Jewellery from Late Antique Egypt

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The history of ancient jewellery has increasingly become the subject of research in recent years (e.g., Entwistle and Adams 2010); however, and despite the effort of many scholars, its study is still in its early stages. The identification of regional workshops and their locations is one of the major unsolved problems. This fact is due particularly to the nature of the material: pieces of jewellery are lightweight and therefore portable with the result that a piece of jewellery found in one corner of the ancient world may have been made in another corner, no matter how and why it moved from A to B. In most cases findspots do not reveal anything about the origin of the objects. This article attempts to introduce a methodology for identifying workshops and workshop regions using the case study of Late Antique Egypt.

Numerous pieces of Late Antique jewellery have appeared on the art market with the information that they were found in Egypt. The circumstances of their finds are often unclear. The details provided by the art dealers at the time of the sale may or may not be correct. As a consequence, museums and private collections are full of objects allegedly found in Egypt, which are in fact objects of unknown provenance. The stated findspots cannot offer much information on the find's workshop or workshop locality. One possible way to circumvent this problem is to compare as many pieces of jewellery from, or allegedly from, Egypt with each other as possible. If these pieces of jewellery share features that do not reappear on jewellery from other regions, they may be considered regional.

This article has four parts. The first part introduces selected material from archaeological excavations in order to demonstrate that certain features in Late Antique jewellery reappear exclusively on jewellery made in Egypt. The second part discusses pieces of jewellery, which were probably made in Egypt as well, but which represent the so-called koiné style—an inter-regional style, which may have spread from a workshop or workshop group in the Byzantine capital Constantinople (Stolz 2010). Whether representing the Egyptian or koiné style, the jewellery attributed to Egypt for various reasons in the first two parts provides a framework into which objects of unknown provenance can be fitted. The third part of this article deals with a selection of objects of unknown provenance that can be localised to Egypt by comparison. The final part briefly discusses the largest jewellery hoard ever found in Egypt: the so-called Assiût hoard. It comprises pieces of jewellery fashioned in both the Egyptian as well as the koiné styles. It, therefore, represents in microcosm the diversity in jewellery from Late Antique workshops in Egypt.

1 A related paper will be published in the Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Coptic Studies 2012 (Petrina forthcoming a).
Egyptian style: Chains from excavations at Taposiris Magna and Abuqir Bay

In order to find out more about the jewellery that was made in Late Antique Egypt, it is necessary to take a closer look at the finds from archaeological excavations. The material is rare. Among the excavated finds are those from Taposiris Magna and Abuqir Bay. Two fragmentary gold chains from these excavations resemble each other closely. The chain from Taposiris Magna is most likely a necklace, while the chain from Abuqir Bay—with an overall length of only 9cm—may have been part of a necklace or of a bracelet.

The Taposiris Magna chain is composed of 16 small circular links and one larger, circular link (Fig. 1). All links are worked in repoussé and with some pierced-work in addition. Half of the small links consist of a hemisphere with a beaded border. They alternate with flat links with openwork crosses, framed by a beaded border. The largest link has a repoussé cross surrounded by a wave pattern. Opposite the larger link, the chain is interrupted. Both ends of the chain terminate in links with openwork crosses. Thus, one hemispherical link, a longer segment with alternating links or a pendant is missing. The pendant could have been circular in shape and might have been attached to a biconical suspension bar. Such pendants have survived on contemporary necklaces with circular links.

The Taposiris Magna chain was found at Taposiris Magna in 2001 as part of a small hoard in the western entrance area of the Byzantine basilica that was installed in the ancient temple (Vörös 2004, 166, for the exact findspot see arrow 167). The hoard was hidden in ‘the vicinity of the pavement stones and floor foundation of the completely cleaned basilica’ (Vörös 2004, 166). It also contained five gold coins, all of which were minted in Constantinople (Vörös 2004, 168–77). The coins can be assigned to the reigns of the Byzantine emperors Maurice Tiberios, Phokas and Heraklios. The coin of Heraklios also shows the emperor’s son Heraklios Constantine, who was associate emperor from AD 613. Thus, this coin cannot have been minted before 613. The coins provide a terminus post quem for the burial of the hoard, which may have taken place before or during the Arab invasion in the AD 640s (Vörös 2004, 166).

The Abuqir Bay chain (Fig. 2) closely resembles the Taposiris Magna chain. Seven small links and one larger link have survived in three sections. The three sections together measure about 9cm. All the links are worked in repoussé and the larger link is decorated with pierced-work in addition. Two small links are cylindrical, and five are hemispherical with a beaded border. The larger link has an inscribed cross framed by a wave pattern. An unknown number of links and possibly a pendant are missing. The chain comes from the underwater excavations in Abuqir Bay, more exactly from an area of 150 × 50m called T/T1, which can possibly be identified as a part of the famous pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis (Stolz 2008). Various finds, among them a large number of pieces of jewellery, indicate that

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2 Measurements unpublished. See also Vörös 2004, figs on 166, 178–79 and 181. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Csanad Bálint (Budapest) for making me aware of the Hungarian excavations and their finds.

