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# Now we see through a glass, darkly

by David Buckton<sup>1</sup>

One of the many enigmatic objects in the British Museum is a gold and enamel pendant with a complicated image and the inscription ‘seal of God’ in Greek (Fig. 1). It has been in the museum since 1911<sup>2</sup>, and this its first publication is dedicated to two greatly valued friends and former colleagues.

It comprises a disk of gold sheet, 34 mm in diameter, with a strip of gold hard-soldered to it as a suspension-loop. Both the disk and the loop are decorated with gold filigree and granulation. The disk has a border containing the inscription  $\text{C}\Phi\text{P}\text{A}\text{G}\text{I}\text{C}\ \Theta\text{E}\text{O}\text{V}$  in filigree wire letters, the words separated by a five and a six-pointed star and a lunate shape, with granules inside the wire outlines, a circle containing three evenly spaced chevrons, all in wire, and a filigree motif with granules raised on wire loops. The letters are separated by granules arranged in threes; groups of three are also spaced inside the outer edge of the border.

Inside the border is a human head, with the hair or headgear encroaching on the brow and both cheeks. There is no mouth; short lengths of wire run into the face from the chin. On the top of the head, slightly to the left of centre, is a triple aigret, and to the right is an asymmetric scroll of doubled wire. Projecting from or from behind the head at top left and centre left and right are animal-heads. Below the human head are the head, body and tail of an animal facing left. In the surrounding field granules are grouped in threes; in one case, seven granules make up a rosette. In places are remains of a dark reddish brown vitreous laminate. The back of the object is plain.

The pendant is important in that it could constitute the only proof of the survival of filigree enamelling into the Late Antique or Early Byzantine period. Although the continuation of the ancient Hellenistic technique has long been taken for granted, the only two pieces of evidence to have been published, filigree enamels in Paris and Baltimore, Maryland (Wessel 1967, nos 1-2; Haseloff 1990, Abb. 1-2), have recently been re-dated from the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE to between 1892 and 1897<sup>3</sup>. An initial approach to the British Museum Research Laboratory brought the reassuring response that the vitreous material on the ‘seal of God’ pendant was absolutely typical of Late Antique or Early Byzantine enamel.

Enamel is, of course, glass. When it is heated to its melting-point, glass bonds to metal, and for some three and a half thousand years this property has been exploited to add polychrome decoration to precious and base metal. According to ‘Theophilus’, a Benedictine monk and priest writing under a pseudonym, probably in north-west Germany at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the enamellers of his day used coloured glass *tesseræ* from mosaics found ‘in the ancient buildings of the pagans’ (Dodwell 1986, 44, Liber II, cap. XII)<sup>4</sup>. This surprising assertion has now been substantiated by the discovery that most early medieval enamel – whether Byzantine or western – was produced using glass which had been manufactured in the Roman world before the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. The 4<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a change in glass constituents, which has made it possible to establish that in the post-Roman period, even as late as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, enamellers were using pre-4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman glass<sup>5</sup>. If the 4<sup>th</sup> century, after

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<sup>2</sup> P&E 1911,5-12,2. Bought from L. Blumenreich, 83 Dartmouth Road, Brondesbury, London N.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, M.1688, and Walters Art Gallery, 44.304. These filigree enamel medallions have exactly the same dimensions, stylistic features and technical idiosyncrasies and are patently the work of one goldsmith. Enamel on the Baltimore object (acquired in 1931) has been shown to date from no earlier than the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Henderson 1992). The Paris example, acquired by the Cabinet des Médailles in 1897, incorporates a portrait of Licinia Eudoxia, daughter of Theodosius II (408-450) and wife of Valentinian III (425-455), which can only have been copied from a coin in the British Museum, published, with an illustration, in 1892 (Buckton forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Theophilus goes on to mention ‘various small vessels’ of coloured glass, apparently also to be found in ruined Roman buildings, which could be re-used in glassworking.

<sup>5</sup> The analyses and their interpretation have been published a number of times and progressively refined (See Freestone 1993a; 1993b, 37-45; Freestone *et al.* forthcoming).

