Important Bracelets in Early Christian and Byzantine Art

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With the transfer of the imperial capital to Constantinople, the centre of gravity of not only the administration but also of artistic development moved to the East. Specific changes took place and, in art in particular, these led to an aesthetic displaying obvious Hellenistic influences and with ancient roots in the eastern Mediterranean. Art, primarily sculpture made during the preceding period of the military emperors and the tetrarchs, witnessed an upsurge of heavy figures in frontal poses, characterised by harsh features and geometric treatment of garments. These traits cannot be attributed to technical ineptitude or an inability to imitate Classical models. On the contrary, they were the result of a conscious choice of styles designed specifically to serve the needs of propaganda, to transmit from above messages of political power and totalitarianism.

Beginning in the reign of Constantine the Great, however, we can detect a merging of these traits with other, lighter, classicising models, characteristic of the eastern Mediterranean; these were destined ultimately to prevail in the formation of the art of Constantinople. This phenomenon can be seen, for example, in large scale sculpture such as the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, on which an Early Christian thematic repertoire also appears. Such works of Hellenistic character reveal the technical ability of their creators as well as the orientation of the sophisticated and educated strata of society, who endeavoured to keep this tradition alive. It is no accident that this tendency is particularly evident on luxury objects such as the ivory diptych of Symmachon and Nikomachon executed with a purely classical rendering of the figures and Greek iconography.

Similarly, a large number of silver vessels dating from the 2nd to the 5th century are decorated with classicising figures in mythological scenes. This trend was prevalent even in the western provinces of the Empire, as evidenced by major treasures or hoards such as those found at Mildenhall and Kaiseraugst, despite many questions concerning the origin of these objects and their absolute dating. Classical remnants including gods and heroes, symbols, vegetal motifs and geometric patterns survived and were repeated conscientiously on silver vessels made as late as the 7th century, appearing alongside Christian subjects, as for example on the David plates from the second Cyprus treasure.

In jewellery this classicising trend is especially apparent in the decoration, which had already excluded the human figure from its thematic repertoire, but retained floral and geometric motifs which emanate a delicacy and grace which recall Hellenistic creations. The shape and decoration of some bracelets which survived essentially throughout the duration of Byzantine goldwork serve as examples of this tendency.

With few exceptions, characteristic elements of Hellenistic jewellery such as the Herakles knot, coiled snaked bracelets and bracelets with animal-headed terminals steadily diminished in popularity throughout the Roman period up to the 3rd century. One survival of the latter type (Pl. 1) is a bracelet with confronted panthers in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection. The felines’ bodies are rendered with particular care, while their forelegs hold a mount for a precious stone. The combination with the pierced-work technique on the back of the mount suggests the bracelet should be dated to the 7th century. Even if the earlier dating proposed by Zwirn proves not to be valid, nonetheless the craftsman was surely familiar with bracelets with animal-head terminals and the manner of rendering them.

Another category is that of bracelets composed of interlocking elements; these, too, are of Hellenistic origin. An interesting example is the bracelet in the Zintilis Collection, now in the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens (Pl. 2). It comprises a row of interlinked plaques with inlaid stones, now lost, and light pierced-work filling decoration; the central plaque was set with a larger stone. It can be related to a corresponding necklace in the same collection and is dated to the late 4th century. Much later is a bracelet in the Pantalica Treasure, with rows of interlocking heart-shaped elements, each one enclosing an arrowhead motif. This bracelet is dated to the 7th century. It is puzzling, given how common this technique is on necklaces, that bracelets with interlocking elements have not survived in greater numbers.