3 Examples include necklaces in Richmond (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 67.52.26; Gonosová and Kondoleon 1994, 104–05, no. 35, 164, fig. XII) and Mainz (Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, inv. no. O. 40562/2; Schulze-Dörflamm 1988). More examples are listed in Stolz 2009, 123–24.

4 Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. nos SCA 131 (32288), SCA 189 (32257), SCA 190 (32258); Goddio and Claus 2007, 363 nos 49–51, fig. p. 248.
the site was flourishing in the 6th and 7th centuries (Stolz 2008; Petrina forthcoming b). The *terminus post quem* for the site’s submergence is provided by a coin which was minted under the reign of the Umayyad caliph Hishām in AD 729/30. Hence, the site was active until the 8th century. The fragments of the chain were not found together, but scattered all over T/T1 (on T/T1: Goddio 2007, 57).

The similarities between the two chains from Taposiris Magna and Abuqir Bay are striking: both chains are composed of two kinds of links, which alternate. Both chains have hemispherical links with a beaded border. In addition, both necklaces feature a larger circular link with a cross and a framing wave pattern. No other Late Antique necklaces share these features. In general, it is rare to find such close similarities as appear on these two chains. Since both pieces were found in close proximity, it is possible to assume that they were made in the same workshop. This is also indicated by the hemispherical links with a beaded border: similar ornaments reappear on bracelets from the so-called Assiût hoard (see below), on a net-shaped necklace attributed to the same hoard and on another net-shaped necklace allegedly from the Fayum (Fig. 3).5 The general shape and several details of these pieces of jewellery point to their manufacture in Egyptian workshops (Petrina forthcoming b).

The chains from Taposiris Magna and Abuqir Bay demonstrate that some pieces of jewellery from, or allegedly from, Late Antique Egypt share features which were unknown to other regional workshops. Egyptian workshops seem to have developed their own style. However, not all pieces of jewellery made in Egypt show features exclusive to Egyptian jewellery; some represent the interregional style.

*Koiné style: A finger ring from Abuqir Bay*

This is the case for a finger ring from the Abuqir Bay excavations (Fig. 4).6 It was found at T/T1 as well. The finger ring is of an extraordinarily high quality. It has a pierced-worked hoop and a bezel in the shape of an oil lamp. The pierced work shows an undulating tendril. No general parallels for the ring are known, but its pierced-worked hoop finds remote parallels in contemporary pierced-worked finger rings from Pantalica in Sicily and Senise in Italy.7 In addition, similar pierced-worked tendrils reappear on pieces of jewellery from, for example, Kalaat el-Merkab in Syria, the Assiût hoard from Egypt and Lambousa in Cyprus.8

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5 Pair of bracelets from the Assiût hoard (Washington, DC, Freer Gallery of Art, inv. nos 09.62, 09.63); Dennison 1918, 154 nos 22–23, pls 45–46; Lawton 1983, 181 fig 2; net-shaped necklace attributed to the Assiût hoard (unconfirmed) (Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. no. 30509); Greifenhagen 1970, 69, pl. 50.2, colour pl. IV; Wamser 2004, 293 no. 487; net-shaped necklace allegedly from the Fayum (Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, inv. no. 38.67); Ross 1965/2005, 16–17, no. 11, pls 18–19.

6 Alexandria, Archaeological Museum in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, inv. no. SCA 198; Goddio and Claus 2007, 364 no. 58, fig. p. 249.

7 For Pantalica (lost), see Yeroulanou 1999, 257 no. 315, 259 no. 325; on the hoard, see Orsi 1910 and Fallico 1975. For Senise (Naples, Museo Nazionale), see Breglia 1941, 96 no. 999, pl. 42.4.

8 Kalaat el-Merkab (Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. MFA 67.52.26); Yeroulanou 1999, 226 no. 128; Assiût (Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. no. 30219, 508a); Wamser 2004, 302 no. 499; Lambousa (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. nos 17.190.148, 17.190.149); Yeroulanou 1999, 62 fig. 88.
The pointed, triangular leaves on the Abuqir Bay ring find a close parallel on the sides of the settings on a pendant cross from Guarrazar in Spain. This wide geographical distribution of parallels shows that the ring represents the interregional style. It could, therefore, have been made in a workshop in Constantinople or anywhere else in the Late Antique world. A regional attribution would appear impossible.

