A Copper-Alloy Bowl with Phallic Decoration from Trier, in the Collection of the Yorkshire Museum

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The purpose of this short article is to bring a fascinating object further into the public domain and discuss it in terms of its unique imagery. A copper alloy bowl in the collection of the Yorkshire Museum (YORYM: 2010.324) has, since 2010, been displayed in the entrance hall of the museum; a factor that has yet gained it no additional attention in an academic capacity. This short contribution adds to a scheme of research undertaken by the author into the use of phallic imagery in an apotropaic fashion (Parker 2015; Parker & Ross 2016; Parker forthcoming and in prep) as part of an ongoing PhD project with the Open University investigating the archaeology of magic in Roman Britain.

The bowl is one part of the Edward Hailstone collection, donated to the Yorkshire Museum in July 1882. The collection of antiquities is comprised of “some fifty stone and bronze implements of the prehistoric era, numerous specimens of Roman, Etruscan, and English Pottery etc.” (YPS 1883, 9-10) and thus formed a somewhat typical collection of a nineteenth century gentleman interested in the ancient world. Hailstone donated a number of objects from Trier including, “a torch-stand, two vessels, and a Lamp, from Trier, all of bronze and of Roman work...and two charms against the Evil Eye from Trier” (YPS 1883, 29).

Description

The copper alloy vessel in question is a hemispherical bowl with a thick, plain, flattened rim (figs. 1-2). The exterior sides of the bowl are fluted in the manner of scallop-shell decoration and taper from the rim to the base, the interior follows a smooth curve. A squat ring foot is evident on the base. The objects of interest with this bowl are the conspicuous addition of a repeating series of figures along the rim of the bowl. Moulded into the rim are a series of eight short, rounded vertical projections grouped in pairs at equal distances around the rim; the reverse and sides of these are flat, but the exterior facing sides are moulded (and hand-finished) with a central, vertical, oblanceolate incision, surrounded by an irregular series of radially incised lines - stylistically we might categorise these as either ‘vulvate’ or ‘evil-eye-esque’. The space on the rim between each pair of projections is filled with a stylised double-phallus projection, upturned at either end (four pairs in total, one half of one pair is missing). Anatomically, the phallus is simple and represented by a circular-sectioned shaft with a glans added through the addition of a single diagonal incision. A pair of testes in low relief is evident at the base of the two shafts, divided between the two phalli by a vertical incision.

The bowl stands to a height of 48mm from foot to rim with an additional 10mm added by the phalluses. It has an external diameter of 137mm and a weight of 700g. The substantial weight of such a small object is, at least in part, accounted for by the clear reconstruction of parts of the body, reattachment of parts of the rim to the bowl and a consolidation of the foot utilising a lead-alloy. Macroscopic investigation of the vessel and traces of lead-alloys suggests that the repairs are modern. The repairs are added to with strokes of green paint on parts of the bowl exterior matched with the dark green patina. The full extent of the antiquarian intervention in this piece is unclear, but reconstruction is assured.

Discussion

This short article does not intend to offer a full overview of the potential apotropaic functions of phallic imagery, merely to help contextualise the imagery evident in this bowl. A caveat to this is that, given the unusual nature of this object, much of the discussion unfortunately remains conjectural.

The Phallic Image

As an introduction to the topic it can be stated that using the phallus as part of an artistic tradition is a Roman import into most of north-western Europe (Plouviez 2005, 161). Phallic imagery is a common feature across
the Roman world with the apotropaic use of male genitals being somewhat facilitated by the fact they are easy to represent in a simple and stylised form and recognisable when divorced from the rest of the body (Johns 1982, 61). A possible humorous aspect to such things cannot be disproven, especially given the lack of context in this instance.

The polyphallic image is elsewhere well attested across the Roman world, often incorporating a secondary ithyphallic phallus projecting from a macrophallus on amulets (Plouviez 2005, 1.08 and 1.10), tintinnabula (Blazquez 1985), and even Priapic wall paintings (Clarke 1998, 200). Direct comparisons for the bowl are difficult to account for given the variability in material, form, and finishing of the material evidence, though some ‘dual-ended phallus’ forms include a squat copper-alloy pendant from Aquileia (Artefacts: AMP-4033) copper alloy amulets from Baetica (Pozo 2002, Nos. 47-51) and a gold example, complete with hooked-chain, in the British Museum (Johns 1982, pl.10). Dual-ended, curving phalli are evident on antler roundels from Nijmegen (Greep 1994, Nos. 173-175), Mainz (Greep 1994, Nos. 164-166), and Cologne (Greep 1994, No. 153). The latter of which is the only example to also include a representation of female genitalia. Curved metal lunulae have been interpreted as representing phallic images (Crummy 1983, No. 4288) and are known from child and infant graves (Dasen 2003, 286). Variants of the ‘dual-end’ form often combine one of the phalli instead with a clenched fist making the manus fica gesture; the combination of these images comes from the Imperial period and has a strong military association (Greep 1983, 139-140; Deschler-Erb & Božič 2002, 39). Such ‘fist-and-phallus’ amulets are known from across north-western Roman contexts (Unz & Deschler-Erb 1997; Pozo 2002; Parker 2015) - no evidence of this variant is visible on the Trier bowl.