The bracelet type of greatest longevity was that with a hoop formed from two moveable parts fashioned of thick wire or of thin cylinders intertwined, secured by a plain or more
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Plate 2 Bracelet, Athens, Cycladic Museum (Thanos Zintilis Collection)

Plate 3 Bracelet with Athena, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan (Inv.-no. 1917.17.190.2053)

Plate 4 Bracelet with busts of Christ and the Virgin, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, Stathatos Collection

Plate 5 Pair of bracelets, Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Acc. nos. 38. 64–65)

Plate 6 Pair of bracelets with agates, Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase, The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund (67.52.32.1/2)
elaborate clasp. In the 3rd century the clasp was formed by a mounted precious stone. An interesting 5th-century example of such a bracelet, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has a clasp with a medallion representing the head of Athena, another example of the partiality for Greek subject matter (Pl. 3). The very wide diffusion of bracelets with twisted hoops is illustrated by examples in the Thetford and the Ténès treasures, as well as those in copper-alloy from Thessalonica. Taken together, these testify to the international character of Late Roman and Early Christian jewellery.

A further pair of bracelets from Thessalonica, in the Stathatos Collection, with a hoop formed from twisted bars, has terminals in the form of two facing heart-shaped plaques. (See Bosselmann-Ruickbie this volume, Pls 1–2.) The plaques feature a composition with two birds on either side of a tree; a representation also known on earrings in the 7th century. These bracelets have been dated to the 11th century. Of the same period are the braided bracelets in the same collection displaying busts of Christ and the Virgin (Pl. 4), which by this time are purely amuletic in character.

Closely related in form to the bracelets formed from twisted bars are those with braided hoops. One pair, with a clasp with a group of five coins up to the reign of Heraklios, is in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Pl. 5). Another, with two copies of coins in a corresponding arrangement, is in Berlin and comes from Egypt, from the ensemble known as the Assiût treasure. One further bracelet from the same treasure, again with a braided hoop, has a cluster of 13 precious and semi-precious stones on the clasp, in an arrangement corresponding to that on a bracelet in the Louvre. This will be examined later as its hoop is formed from a pierced-work band.

Composite bracelets, formed essentially from tubular hoops of various shapes and with relief decoration, are encountered from the 4th century onwards. One fine bracelet in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and a corresponding one in the de Clerq Collection, have hoops of semi-circular cross-section, i.e. the inner side is flat. Two other bracelets of irregular shape, again from Virginia (Pl. 6), belong in this group. One has inlaid stones and they can be dated to the late 3rd or the early 4th century.

The bracelets from the Mytilene treasure also have tubular hoops (Pl. 7a), although much finer and with a characteristic thickening towards the centre. Among them is an important example with cruciform monograms (Pl. 7b). Bracelets with similar hoops are known also from Constantinople, the Mersin treasure and from Cyprus. All are dated to around the 7th century.

Returning again to the 4th and 5th centuries, to the basic shapes of this period, that is of bracelets with hoops of semi-circular cross-section and bracelets with moveable clasps, we observe that the pierced-work technique prevails in the rendering of the decoration, with a few cases in which relief is used.

On perusing the groups of pierced-work bracelets, the wealth of shapes, designs and decoration in this unique period of jewellery production, becomes apparent. Initial stages of the technique appear in similar bracelets composed of a pierced-work band with intermediate circular discs without decoration. It is possible that they were interposed to consolidate the pierced-work surface, given that it is fine and vulnerable to damage. On the pierced-work parts checkerboard patterns alternate with a simplified rinceau with tiny ivy leaves. The workmanship of the pierced-work surface could be characterised as rough, in comparison with the finer compositions of the next group of bracelets. It displays closer affinity to the opus interrasile of coin mounts from the West, such as some pieces from the Beaurains treasure, dated to the late 3rd or the early 4th century.

On almost all the bracelets, an attempt was made to insure their durability against wear and tear by leaving areas of gold between the pierced-work parts. A bracelet in the British Museum (Pl. 8) has four blank elliptical discs, in combination with scenes of the vintage and the chase. Here, the pierced-work surface is limited and of a less formalised design. Scenes of hunting or of harvesting grapes are particularly frequent on bracelets of the period, such as the bracelet with putti engaged in the vintage, from Desana.