However, there is one detail that ties the ring to Egypt: the bezel in the shape of an oil lamp. Oil lamps played important roles at Christian pilgrimage shrines all over the Byzantine world. Literary sources refer, for example, to oil from the graves of St Andreas, St Menas, St Demetrius, St Martin and from the holy sites in Jerusalem. As stated, the site in Abuqir Bay where this ring was found probably belonged to the pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John. Here oil again was of great importance, as reported by Sophronios, a visitor to the shrine and later patriarch of Jerusalem (Sophronios, Mir. 36.16, 36. 19–20; Fernandez Marcos 1975, 326–27). He states that oil-lamps were suspended from the ceiling above the graves of the saints and that the oil from these lamps was used as a medicine to cure the sick.

The excavations in Abuqir Bay yielded numerous pieces that indicate workshop activity, e.g., splinters of gold sheet, short pieces of wire, undrilled beads and ingots (Petrina 2012). As known from the Coptic Miracles of St Menas, the pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John had a gold workshop attached to it (Drescher 1946, 84, 154). The manuscript with the Coptic miracles is attributed to the 9th century, but the miracle is set during the reign of the Alexandrian bishop Damian (AD 569–93). Thus, it is likely that a gold workshop existed at Menouthis in the late 6th century. There is, therefore, archaeological and literary evidence for a gold workshop at the pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John. Since oil lamps played a significant role for the site, it is likely that the gold finger ring with the attachment in the shape of an oil lamp was made in the workshop attached to the shrine. The ring may have served as a eulogium or a souvenir a pilgrim may have filled with oil and taken home. If this was the case, the fully functional lid of the oil lamp could have been fastened onto the lamp’s body with an adhesive material such as beeswax. The wick holes must have been closed as well.

Objects of unknown provenance

Egyptian workshops seem to have produced pieces of jewellery with Egyptian features, such as the chains from Taposiris Magna and Abuqir Bay, and pieces of jewellery that represent the interregional style, such as the finger ring from Abuqir Bay. With the help of these and other localisable pieces, it is possible to establish a framework for Late Antique jewellery from Egypt, into which the material from museums and collections can be fitted. One example is a pair of gold earrings in Berlin (Fig. 5). Their attachment-hoops are lost, but bow-shaped ornaments have survived, situated at the lower end of the earrings. The ornaments consist of several gold tubes which are bent into semi-circles. These gold tubes are connected to each

other by ornaments in filigree. At the lower rim of the earrings, there are protruding eyelets at regular intervals. They hold a row of pearls strung on wire.

The Berlin earrings are exceptional. No parallels are known that would enable classification. However, there is one detail that may provide more information on their place of manufacture: where the hoop was attached, two quatrefoil appliqués with a central granule mask the soldering joints. Such appliqués are only known from pieces of jewellery that have been found, or are said to have been found, in Egypt.

Similar appliqués can be found, for example, on pieces of jewellery from the Assiût hoard (Stolz 2006, 552–58 [group 1]), most prominently on two similar necklaces with late 6th-century coins housed in museums in Berlin and New York (Fig. 6). Further examples of appliqués within the Assiût hoard include those on a belt, where they are hiding the soldering joints between the central medallion and three eyelets attached to the lower end of the medallion, and those on several other pieces of jewellery, among them a necklace and a pair of bracelets.

Another pair of gold bracelets with appliqués is housed in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington, DC (Fig. 7). The bracelet consists of a gold tube and a frame of settings with inserted coins. The coins provide a terminus post quem of AD 615 for the manufacture of these bracelets. Between the coin settings, there are numerous trefoil appliqués similar to those on the Assiût jewellery. The bracelets were allegedly found in the Fayum or Behnesa. This information was given at the time the bracelets were sold on the art market. Together with the trefoil appliqués, the alleged findspot may confirm their origin in an Egyptian jewellery workshop.

Since no general comparisons have survived, the Berlin earrings are difficult to date. The comparisons for the appliqués, though, indicate that the earrings belong to the 6th, 7th or even 8th century. These appliqués also provide information on the place of manufacture: since, as stated above, all jewellery with such appliqués was either found (or said to have been found) in Egypt, such appliqués may be a feature of Late Antique jewellery from Egypt. Thus, it is likely that our earrings come from an Egyptian workshop as well. One piece of information may confirm this: the earrings belonged to the former collection of Friedrich Ludwig von Gans. Von Gans donated a great part of his private collection of antiquities to the Berlin Antikensammlung in 1912. Many of his small finds were acquired in Egypt, among them also objects from the Assiût hoard mentioned above. Even though there is no further information on the acquisition of the earrings, it is possible that von Gans purchased them in Egypt as well.

