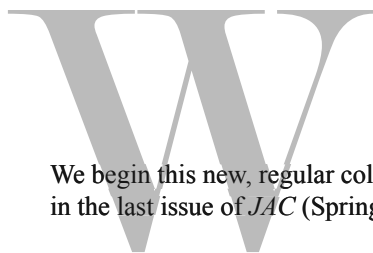


Nekyia

“From Apulia to Virginia: An Apulian Gnathia Askos at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts”¹



We begin this new, regular column on the underworld of antiquities trading with a follow-up to my article in the last issue of *JAC* (Spring 2013), ‘A Marble Statue of a Boy at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’.

Τύμβος ἐγώ, τύμβων πανυπέρτατος· ἀλλ’ ἔμ’ ἔφξεν
ὥς τινα τῶν πολλῶν ἀνδροφόνοσ παλάμη.
Ἀνδροφόνοσ παλάμη με διώλεσε· λήξατε τύμβων,
θνητοί, καὶ κτερέων· δεῦτ’ ἐπὶ νεκρά, κύνεσ.
Δεῦτ’ ἐπὶ νεκρά, κύνεσ· χρυσοῦ διφήτορεσ ἄνδρεσ
ἤδη καὶ νεκῶν χρυσολογοῦσι κόνιν.

I am a tomb surpassing all other tombs in height,
but murderous hands opened me as if I had been
one of the many. Murderous hands destroyed me.
Cease from building tombs and celebrating funerals,
ye mortals. Come to the bodies, ye dogs! Come to
the bodies, ye dogs! Seekers after gold
gather gold now from the dust of the dead too.

SAINT GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN, *Επιγράμματα*, viii. 230, trans. W. R. Paton (1917).

Facts and Evidence

An Apulian Gnathia askos with a spout formed in the shape of a woman’s head appears in 2 Polaroid images (nos. CD 3, racc. 82, pag. 31, foto 6 and CD 3, racc. 82, pag. 32, foto 2) from the confiscated archive of the convicted antiquities dealer Giacomo Medici. The vase is depicted uncleaned, standing on a large, creased white sheet of paper, reassembled from various fragments, missing the entire left side of its rim and various chips of clay from its neck and shoulder.

The number of the film printed on the back of both Polaroid images is the same (01079G72865) and it does not match with any of the numbers of the other Polaroid images in the Medici archive, a fact that would

¹ I am grateful to the officers of the Greek police Art Squad for the access they gave me to the Squad’s archive and especially to the three major confiscated archives (Medici, Becchina and Symes-Michaelides) from July 2006 until December 2008, to Dr Helen Van Noorden for her comments, to Mr Stephen D. Bonadies (Deputy Director for Collections and Facilities Management at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) for his prompt replies to my emails and his high level of cooperation, and to Ms Sarah Huggins at the Library of Virginia, Richmond, for identifying the unsigned article in the *Richmond News Leader* newspaper.

have led to the possible partial reconstruction of the askos' archaeological context, since objects which were found together by non-archaeologists have usually been photographed on the same Polaroid film.

In 1980 this askos was acquired by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, from Fritz Bürki (acquisition source revealed by email on March 6, 2013 from Mr Bonadies (Deputy Director for Collections and Facilities Management at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) on March 6, 2013). It was accessioned with no. 80.72 and immediately went on display in the Mediterranean Court gallery. The vase must have been bought from Bürki before October 1980, since its acquisition by the VMFA was described in an unsigned article in the issue of October 2, 1980 of the *Richmond News Leader* newspaper (p. 30), (scanned and attached to an email I received from Mr Bonadies on March 8, 2013). Subsequently, the askos appeared in a travelling exhibition *The Art of South Italy: Vases from Magna Graecia* (Mayo 1982:266-268, no. 126), which started at the VMFA (May 12 - August 8, 1982), then went to the Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma (November 20, 1982 - January 9, 1983) and ended at the Detroit Institute of Arts (February 7 - April 10, 1983). The exhibition director and catalogue editor was Dr Margaret Ellen Mayo, with Kenneth Hamma as consultant. In both publications the vase appears in excellent condition, clean and with its rim complete. Dr Mayo wrote the entry of the askos in the exhibition catalogue, stating (Mayo 1982: 266):

ca. 330 B.C.