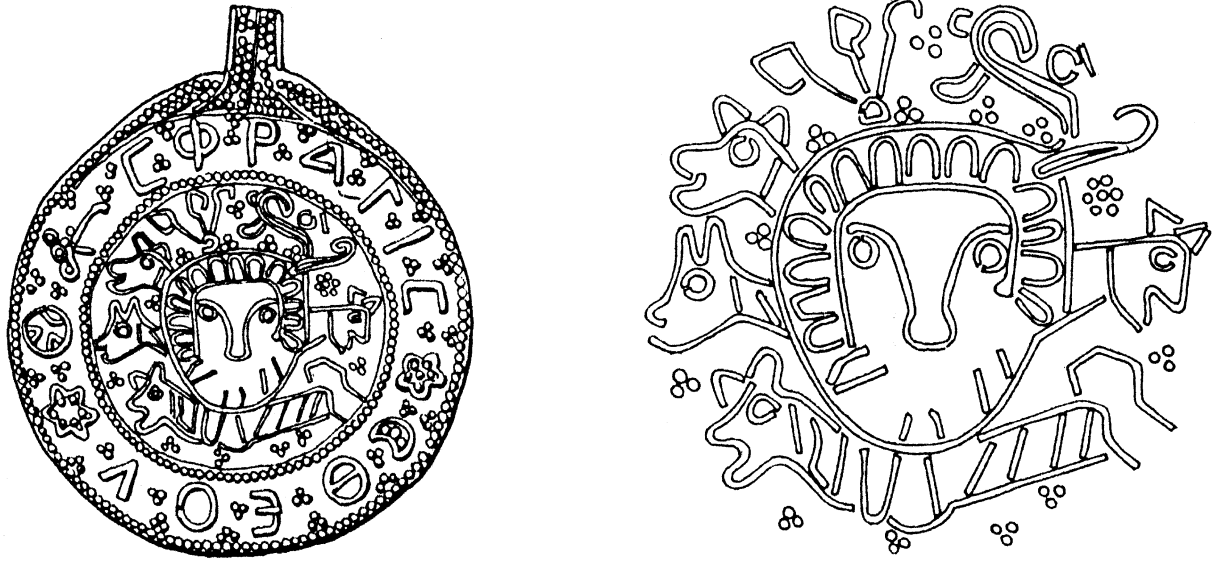


Fig. 1 — Gold filigree enamel pendant, British Museum, P&E 1911,5-12,2, and detail. Diameter 34 mm. Drawing: James Thorn; © The British Museum 2005.

Christians had been granted the freedom to practise their religion throughout the Roman Empire, also saw the first overtly Christian art, earlier mosaics could well have been supposed pagan.

Its inscription relates the pendant to 4<sup>th</sup>-century magical gems inscribed  $\text{C}\Phi\text{P}\text{A}\text{G}\text{I}\text{C}\ \Theta\text{E}\text{O}\text{V}$  on the reverse. On the obverse, these haematite intaglios show a horseman, often identified by inscription as Solomon, spearing and trampling a prostrate figure (Fig. 2). According to the *Testamentum Solomonis*, the archangel Michael gave Solomon a ‘seal of God’ which endowed him with magical powers, particularly over demons (Michel 2001, 268).

If the iconography on the intaglios is compared with that on the pendant, it is just possible to interpret the human head surmounting the head, body and tail of an animal on the latter as a horseman. There are, though, far more differences than there are similarities: there is no room on the pendant for the horse’s legs, let alone a prostrate figure under its hooves, and the animal heads projecting from the human head have no parallels on the intaglios.

However, several amulets from the eastern Mediterranean region, most of them invoking Solomon as protection against ill-health, ill-fortune and ill-will, were published by Gustave Schlumberger (1892), and one of these, a lead pendant (Fig. 3), bears an image very close to that on the British Museum object (Schlumberger 1892, 79;

1895, 123-4)<sup>6</sup>. On one side is a stylized variation on the iconography of the haematite intaglios; the other side, which Schlumberger designated the reverse, corresponds to the filigree enamel pendant. A comparison of one with the other nevertheless reveals significant discrepancies. Perhaps the most obvious is that there is no ‘seal of God’ inscription on the lead amulet, which has in its place a largely indecipherable legend<sup>7</sup>. The layout of the image differs: on the BM pendant it completely fills the available space, whereas on the Schlumberger amulet it occupies the upper three-quarters only. Judging from the gaps evident in the inscriptions on the lead amulet, the space at the bottom of the image is likely to have contained, or



Fig. 2 — Haematite intaglio, British Museum, EA 56204. Drawing: James T. Farrant; © The British Museum 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Schlumberger collection, acquired in Constantinople, n° 5.