Another piece of jewellery, which may be localised to Egypt by comparison, is a late Roman copper alloy necklace with two pendants in Baltimore (Fig. 8). The pendants have the shape of a stylised Isis figure and an oil lamp, respectively. Iconographically, the Isis figure

15 John Hopkins University Archaeological Collection, inv. no. 1194; Dauterman Maguire 2009, 151–52, fig. 22.
points to an Egyptian origin for this necklace. The shrine of SS Cyrus and John mentioned above was installed close to the famous Isis shrine of Menouthis (Stolz 2008, 199–200). It was intended to replace the pagan place of worship. The tradition of the liturgical and medicinal use of oil at SS Cyrus and John may stand in a local pagan tradition. Since Abuqir Bay was famous for its workshops in Antiquity and Late Antiquity (Petrina forthcoming a), it would be no surprise if the copper alloy necklace had been made there as well.

The examples in Berlin and Baltimore may demonstrate that objects of unknown provenance can be a valuable addendum to the archaeological material; they allow us to close gaps in the art history of jewellery from Late Antique Egypt.

**Egyptian and koiné style combined: The jewellery from Assiût**

The diversity in jewellery from Late Antique Egypt is best illustrated by the character of the Assiût hoard mentioned above. This hoard is an assemblage of jewellery that appeared on the Cairene art market in the early 20th century, together with a rock crystal statuette (Stolz 2006; Dennison 1918). The hoard’s exact findspot is unclear: at the time of the sale, art dealers provided the information that the hoard was found in the ruins of an ancient monastery in Assiût (Zahn 1913, 88). According to Walter Dennison, it was later believed that the hoard came from Shêkh Abâda, ancient Antinoë (Dennison 1918, 98). In his 1918 monograph, Dennison lists 32 pieces of jewellery, which he considers part of the hoard. Analyses have shown that the same particles of red sand were attached to most of these 32 pieces (Dennison 1918, 98), indicating a common findspot. Several pieces of the hoard were acquired by Mrs Walter Burns for the British Museum, London, and others by the private collectors Charles L. Freer, J. Pierpont Morgan and Friedrich L. von Gans.¹⁶

The pieces of jewellery from the Assiût hoard can be separated into three stylistic groups. Group 1 contains two necklaces and their respective pendants, a pair of bracelets, a fragmentary belt chain and two necklaces with pendants (Stolz 2006, 556–59, 562–63). On all pieces of jewellery from this group, local features can be found, such as the above-discussed appliqués. Thus, the group 1 pieces of jewellery were probably made in Egyptian workshops. Group 2 includes a broad and jewelled collar, another pair of bracelets and a necklace (Stolz 2006, 538–39). These pieces of jewellery have several features in common, among them characteristic claw-settings, high bezel settings and pearls strung on wire. All these features belong to the interregional style. The many similarities between the group 2 pieces of jewellery indicate that they were made in the same workshop as a set. The broad and jewelled collar may provide more information on the workshop: for various reasons, its shape and materials suggest that it could have functioned as a regalium for a female member of the imperial family (Stolz 2006). Together with the other pieces of group 2 it was, therefore, probably made in the imperial workshops in Constantinople. Group 3 is composed of pieces of jewellery, which represent the interregional style as well (Stolz 2006, 564–65). The pieces of this group

¹⁶ Dennison 1918, 97. Today, the pieces acquired by Freer are housed in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Those bought by Pierpont Morgan are shown in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and those acquired by von Gans in the Antikensammlung, Berlin.
cannot be localised. They could have been made in a workshop in Egypt, which was familiar with the interregional style, or in any other part in the Late Antique world. Like no other find, the Assiût hoard, therefore, represents the taste of the elite in Egypt and, thus, also the range of products offered in its most prestigious jewellery workshops.

Bibliography


http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_21/petrina.aspx
Fig. 1: Chain from Taposiris Magna (after Vörös 2004, 179).

Fig. 2: Chain from Abuqir Bay (© Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation, photo: Christoph Gerigk).
Fig. 3: Net-shaped necklace with hemispherical links, allegedly from the Fayum, detail (© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC).

Fig. 4: Finger ring with an oil lamp from Abuqir Bay (© Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation, photo: Christoph Gerigk).
Fig. 5: Earrings in Berlin (© Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, photo: Johannes Laurentius).

Fig. 6: Necklace with appliqués from Assiût, detail (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 [17.190.1664]).
Fig. 7: Bracelets with appliqués from the Fayum or Behnesa, detail (© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC).

Fig. 8: Fragment of a necklace with pendants in the shape of an oil lamp and an Isis figure (© HT 1194, collection of The Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, image courtesy of the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum).