

Thoughts on the Artistic Legacy of Fourth-Century BC Macedonia to the Roman Republic

Beryl Barr-Sharrar

Testimony from ancient writers indicates that the consumerism sustaining the production of high-end luxury metalwork that began with demand from the mid-4th century BC court of Philip II of Macedonia increased substantially in the kingdoms established after the conquests of Alexander the Great. The earliest public display in Rome of the Greek plunder of silver goods during the Roman military conquests may have been the one following the sack of Syracuse in 211 BC (Livy 26.21.6-10). Later, both Livy (37.59.4-5) and Pliny (*NH* 33.148) report that Lucius Scipio displayed thousands of pounds of gold and silverware in his triumph of 189 BC celebrating the conquest of Asia.

The continuation of consumption in Macedonia was no less impressive. The procession in 167 BC honoring Aemilius Paullus after his triumph at Pydna lasted three days according to Plutarch. After a day focused on confiscated statues, paintings and colossal images, Macedonian armor was followed by “silver mixing bowls, horn-shaped goblets, offering bowls, and drinking cups,” each one “outstanding in size and in the density of its engraving.” On the third day, more metalwork was exhibited, including “all the gold utensils used at the table of Perseus.” (Plutarch, *Aemilius Paullus*, 32-3).

From surviving examples, we know that during the 3rd century B.C., a development towards greater elegance of form was accompanied on almost all silver shapes by an increase in surface elaboration executed in repoussé relief of a very high level of technical achievement. Plaster and clay positives of molds taken by Roman craftsmen from Hellenistic silver or gold vessels, or made from wax models used in the artists’ workshops, survive from Alexandria, Memphis and sites in Afghanistan. These are invaluable in reconstructions of ornate vessels now lost.

Fourth- and third-century BC metal prototypes, recognized through familiarity with finds from ancient Macedonia, lie behind some surprisingly similar, elaborated adaptations designed during the Roman Republic. This phenomenon suggests the retention of Greek heirlooms late into the Hellenistic period. The apparent availability of these precious objects to Roman craftsmen is a recognized phenomenon not yet sufficiently analyzed.