Attribution: Circle of the Rose Painter, close to the Painter of Lecce 1075. [Credit: J. R. Green (p. 268)]

Height to tip of spout 28.4 cm., diameter foot 16.3 cm.

Condition: recomposed from a number of fragments with no major losses; minor flaking.

Virginia Museum, The Glasgow Fund (80.72)

The askos does not appear on the VMFA website.

Discussion and Questions

The first point to highlight is the presence of the askos in the archive of Giacomo Medici. Medici has been convicted in Italy for trafficking antiquities (Felch 2012), of which dozens, once identified in his archive as looted and smuggled, have been repatriated to Italy and Greece in the last 7 years (see e.g. Gill & Chippindale 2006; Watson & Todeschini 2007; Gill & Chippindale 2007; Godart & De Caro 2007; Godart, De Caro & Gavrioli 2008, Tsirogiannis 2013b:10-11). Most of the repatriated antiquities are depicted in Polaroid images, smashed or reassembled from fragments, and uncleaned, as in the photographs of the Apulian Gnathia askos.

For about 35 years, Medici was supplying looted and smuggled objects to the biggest illicit antiquities dealers, one of whom was Robert Emmanuel Hecht Jr. At the same time, Hecht and Medici were frequently using the Zurich-based antiquities restorer Fritz Bürki as a “front” to sell their looted, smuggled and stolen antiquities; Bürki was presented to museums as the owner and seller of antiquities which in reality were owned by Hecht and Medici (Watson & Todeschini 2007:188; Felch & Frammolino 2011:153). Two of the high-profile cases which prove this point are those of the looted and smuggled marble statue of the Roman Empress Vibia Sabina and the stolen Etruscan bronze tripod from the collection of Count Guglielmo of Florence. The Sabina statue appears uncleaned in Polaroid images from the Medici archive and was sold from Bürki to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1979, but the real owner was Robert Hecht, who was acting as an agent. The statue was offered to the BMFA as having been “reputedly in an aristocratic family collection in Bavaria” (Gill & Chippindale 2006:324, no. 1). In September 2006 the BMFA announced the return of 13 antiquities to Italy, among which were 3 objects sold by Bürki to the museum: the statue of Sabina (Watson & Todeschini 2007:298, Godart, De Caro & Gavrioli 2008:190-191, no. 74) and 2 more (Gill & Chippindale 2006:325, nos. 6 and 9). Regarding the case of the stolen tripod, Medici and Hecht offered it for sale to Marion True in Medici's warehouse in Geneva Free Port in 1987, but dealer Mario Bruno was also involved (for Bruno's involvement in the sale of another antiquity now at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, see Tsirogiannis 2013a). The Getty Museum officially purchased the tripod in 1990 from Fritz Bürki, who had previously been asked by Bruno to sign the relevant documents (Watson & Todeschini 2007:187). The Getty Museum returned it to Italy in 1996, after a U.S. attorney questioned Marion True about the case

Next, Bürki. In October 2001 Fritz Bürki, during his interrogation by the Italian authorities, admitted that he knew that most of the antiquities he restored in his career came from illegal digs, although everyone pretended that these objects were “family heritage”. Bürki added that he was generally acting as a frontman for Hecht, but he denied that he did the same for anyone else. Later, he admitted that Mario Bruno, who was a known receiver of stolen goods (Watson & Todeschini 2007:86; 187) and a major grave-robber (Isman 2008:30), also used him as a “front” in the sale of the stolen tripod to the Getty Museum, speculating, “perhaps the museum didn’t wish to have direct contact with him” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:187-188). On May 12, 2005, Judge Muntoni, during the reading of his 659-page judgement which found Giacomo Medici guilty, stated of Fritz Bürki (Watson & Todeschini 2007:282):

...restoration work [was] done by Bürki on innumerable archaeological objects sold by Medici, [...] an association which continued for years. Proud of being citizens of a “neutral” country with respect to the one in which the clandestine digs had taken place, [Fritz Bürki and his son, Harry] shamelessly admitted that the objects they restored came from clandestine digs in Italy...