<sup>7</sup> Schlumberger (1892) found the inscription illegible, but subsequently (1895) identified the nouns ‘έλαφος (deer) and, less confidently, λαγώς



Fig. 3 — Lead pendant, formerly Schlumberger collection (illustration after Schlumberger).

been intended for, at least the legs of the animal, the head, body and tail of which survived to be drawn by the illustrator. The losses could have been the result of defective casting or die-stamping, or of subsequent damage, wear or corrosion.

At the top right of the enamelled version is an arrangement of filigree which, while it approximates to the individual lines of the analogous feature on the lead amulet, unlike the latter cannot be recognized as the head of a stag. The animal-heads seem to be identified by names which can be made out from occasionally transposed Greek letters on the obverse of the lead object: ONOC (ass), ΕΛΛΦΟC (deer), AMNOC (lamb), and ΚΥΝΙΚΟC, interpreted as *κυνίσκος* (young dog) by Schlumberger (1895, 124). This last could also be emended to *κύνικλος* (rabbit), but any corresponding representation certainly looks more *κυνικός* (dog-like).

On the gold pendant the animal-heads are not identified, and, since any clues to the meaning or function of the two pendants are supplied by the lead one, it seems likely that this, or a uniformly flawed duplicate, provided the model for the gold version. If this were indeed the case, the ‘seal of God’ inscription might well have been taken from another object. It does, in fact, appear in one of the other line-drawings in Schlumberger’s article<sup>8</sup>, a coinci-

dence which, although in itself unsurprising in the context of Solomon amulets, inevitably raises the question of whether the goldsmith could have been copying not the objects themselves but their illustrations, conveniently collected in a single publication.

If a pendant acquired by the British Museum in 1911 had indeed been inspired by drawings published in 1892, these years would obviously provide the date-bracket for its manufacture. Between these very dates, it was suggested in an article published in 1988, more than 150 enamels purporting to be Byzantine had in reality been made by craftsmen ‘moonlighting’ from the Fabergé or other St Petersburg workshops (Buckton 1988). The *terminus post quem*, 1892, was provided by the publication of a work on Byzantine enamel which did not mention the enamels in question and contained colour-plates apparently serving as models for them (Kondakov 1892<sup>9</sup>). The *terminus ante*, 1911, was the year the problematic enamels were catalogued.

In 1995 it was revealed that a confession written in 1916 had come to light in the Fabergé archives (Norman 1995). A craftsman employed by the firm had admitted being involved with others in the manufacture of over a hundred of the enamels. They had indeed been made in St Petersburg – actually between 1892 and 1909<sup>10</sup>.

(hare).

<sup>8</sup> A haematite intaglio acquired in Beirut, n° 13: Schlumberger 1892, 84; Schlumberger 1895, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Kondakov’s book was also published as *Geschichte und Denkmäler des byzantinischen Emails* (*Byzantinische Zellen-Emails: Sammlung A. W. Swenigorodskoi*) and as *Histoire et monuments des émaux byzantins* (*Émaux byzantins: collection Zvénigorodskoi*), both Frankfurt am Main, 1892.

While the St Petersburg forgeries are cloisonné enamels and have little in common with the filigree enamel of the pendant, they do show that Byzantine enamels were being counterfeited in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and that the fakes were based on published illustrations. The re-dating of the medallions in Paris and Baltimore from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> suggests that the technique of filigree enamel was also being employed by forgers. Back in the BM Research Laboratory, the gold pendant was subjected to further scientific tests, and, whereas the glasses used for the enamelling were confirmed as compatible with a Late Antique or Early Byzantine date, the gold turned out to be suspiciously pure, around 99.1%, with 0.8% copper and 0.1% silver<sup>11</sup>. This contrasts with the alloys found in Early Byzantine jewellery, which are typically between 87% and 97% gold (with a mean of 92%) and with a silver content at least twice that of the copper (Oddy & La Niece 1986).

