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Research on Roman silver plate

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FRANÇOIS BARATTE (ed.), *ARGENTERIE ROMAINE ET BYZANTINE* (Actes de la Table Ronde, Paris 11-13 octobre 1983) (CNRS, Paris 1988). Pp.231. ISBN 2-7018-0038-2.

FRANÇOIS BARATTE, *LE TRÉSOR D'ORFÈVRENERIE ROMAINE DE BOSCOREALE* (Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris 1986). Pp. 96. ISBN 2-7118-2048-3.

FRANÇOIS BARATTE, *ORFÈVRENERIE GALLO-ROMAINE. LE TRÉSOR DE RETHEL* (Picard, Paris 1988). Pp. 172. ISBN 2-7084-0373-7.

FRANÇOIS BARATTE & KENNETH PAINTER (edd.), *TRÉSORS D'ORFÈVRENERIE GALLO-ROMAINS* (Catalogue de l'exposition 8 fevr. - 23 avril 1989) (Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris 1989). Pp. 298. ISBN 2-7118-2238-9.

Introduction

The possession of silver plate has long been a symbol of wealth and status, and this was as true during the Roman empire as in more recent times. Impressive quantities of silver tableware were used and displayed by rich Romans, and though the amount which has survived may be statistically small, especially compared with the overwhelmingly large quantities of Roman pottery, it is still sufficient to form the basis of detailed and wide-ranging study.

However, the examination of artefacts made of precious metals, whether jewellery or tableware, presents certain problems which are absent when dealing with materials such as pottery and base metals. Seen from the viewpoint of the museum curator, the intrinsic value of the material places practical restrictions on access to the objects, and often upon scientific sampling. The finest craftsmanship of antiquity was often lavished upon such pieces, and, having been hoarded for safety by their erstwhile owners, treasures of gold and silver have rarely been found in controlled archaeological excavation; beautiful and valuable items recovered without any regard for context and association have tended to be seen as the province of the art-historian rather than the archaeologist, to be studied in aesthetic isolation. Art-historical research has so far achieved little in creating any sound framework for the study of this material.

Perhaps because this branch of scholarship appeared less than dynamic, the last 10-15 years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in research on Roman silver, supported by a new multi-disciplinary approach. Specialists in provincial Roman archaeology are in a particularly good position to be aware of the advances in many different fields, being conscious of the interests of prehistorians, classical archaeologists and mediaevalists, and taking into account literary and other documentary evidence, art-history, and the application of the natural sciences to problems of dating and the history of technology. It is also no accident that some of the outstanding advances in the field of study which we are considering here have been made by scholars based in major national museums, who are fortunate in having access to the wide range of skills which are now needed in the detailed study and publication of antiquities.

A significant additional impetus towards the study of Roman silver plate, at least in the northern provinces of the Roman empire, has been the discovery within the last generation or so of several important new hoards. Some of the great Roman silver hoards found in the 18th and 19th c., such as those from Hildesheim and the Vesuvian cities, had long been well known as outstanding representatives of Roman applied art, but more recent times have seen a more critical and original approach to both the new finds and the old, which in turn have demanded renewed study and publication.

The unearthing of the Mildenhall treasure in Suffolk during the Second World War (1942/43) was perhaps a starting-point: 1962 saw the discovery of the Kaiseraugst treasure in Switzerland, and in the same year, Britain produced an early Roman silver treasure from Hockwold, Norfolk, and a late-Roman,