Such scenes also appear on three bracelets from the Hoxne treasure (Pl. 9), of the late 4th or the early 5th century. One bracelet has, in addition, cut-out surfaces engraved with a youthful head. On all these examples, the pierced-work surfaces are of limited extent and more random design. Two other pairs, with rows of circles and lozenges, between which are pierced-work scrolls, are unique examples, as is one other
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Plate 8 Bracelet, London, British Museum (GR AF 2817)

Plate 9 The group of 19 bracelets from the Hoxne Treasure, London, British Museum (PE 1994,4-8,11-29)

Plate 10 Bracelet with inscription from the Hoxne Treasure, London, British Museum (PE 1994,4-8,29)

Plate 11 Bracelet, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum (83.AM.227.3)

Plate 12 Bracelet, Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Acc no. 75.1)

Plate 13 Bracelet from the Ténès Treasure, Algiers, Musée National des Antiquités

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bracelet from the same hoard, with horizontal and vertical bands creating panels of pierced-work scrolls of the same simple workmanship as the previous bracelets. The bracelet with the openwork inscription, VETERE FELIX DOMINA IULIANE, which serves the same function of consolidation of the openwork surface, belongs to the class of jewellery with inscriptions.29 This last bracelet, another with mainly blank circular discs on the surface, is reminiscent of eastern Mediterranean traits such as the pierced-work decoration that forms around the discs, nested lozenges and a straight stem with tiny ivy leaves placed symmetrically on either side (Pl. 8).30

Exceptionally fine and strictly disciplined workmanship also appears on a bracelet in the Getty Museum, on which concentric circles of very fine stems are formed around small animals, birds, leaves and rosettes (Pl. 11).31 Exactly the same arrangement is seen in the concentric circles and lozenges on a bracelet in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Pl. 12),32 despite the fact that on the criterion of shape it belongs within the category of bracelets with moveable geometric openings. Nonetheless, the similarity in the rendering of the pierced-work surface permits its almost certain attribution to the same workshop.

In every attempt at classifying or dating pierced-work jewellery it is important to focus on the motifs and themes of the decorative programme of the pierced-work surface and secondly on the shapes, the use of stones, and so on.

On the bracelet from the Ténès Treasure (Pl. 13),33 a geometric border encloses the vine leaves and the birds, with a more lavish interposing of gold surfaces. The same principle is applied on the large bracelet from the Hoxne Treasure, with the cut-out leaves.34 Here, however, a lack of balance is observable in the arrangement of the decorative motifs. More accomplished is the composition on the Audemer bracelet, where oak leaves are interposed between the wavy band, while the pierced-work scroll is extremely fine and balanced.35

These large bracelets recall a pair from Syria, now shared between Berlin (Pl. 14) and Saint Louis in the USA.36 The bracelet hoop differs and is of hexagonal cross-section, has no cut-out surfaces and is rendered completely in pierced work, with concentric geometric shapes. The workmanship is remarkably fine, so that the surface almost resembles filigree. In the central zone of both bracelets is the Greek inscription ΕΥΤΥΧΩΣ ΧΡΩ ΔΙΑ ΒΙΟΥ (‘use it for [your] luck throughout life’) and ΨΥΧΗ ΚΑΛΗ ΥΓΙΑΙΝΟΥΣΑ ΦΟΡΙ (‘beautiful, healthy soul, wear it’). These bracelets are among the most important and typical examples of the pierced-work technique.

Some bracelets with hoops in the form of a pierced-work band (Pl. 15) are enriched with precious stones. One pair from the de Clerq Collection and one bracelet in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, are of the same shape, with two zones of pierced-work scrolls separated by tooled wire.37 The only difference is that the single bracelet in the Cabinet des Médailles has a moveable clasp. The pierced-work scroll is also the same on the two bracelets, with a clear design rendered on a rather thick surface, so that the scroll has substance and is discernible on the reverse too. A bracelet from Cologne38 is also in the form of a fine pierced band with precious stones (Pl. 15). The scrolls in particular, which describe a large pelta, bring to mind the corresponding design on the medallions of Constantine the Great.39

