts used in the firing process.

Serres pottery is made of red, frequently coarse clay, usually well fired. Most of the pots are open shapes, mainly bowls with a lesser number of plates. The decorative motifs are extremely varied and eclectic in their rendition: birds (of two types, tall and squat), animals, foliate themes (spiral sprigs,

trefoils, and palmettes), and geometrical motifs (e.g. a star inscribed in a pentagon).

On the basis of these characteristics, which are the principal features of the Serres ware, Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis presents a reasonable case for arguing that a number of these pots have been located both in neighbouring and in more distant areas. This indicates that they spread from Serres in the late Byzantine period. Pots found at Philippi and Thessaloniki in Macedonia, Melnik in Bulgaria, Maroneia and Mosynopolis in Thrace, Corinth, and Byzantine Skoupi (Skopje) and Prilapos (Prilep) may be attributed to the Serres workshops, and a Serres plate has been found embedded in the wall of a church in Molyvdoskepasti in Epirus. A small fragment found during the cleaning of the Laguna at Venice also has the characteristics of the Serres pottery.

In the short chapter which follows, 'A Note on the History and Culture of Serres during the Late Byzantine Period' (pp. 36-9), the Ephor of the Ephoreia of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Antiquities of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, Professor Charalambos Bakirtzis, gives a concise account of the historical and cultural circumstances in Serres from 1204 to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. During this period the town participated in the most crucial events that followed Latin rule, for it was part of the state of Thessaloniki under Boniface de Montferrat (1204) and the object of Bulgarian claims, first under Johannica and later under John II Asen, until it was brought into the state of Nicaea by John Batatzes (1245). After Michael VIII Palaeologos had restored the Byzantine Empire in 1261, Serres once again became the capital of the theme of Serres and Strymon and flourished both economically and culturally for a while, despite finding itself, in the first half of the 14th c., at the centre of the dynastic conflict between John V Palaeologos and John VI Kantakouzenos. Before it finally fell to the Turks in 1383, Serres was in Serbian hands under Stephen Dushan and his successors (1345-71).

One of the most important artistic creations of this period was the founding of the Monastery of St John Prodromos on Mount Menoikion (1275) and four churches within the town of Serres itself: St George Kryonerites, St Demetrios, St Nicholas of the Kastro, and the funerary chapel in the old Cathedral of the two Saints Theodore. To these may be added the town's fortification with the citadel, the contemporary works of painting and sculpture, and, in the literary sphere, the outstanding *Ekphrasis tou ierou Pherron*, by the Serrean scholar Theodore Pediasimos.

The next section of the book, which is untitled, consists of catalogue

entries (pp. 41-65), a presentation of twenty-five ceramics from Serres, two of which were found during excavations at Philippi and Maroneia. Each page, devoted to one item, comprises a photograph, a small drawing of the outline and section of the object, and an explanatory text giving details of the type of clay used and the shape of the article, followed by a much lengthier description of the decoration. This is followed by a brief description of the glaze (its colour and the surfaces it covers). There is no authorial ascription for this chapter, but it was in fact compiled by Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzis in association with Eunice Dauterman Maguire.

The last chapter is contributed by Sarah Wisseman, 'The Materials Analysis of Byzantine Pottery' (pp. 66-9). She begins by discussing the technical methods of analysing the clay used in Byzantine pottery in order to determine where the products were made and how far they spread. The nature and chemical composition of clay can vary quite widely, making it very difficult to identify the provenance of the raw clay used at the time when any particular item was made. The writer points out that, apart from geological, climatological, and natural conditions, the composition of the clay also depends on and is affected by tempering and firing, which makes it even harder to identify its source.

Various techniques are employed to determine the provenance of pottery, including petrography (the microscopic analysis of the structure of the clay) and multi-elemental analysis in the form of optical emission spectroscopy, X-ray fluorescence, and neutron activation. Neutron activation analysis (NAA) is considered the most useful today, though it has the drawback of requiring a nuclear reactor. The Byzantine pottery from Serres has been chemically analysed by optical emission spectrography, the method favoured by A. H. Megaw and R. E. Jones. Twenty-two samples were examined, and the results suggest that the clay came from at least three different sources. However, Wisseman cautions, the variations could be due to firing different quantities of the same clay at different temperatures or to the differences that can exist between layers of the same clay bed.

This interesting chapter ends with the results of a special investigation of the chemical composition of the colouring agents and glaze from two samples of Serres ware. The testing was carried out by Dr Duane Moore, a clay mineralogist at the Illinois State Geological Survey, and revealed, amongst other things, the presence of elpasolite, which according to Moore, appears to be an alteration product of cryolite.

As already stated at the beginning of this report, the book ends with a glossary of technical terms and a selected bibliography. Brief biographical

notes of the writers and contributors supplement this collective work, which is in every respect a useful addition to the literature on Byzantine art. In their easily comprehensible and extremely informative texts, the writers present a succinct picture of Byzantine pottery, so that the value of this particular volume far exceeds the narrow confines of a mere exhibition catalogue of glazed ceramic art from Serres. It also provides a vivid picture of the productive and artistic activity of Serres' pottery workshops in the late Byzantine period, thus shedding more light on the economic, social, and cultural life of this major urban centre in Eastern Macedonia.

E. N. KYRIAKOYDIS

*Bessarione e l'umanesimo. Catalogo della mostra*, published by the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici and the Biblioteca Nazionale Marchiana, Napoli (Vivarium) 1994, 28×24.5 cm., pp. 544+XVI.

Bessarion, the Greek from Trebizond on the Black Sea, is today considered one of the most important personalities in the history of the European spirit, a leading figure in the Byzantine world who contributed to the revival of the Classical tradition in Western Europe. This assessment belongs to Professor Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, director of the Italian Institute of Philosophical Studies, and to the enterprising head of the Marciana Library of Venice, Marino Zorzi. Both supervised the above monumental work.

We are not dealing here with the usual catalogue of exhibits (manuscripts and mementoes of Bessarion). This is a book with impeccable academic specifications, printed with enviable artistic sensitivity. It includes 26 studies, written by European experts who have been involved with the life and activity of Bessarion. It is, moreover, embellished with rare, or hitherto unknown, colour and black-and-white tables, miniatures, facsimiles of documents and autographs of Bess., wood-cuts, engravings, views of cities, diagrams, sketches, maps and photographs of wonderful quality. In essence, the reader has before him a work of art, both as regards the typographical presentation as well as the contents.

I know of no other intellectual personality of medieval and modern Hellenism who has been so deservedly honoured in Europe. Bessarion's decision, in 1468, to donate his library, consisting of manuscript codices of