The double-phallus evident is not, in itself, unusual in form. The unusual aspect of this is its positioning on the rim of the bowl. Rim decoration on metal bowls is certainly unusual – one type of decoration occurring on copper alloy vessel rims and lids in Britain takes the form of a bird (PAS: BH-291876; SF-1D5C52; NMS-C79645; Crummy 1983, No. 4268) but in nothing like the quantity visible on the Trier bowl. Phallic images (and sexual scenes) do occur on ceramic vessels in the Roman period, but feature on the exterior of the body and usually in barbotine (e.g. pedestal beaker with barbotine decoration in the British Museum, Acc: 1985, 0201.1189; Johns 1982, figs. 78-80), but both the position and quantity of the phalli represented on this copper alloy example is a point of particular interest.

A further phallic feature of this bowl is visible on the underside of the pedestal foot (fig. 3). This polyphallic image is now somewhat weathered in comparison to the other surviving images on the bowl. The image, set within the roundel of the foot, depicts a complicated phallic image. A central zoomorphic phallus, depicted with legs and horns, faces left. It has a secondary phallus projecting below it and its tail takes the form of a third. A rider, wearing a tunic, is visible standing on its back and holds a rein or whip towards on the phallic tail. Bulbous projections behind the legs and below the secondary left-facing phallus are harder to interpret. Fortunately, a near exact parallel for the content of this image is known from Suffolk and is now in the collection of the Moyses Hall Museum (Plouviez 2005, No. 1.08). Plouviez’s interpretation of the projections on the Suffolk example is that they are feet, or cloven hooves and the same is true of the Trier example. The secondary phallus appears to have a pair of testes at its mid-point rather than another foot. A good parallel for the zoomorphic polyphallic beast (although absent of rider) is a copper alloy tintinnabulum in the British Museum from Pompeii (fig. 4) of which there is a near identical example from Trier (Johns 1982, fig. 52). A carving on stone from Long Bennington, Lincolnshire, does depict a rider sitting atop a zoomorphic phallic beast (Moore 1975).

Vulva or Evil Eye?

The combination of phallic and vulvate decoration is quite evident in the Roman world, particularly in triplicate with either two phalluses or a fist and...
phallus on amulets (Unz & Deschler-Erb 1997) and harness pendants (variants on Bishop 1988, type 8l with vulvate moulding, e.g. PAS: NLM863), though vulvate decoration is much less common on its own (Johns 1982, 73-4). The difficulty in attribution is borne out of the similarities in stylised depictions of eye and vulva; both are shown in an oval panel with an elliptical central decoration. This ambiguity has been well discussed by Catherine Johns (1982, 73), though no conclusive method of attribution yet exists.

Stylistically, the Trier bowl projections are surrounded by a series of incised radial lines, which might be better attributed to the depiction of an iris than anything anatomically female. An eye surrounded by radial lines does also have a modern parallel with the Post-Medieval ‘Eye of Providence’ image from the Christian iconographic tradition.

The circumstantial identification of the projections as ‘evil-eye-esque’ raises further issues. Firstly, the multiplication of the evil eye is not a well established artistic style; it is a singular concept and we might thus question this interpretation on this basis. Secondly, the evil eye can be depicted in multiple ways, altering the narrative of the scene. The evil eye is the Roman personification of ‘bad luck’ and is rightly feared and respected (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 7.2; Plutarch *Quaes. Conv.* 5.72). The most common depiction of the eye in combination with phalli is when it is under attack as part of the ‘all suffering eye’, for example on a mosaic from the ‘House of the Evil Eye’ at Antioch (Clarke 2009), a gold earring from Norfolk (Worrell & Pearce 2014, No. 20, fig. 20), and a carved stone relief from Leptis Magna (Johns 1982, fig. 77) – all these examples include phalli as one of the enemies of the evil eye. More specifically, the ‘phallus attacking the evil’ topos can be seen throughout the Roman period. The scene is depicted, primarily, on stone phallic carvings (Coulston & Phillips 1988, No. 407; Parker & Ross 2016; Parker forthcoming), but it can be used in other media – a first century BC terracotta figure depicts two humanoid phalli sawing an evil eye in half (Johns 1982, fig. 51). The issue of this narrative was best described by Johns (1982, 66): “It is often completely ambiguous in cases where both eyes and phalli are represented, whether the phallus is supposed to be overpowering the Evil Eye, or whether the eye motif is itself performing an apotropaic function”.