To the group that combines pierced-work technique with inlaid precious stones belong also some bracelets with hoops of semi-circular cross-section but which are not closed at the back, like the tubular bracelets. In this way they achieve the desired transparency. On a pair of high quality bracelets in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Pl. 16), the running scroll, above and below the settings with sapphires and emeralds, forms extremely fine concentric circles with details that are encountered on other bracelets.40 The delicacy and the balance of the accomplished workmanship are due to the manner in which the pierced work is executed, by excising the gold completely and neatly, leaving the design clearly visible on the reverse as well. Very closely related are a bracelet from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and one in the Römisch-
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Germanisches Museum in Mainz. The pierced-work decoration on the Oxford bracelet is slightly denser, with lozenges enclosing vine leaves, and shares elements in common with the last examples. The design can be seen very clearly on the back. The decoration on the Mainz bracelet is different, because the interface that is usually a filling motif surrounding the shapes, is here the main subject and leaves along the rim other motifs, which do not appear, however, to be correctly distributed. On a pair of bracelets in the Cabinet des Médailles with hoops of semi-hexagonal cross-section, the decoration between the inlaid stones is simple and includes Greek inscriptions. The latter, together with all the other elements, argue for an eastern Mediterranean origin for these pieces of jewellery.

The last example in this important category is the large bracelet set with precious stones and of semi-hexagonal cross-section, in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Pl. 17). The wide band is filled with mounted stones and sockets in which pearls were strung. The pierced-work decoration, somewhat restricted by the stones, has been worked from the front, leaving just holes on the back. Even so, the type of scroll and the details are sufficiently akin to the previous examples and certainly constitute an outstanding example of the goldsmith’s art, with many similar elements that undoubtedly point to a common origin.

Whereas the entire preceding category is distributed between the 4th and the 5th century, the next category, composed of bracelets that have a clasp of geometric shape, begins in the 3rd century with a bracelet in the de Clerq Collection, and continues until the 7th century. Like the Dumbarton Oaks bracelet (Pl. 12), the one in the Louvre has a square clasp with nine inlaid stones and its hoop is very closely worked with tiny squares each enclosing a cross. The hypothesis that the subject has Christian connotations cannot be ruled out, as this bracelet, like the next pair, has been dated to the 5th century. A pair from Egypt has pierced-work decoration on both the hoop and the circular clasp (Pl. 18). They, too, are very compactly worked with geometric patterns, between which are small birds. It is not without significance that small crosses are represented at the centre of the hoops. The absence of engraving on the surfaces of the birds is reminiscent of the rendering of the birds and the leaves on the bracelet from the Ténès treasure (Pl. 13).

A high point among the pierced-work bracelets is an example in the British Museum, with a bust of the Virgin on the disc of the clasp (Pl. 19). By the 6th century, jewellery often had an overtly religious content. On the hoop is a rinceau that emerges from a vase and encloses a bird in each scroll. The decoration here is free, with larger interstices so that the design is absolutely clear on both the front and back. Also dated to the 6th century are two bracelets in the Benaki Museum (Pl. 20), on which the pierced-work discs of the clasps are decorated with a scroll emerging from a cornucopia, a design which is replicated in repoussé on the hoops. The correspondence between this specific subject and the manner of its execution with the decoration on the cross of Justin II, allows us to date them to the second half of the 6th century. We have clearly moved on to a new phase in pierced work, with large cut-out designs; this too encompasses many important pieces of jewellery.

Also belonging to this period is a repoussé bracelet (Pl. 21a), as well as a fragment of its pair (Pl. 21b) in the Dumbarton...
Oaks Collection: this has a scene on its circular clasp of an emperor in a chariot accompanied by Victories. Depicted on the hoop is a vine branch enclosing animals and birds. Two bracelets of the same type were found at Hebron in Palestine. On another group of bracelets, vine stems enriched with leaves and bunches of grapes are worked on the hoop (Pl. 22). The bracelets in the second Lambousa treasure, on which the same symmetrical vine stem also fills the disc of the clasp, are characteristic of this type. The Lambousa treasure includes some of the most important pieces of jewellery known from the 6th to 7th century.

