

# RITUAL DISH WITH CHRIST, SAINT PETER AND SAINT PAUL

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Byzantine, 5th–7th or 9th–10th  
Garnet  
H: 3.7 cm – W: 2.5 cm – D: 1 cm  
Reference: 19832

This garnet, sculpted in the shape of a shallow convex dish, is extraordinary both by its size and the purity of the stone. It is carefully and finely engraved on both sides. A large cross with long arms covers most of the exterior surface. The extremities of the Cross's arms worked as two commas circling a large pearl. The letters IC XC (Iesos Chrestos) are engraved on either side of the Cross. The standing figures of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, draped in a mantle, are acclaiming on either side of the Cross. Peter carries a long shafted cross, whilst Paul is recognizable iconographically: an ascetic man, with a long beard and a bold skull.

The interior of the vessel is occupied by a figure of Christ, standing on a scabellum (a small stool) drawn in perspective, and holding a book in his left hand. He wears a long tunic and a draped mantle on his shoulders. The right arm is covered by the mantle, thus preventing the familiar benediction gesture. The Christ is bearded and his long hair falls down upon his neck. A cross shaped halo surround his head.

A clever visual effect was devised by the artist with the interior side directed towards the light, and Christ appearing on the cross on the exterior. However, this visual effect is not active in the reverse; indeed, when looking through the interior, the cross is simply not visible behind Christ.

Stylistically, this figure of Christ can be assimilated to several other examples in glyptic works from the 9th and 10th century, such as the so-called 'Anne' double faced intaglio, at the Cabinet des Médailles, in Paris (Babelon 338). Indeed, the image of Christ is represented in the same way, in the same attitude, but surrounded by Deesis (the Virgin and John the Baptist).

Yet, another similar standing figure of Christ is also attested on an amethyst cameo from the Dumbarton Oaks collection (inv. 53.7).

Nonetheless, one should not discard an earlier dating for this piece, notably due to the subject matter on the exterior side of the vessel (the acclamation of the Cross by Peter and Paul). It is in fact rare to encounter it in 10th century Byzantine iconography. However, it is featured on a magnificent agate intaglio from the Wavel collection (Krakow, Poland, inv. IX 2607), which dates from the 5th-7th century A.D. This is one of the finest and best kept intaglios from this period; the bust of Christ tops a large cross surrounded by a Greek inscription

which reads: "Emmanuel". Saint Peter and Saint Paul stand on either side acclaiming the Cross.

The usage of such stone in this peculiar shape is also quite unique. A narrow ridge on the exterior rim of the vessel is proof that a second element could have been fitted onto the dish, thus enabling it to close, and creating a hermetically sealed space on the inside.

The shape, the iconography of the piece, as well the usage of the garnet all point to a very particular and rare vessel. It is probably a dish that contained the holy-chrism (myron in the Oriental Church). This holy oil is used to mark the believers during Baptism, Confirmation (Unction in the East) and the ordination of Priests and Bishops. It is composed of pure olive oil, to which balsam (a substance extracted from a tree in Judea and Arabia) is added.

## CONDITION

Entirely preserved; chips on the interior border to the left of Christ.

## PROVENANCE

Formerly, Simkovic collection, collected in the 1970s.

## PUBLISHED

CRYSTAL 6, Phoenix Ancient Art, Geneva-New York, 2016, no. 3

## EXHIBITED

TEFAF, New York, October 2016

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