The assumption might be that this is a ‘phallus and evil’ scene offers the best interpretation of what exactly is going on with the decoration. However, alternate interpretations of this as a ‘phallus attacking the evil eye’ scene, or a ‘phallus and vulva’ scene cannot be entirely ruled out. Each ithyphallic phallus is pointing towards a projection, perhaps lending weight to the ‘attacking’ narrative, but the multiplication of all elements in the scene confuses this somewhat. The link is somewhat circumstantial now, but it is interesting to note that the collector, Edward Hailstone, also collected two ceramic eyes from Trier (YORYM: 2010.549, fig. 5), considering them to serve an amuletic rather than votive function, and donated them alongside this vessel in 1883 (YPS 1883, 29).

_Dating_

Possible dating of this object is, perhaps, the most problematic aspect of it. The imagery is certainly Roman. Its location at Trier suggests Imperial period, presuming that it is actually from excavations in Trier and not an object brought in solely for private auction. Flaccid phalli are a feature only of the Republican and very early Imperial periods (Deschler-Erb & Božič 2002), but ithyphallic versions are visible throughout both. Combined fist-and-phallus forms, similar in execution to the dual-phallus, are generally first or second century in date (Eckardt 2014, 161; Parker 2015). The attribution of this bowl to any particular phase of the Roman period is currently not possible, even at a conjectural phase. In Britain, secure dates for carved images from the early second century to the mid-4th century (Parker, in prep) show the chronological range of the use of the image.

_A Functional Vessel?_

Complete copper alloy bowls are not commonly found in Roman archaeology, because of the fastidious recycling of prized metal objects (Mould 2011, 162), complete examples occurring mainly as grave goods (ibid.). The analysis of vessel types used in the cemetery of Brougham, Cumbria showed that at least 34 vessels had been placed on a funeral pyre as part of a cremation burial, whereas only one was included complete as an inhumation grave good; itself an “antique” by the time it was deposited (Cool 2004, 378-9).

The Trier vessel form has stylistic parallels elsewhere in north western Europe for its various features, although an exact parallel has not yet been recorded by the author. A squat bowl with a plain rim from first century Pompeii included two paired handles projecting a short distance above the rim (Tassinari 1993, Type S8200) in a manner very comparable with the ‘Trier example. A thin copper alloy bowl from Nijmegen was fluted on the exterior (Boesterd 1936, 57-8) and a similar type is known in silver (Artefacts: PHI-4003). A wider fluted vessel, also in silver, formed part of the fourth century Mildenhall Treasure (Painter 1977).

No evidence is forthcoming for the metallurgical content of the bowl, but research on the metallurgical content of Roman copper alloys generally has shown that a variety of copper alloys were used in the Roman Empire; traditional tin bronze, in use in the Mediterranean for two thousand years already, continued in use but with increased variation in the exact levels of tin added (Dungworth 1997, 901-2). In the late first century BC, bronze was joined by brass (Caddock 1978) and these materials subsequently mixed to produce ‘gunmetals’.

Fig. 5. Ceramic eye charm from the Hailstone Collection in the Yorkshire Museum (YORYM: 2010.549) ©York Museums Trust (Yorkshire Museum).
(Dungworth 1997, 901-2). The Trier bowl is oxidised to a dark green patina throughout.

The question of how this bowl was physically interacted with remains open-ended. Given the existence of a great number of projections on the rim of the vessel, we are forced to consider its use as a service or storage vessel containing foodstuff which is physically removed by hand or utensil.

It is, perhaps, a soft conclusion to leave the discussion of this object entirely open ended, but the lack of clear comparisons somewhat forces this. It can, at least, be concluded that the vessel is Roman and is related to other copper alloy vessels in form if not in its decoration. An in-depth study of the supernatural implications of the decoration has been deliberately avoided because the lack of context makes the construction of such an argument somewhat circumstantial, but the phallus, vulva and/or evil eye do all serve implicit supernatural functions in the Roman world and it is, perhaps, in this light that the bowl should be viewed. If there are obvious comparisons overlooked by the author he would be very interested in hearing of these.

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Abbreviations

PAS - Portable Antiquities Scheme
YPS - Yorkshire Philosophical Society

Websites