The St Petersburg forgeries are also notable for their extremely high-carat gold, but the glasses are those which were readily available in the Fabergé and other workshops. In contrast, the goldsmith responsible for making the pendant seems to have used Roman glass to enamel it. If this occurred in the early middle ages, the re-use of the glass was absolutely characteristic of the period but it is hard to account for the unusual composition of the gold alloy employed. If, on the other hand, the pendant was made between 1892 and 1911, it is equally difficult to explain the use of glass manufactured one and a half millennia earlier.

It has to be said that misgivings far outnumber any positive feelings. The pendant imperfectly reproduces an image on a published object, even apparently compensating for losses from that object, its inscription appears on a different object illustrated in the same publication, it made its appearance at the end of a period notorious for enamel forgeries, the composition of its gold is unlike the alloys normally found in Late Antique and Early Byzantine jewellery, and no other filigree enamel is now attributed to Late Antiquity or Early Byzantium<sup>12</sup>. Since pendants tend to swivel on their cords or chains, it is, moreover, usual for their backs to have some sort of decoration.

The re-use of glass manufactured in the Roman world is the pendant's sole saving grace. The only way a late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century goldsmith could have known that early medieval enamellers used Roman glass was, however indirectly, from Theophilus<sup>13</sup>. His treatise is divided into three books, the first largely concerned with painting, the second with glass, and the third with metalwork. The reference to mosaic *tesserae* comes in Book II, while Book III contains step-by-step instructions for making cloisonné enamel. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, editions and commentaries had concentrated on Book I<sup>14</sup>. Increasingly complete editions followed in 1843 (in French), in 1847 (in English) and in 1874 (in German), which proved fruitful sources for writers specifically on the subject of enamel (Dodwell 1986, liv–lvii, lxxiv–lxxvii). Notable among these, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was H. H. Cunynghame, who explicitly promoted the treatise as the manual of a practising craftsman, in contrast to the usual medieval compilations of untried recipes and other hand-me-downs<sup>15</sup>.

However, the first to bring Theophilus directly to the attention of latter-day jewellers and metalsmiths was almost certainly Charles de Linas. In a review '*pour le commerce*' of the historical sections of trade exhibitions mounted in Europe in 1880, he supplied a French translation of the entire chapter about the re-use of ancient glass, even helpfully glossing the word 'pagans' as 'Romans'<sup>16</sup>. In the context of the colours of enamel on medieval works in the exhibitions, he went on to emphasize how at the time of '*le moine artiste*' Theophilus, 'and doubtless before that', enamelling was done with glass taken from Roman mosaics (de Linas 1881, 117).

This information was therefore accessible by the time the filigree enamel medallions in Paris and Baltimore and the St Petersburg cloisonné enamel forgeries were made. Uniquely, however, the goldsmith responsible for the filigree enamel pendant in the British Museum not only had the information – whether from de Linas or another source – but acted on it. A significant proportion of the 90-odd-year delay in publishing the object is down to his or her enterprise.

<sup>10</sup> The confession was published in Faberzhe *et al.* 1997, 341–9. For a summary in English, see Buckton 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Scientific Research, British Museum, report dated 7 October 1996: the glass is a low-potash, low-magnesia soda-lime-silica variety. Its high chlorine content (1.2 wt.% Cl) endorses the view that it was made using soda from a natural mineral or plant-ash source rather than a synthetic alkali.

<sup>12</sup> See note 3. Interestingly, the Fabergé craftsman who confessed to forging cloisonné enamels (note 10) was a *filigranshchik* by trade.

<sup>13</sup> No other medieval treatise includes the information.

<sup>14</sup> Primarily because it contains references to oil as a medium for painting, refuting Vasari's assertion that painting in oil had been pioneered by the van Eyck brothers.

<sup>15</sup> While Cunynghame (*On the Theory and Practice of Art-Enamelling upon Metals*, London, 1901, and *European Enamels*, London, 1906) repeats Theophilus' detailed instructions for making a cloisonné enamel, he does not identify the source of the glass. (For the view that Theophilus had himself never practised enamelling, see Buckton 1994.)

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