Two more pairs of bracelets, also with vine stems, but varied by the addition of precious stones, are known: one is from the Assiût treasure, now in Berlin, the other from Varna in Bulgaria (Pl. 23). The first have openwork vine scrolls as part of the hoop and a clasp, which are slightly wider than the height of the hoops, in the shape of multi-petalled rosettes. On the second pair, the vine scrolls are contained between two fixed tooled wires that form the hoops, laden with bunches of grapes formed by pearls and leaves of pale green stone. Finally, one more important bracelet with a hoop and circular clasp from the Assiût treasure, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is encrusted with splendid precious stones and only the reverse of the disc has a design of pierced-work interlace (Pl. 24).

Bypassing the dark age of the 8th century, we come to the period when the use of enamel prevails in the goldsmith’s art. It features mainly on ecclesiastical objects, icons, book covers, and so on, preserved in church sacristies, while items of jewellery are few and these predominantly religious amulets. One exception is the pair of armbands from Thessalonica (Pl. 25), a unique example of enamelling, which continues the tradition of depicting birds and plant motifs with particularly harmonious colours.

There is a notable decline in both the production and the quality of bracelets surviving from the subsequent periods of Byzantine art. Wars, looting, and economic difficulties were all factors that contributed to this apparent decline in jewellery. Even so, representations of emperors bedecked in magnificent jewellery, and of ordinary persons too, as attested by the wall-paintings in the early 14th-century church of St Nicholas the Orphan in Thessalonica, as well as other representations,
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Plate 23 Pair of bracelets, Varna, Narodni Museum

Plate 24 Bracelet, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan (Inv.-no. 17.190.1670–1671)

Plate 25 Pair of bracelets, Thessalonika, Museum of Byzantine Culture (BKU 262/6)
Here the hoop is decorated with three relief medallions, each decorated with a banded cross with four volute palmettes. The presence of the cross places it in the sphere of purely amuletic jewellery. The other bracelet has bosses decorated with palmette interlaces and arabesques in niello on a silver ground.

Although these bracelets of the 11th to 12th century are devoid of opulence and offer little information regarding the diversity of decoration, we should note that bracelets overall, and those included in this short article, constitute a particularly interesting corpus of jewellery, which has given us exquisite examples of superb art, as well as ample ground for deliberation on problems.

Notes
3. See for example the *situla* with six deities, *ibid.*, no. 118.
9. M.C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval...

Stephen Zwirn in his lecture 'Out of the seventh century: where does some Byzantine jewellery belong?', given at the British Museum Byzantine Seminar on 'Intelligible Beauty: Recent Research on Byzantine Jewellery', advanced the theory that the bracelet is much older.

A. Yeroulanou, Diatria: pierced-work gold jewellery from the 3rd to the 7th century, Athens, 1999, no. 103.

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. no. 52.76.1; ibid., 233, fig. 92. See Baldini Lippolis, this volume, Pl. 17.

For one example, see a bracelet in the Benaki Museum: Ελληνικά Κοσμήματα (n. 8), no. 103.


Deppert-Lippitz (n. 31), 114–17, no. 4, fig. 6a–b.

Lepage (n. 22), 17, fig. 28.

Duran (n. 42), no. 76.

Dennison (n. 20), nos 26–7.

Weitzmann (n. 2), no. 299.

Dennison (n. 20), nos 32–3.

Kypraiou (n. 17), no. 108.

Buckton (n. 9), no. 108.

A. and J. Stylianou, The Treasures of Lambousa, Nicosia, 1969, 55, fig. 43.

Dennison (n. 20), nos 32–3.

Weitzmann (n. 2), no. 299.

Dennison (n. 20), nos 28–9.

Kypraiou (n. 17), no. 275.

Ibid., no. 282.

Ross (n. 9), no. 108.

Kypraiou (n. 17), no. 284.

Gonosová and Kondoleon (n. 23), no. 18.

Kypraiou (n. 17), no. 285.

Ibid., no. 126.

Ibid., no. 127.