With such a record, it remains unknown if Fritz Bürki was acting as a frontman for Bruno, Hecht or Medici in the case of the Apulian Gnathia askos, but it is almost certain that he conserved and restored the askos before being presented to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts as its seller.

Now for Mayo. Dr Margaret Ellen Mayo was the director of “Summa Galleries”, before she became the curator of Ancient Art at the VMFA from 1978 until 2004 (Tsirogiannis 2013a:58-59). Bruce McNall, president and owner of “Summa Galleries”, admitted in his autobiography (published after serving most of a 70-month sentence for bank fraud (Bates 2002)) that he was smuggling antiquities and that his gallery stock was almost exclusively supplied by Hecht (McNall 2003:41). Mayo’s first “Summa Galleries” catalogue (1978) contained at least one antiquity (a Greek terracotta votive ship) that I later identified in the Medici archive (Tsirogiannis 2013b:8-10). Mayo also wrote the introduction to the volume *Wealth of the ancient world: the Nelson Bunker Hunt and William Herbert Hunt collections* (Bothmer et al.1983:25-35), which contained looted antiquities, e.g. the famous Sarpedon kylix by Euphronios. This vase passed from Medici to Hecht and was sold to the Hunt brothers by the “Summa Galleries” (McNall 2003:71, Silver 2010:131).

As for Kenneth Hamma, Mayo’s “Consultant to the Editor” in the exhibition catalogue containing the askos (Mayo 1982:266-268, no. 126), he co-edited with Marion True the exhibition catalogue that published for the first time the biggest assemblage so far of looted antiquities in a single private collection: *A Passion for Antiquities: Ancient Art from the Collection of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman* (True & Hamma 1994). This exhibition involved collaborations between several institutions later criticized for wrongdoing. The Fleischman collection was first exhibited in the Getty Museum (October 13, 1994 – January 15, 1995), then in the Cleveland Museum of Art (February 15 – April 23, 1995), before the Getty Museum acquired it. At least six antiquities from the Fleischman collection were identified as recently looted and smuggled and were repatriated to Italy from the Getty Museum (Gill & Chippindale 2007:212). In 2009 Cleveland Museum of Art also returned 13 post-1970 looted antiquities to Italy (Litt 2008). In November 16, 2005, Marion True, as the Getty Museum’s antiquities curator, was prosecuted by the Italian state, charged of conspiring to import illegally excavated antiquities (Povoledo 2005), but she was acquitted in October 2010 because the statute of limitations had expired (Felch 2010).

I turn now to details of the askos’ decoration, as described in the *Richmond News Leader* article of October 2, 1980. The ending to the unsigned article is as follows:

The vine garland on the vessel is a symbol of Dionysus, god of wine, whose cult was important in the south of Italy, Ms. Mayo said. “It was the cult of life after death,” she said. “So the vessel has to do with a religious cult and ceremonies. It may actually have been used in ceremonies, or it may have been placed in a tomb.” Ms. Mayo said the size of the vessel is unusually large for an askos, and it is the only one of its type known in the world. It has joined three smaller Gnathian pieces in the museum’s collection, she added. The askos had

been held in private collections until it was purchased this year with the museum's Glasgow Fund.

This creates more questions than it answers. Since this askos "is the only one of its type known in the world", why does it not appear among the 89 museum highlights of the "Ancient Art" section at the VMFA website (last accessed on August 30, 2013)? Which are the "private collections" that held the askos before its acquisition by the VMFA? Why was the archaeological context of the askos not preserved, leading Dr Mayo to speculate about the askos' use? Has the askos "been used in ceremonies"? Has it "been placed in a tomb"?

To the last question, at least, we may have an affirmative answer. Professor Ricardo Elia has undertaken statistical analysis on the Apulian vases with known find-spots, and has drawn conclusions about the likely origins of Apulian material surfacing on the market without any find-spot. He notes (Elia 2001:146):

'[...] Apulian vases had only a limited distribution and are found almost exclusively in Italy [...] Five vases [from 945 vases with a definite find-spot], comprising 0.63 per cent of vases with known find-spots, come from outside Italy [...] Although Apulian vases have been recovered from a variety of archaeological contexts, they are chiefly found in tombs'.

From this likelihood, then, new questions arise. Since Polaroid films were distributed in the market after October 1972 (Watson & Todeschini 2007:57), what do Elias' results tell us combined with the fact that the askos appears, just reassembled from several fragments, in two Polaroid images in the confiscated Medici archive? Was the askos found in Italy after 1972? Was it smuggled out of Italy after 1972? Does the term "private collections" cover at least Giacomo Medici and Fritz Bürki? Did the VMFA do any research to determine the legal collecting history of the askos before acquiring it? If yes, and the askos is of legal origin, why is there nothing on this research in the museum's archives (email from Mr Bonadies on March 8, 2013: "We don't have any further information on the "private collections" mentioned in the article")? If they did research, and the askos is illicit, why were the results of such research not enough to stop the sale? If no research was done, on what grounds did they make the acquisition? Finally, did/do the holders of the Glasgow Fund exercise any control on the legal status of the objects which are acquired with their support?

These uncertainties have been created by the lack of the archaeological context for the askos and of details of its recent collecting history. There are other uncertainties on which it would be preferable to be concentrating; scholarly problems of interpretation which do not depend on knowledge of the burial context, which are inherent to our distance from the maker of the askos. For example, there is an interesting discrepancy between a detail in the newspaper article about the decoration of the vase, and Mayo's later exhibition catalogue entry. A relief medallion on the top of the vase, under the handle, is described as follows in the newspaper article:

On a flat area beneath the handle is a sculpture in relief of the mythical hero Hercules killing Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to Hades.

Dr Mayo was the expert whose perspectives are reported throughout the newspaper article. She offered a different interpretation, however, in the exhibition catalogue 2 years later (Mayo 1982: 266):

The scene on the relief medallion is most likely of the death of Actaeon, who was devoured by his own hunting dogs as punishment for watching Artemis bathing.

It remains unclear which (if either) interpretation is more likely to be correct; there is no image of the medallion in any publication I have found, and this askos does not appear on the VMFA website, despite its being described in the newspaper article as 'the only one of its type known in the world'. Even if the askos is on display in the VMFA itself, the absence of the virtual display which could provide close-ups means that both the legal status and the art-historical interpretation of this object are still in doubt.

Conclusion

In the last issue (no. 9, Spring 2013) of *The Journal of Art Crime* I revealed that the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts acquired an object which appears in a cut Polaroid image from the confiscated Becchina archive (Tsirogiannis 2013a:55-60). The present case shows that the VMFA acquired another highly ‘toxic’ (undocumented before 1970) antiquity, this time appearing in Polaroid images from the confiscated Medici archive. Dozens of antiquities depicted in Polaroid images from the two archives belonging to the two convicted dealers (ICE 2013) have been already repatriated to Italy. Therefore, this article will conclude in the same way the previous one did. Based on the evidence presented, the VMFA is obliged to contact the Italian authorities about the case, according to the “Guidelines on the Acquisition of Archaeological Material and Ancient Art” published by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD 2013:7):

1. If a member museum, as a result of its continuing research, gains information that establishes another party’s right to ownership of a Work, the museum should bring this information to the attention of the party, and if the case warrants, initiate the return of the Work to that party, as has been done in the past. In the event that a third party brings to the attention of a member museum information supporting the party’s claim to a Work, the museum should respond promptly and responsibly and take whatever steps are necessary to address this claim, including, if warranted, returning the Work, as has been done in the past.

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