

The 'Stand of the Chalice'.

A Note on a Coptic Liturgical Vessel.

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1. Introduction.

One of the veritable gold-mines in the field of Eastern Liturgies is to be found in F.E. Brightman's *Liturgies Eastern and Western*.¹ There, in his 'Glossary of Technical Terms', the author explains (be it under the entry 'Veil') a liturgical vessel what we understand as being characteristic of the Liturgy of the Alexandrian Patriarchate. Brightman writes : "...The Coptic chalice is covered with a cubical box (*tote*, *thronos nte pipoterion*, arab.*cursi alcas* 'stand of the chalice') with a round aperture in the top corresponding to the mouth of the chalice which stands within flush with the top of the *tote* : the aperture is covered with one of the mats (*thom* 'plate', arab. *tabak*, *hasirah*) which lie on the altar, and the paten is placed on this." Such a vessel, which serves to protect the chalice from the moment of its preparation² to the Holy Communion, is not in use outside the Nile Valley. While information concerning the Stand of the Chalice still seems to be rather scarce for Ethiopia, some recent research has yielded more evidence for Egypt, both from liturgical texts and from collections of liturgical objects.

Our first literary source is the so-called *Tartib al-kahanut* (a kind of *Rituale*), which has been dated by its Editor, Julius Assfalg, in about 1200 A.D.³ From the context we may conclude that this vessel must have been already a quite well-known one to contemporaries, because it is deemed self-evident and mentioned without explanation. No wonder, then, that Patriarch Gabriel the Fifth (1409-1427) mentions the 'Stand' more than

1 Oxford, 1896.

2 This might be compared with the Byzantine rite of the *Prothesis*.

3 J. Assfalg, *Die Ordnung des Priestertums*, Cairo, 1955, p. 159. Our vessel, here called a *Hamil*, a holder, is mentioned twice on p. 83.

once in his famous *Rituale*.⁴

The mouth of the chalice has to stand within flush with its 'Stand' to enable the priest to touch the chalice, to raise it and to move it in the form of a cross, when he says : "Take, drink ye all of it : for this is my blood of the New Testament which shall be shed for you and for many and be given for the remission of sins"⁵ This gesture of moving the chalice, according to a 14th Century author being made to indicate the bloodshed of Jesus Christ,⁶ seems, in the same way as the Stand of the Chalice itself, to be limited to the Alexandrian Patriarchate.

Till now, the Stand of the Chalice has drawn little attention. One of the first investigators to be mentioned here would be A.J. Butler, who, in 1884, before Brightman, gave some remarks about the 'ark' or 'altar-casket',⁷ once unfortunately called a 'tabernacle',⁸ although Butler himself was quite aware of the danger of this misnomer. Some years later, J.G. zu Sachsen made very clear that its function was a different one : "Es ist kein Tabernakel, sondern ein Kasten mit einer Versenkung, in die der Kelch zwischen Darstellung (preparation -v.M.) und Kommunion gestellt wird."⁹

Both Authors give useful descriptions of the wooden Stands they discovered during their journeys to Egypt. Later, G. Graf published an interesting Note on a Stand of the Chalice in a Church near Old-Cairo, for which he used the name "Kelchthron" (throne of the Chalice-v.M.).¹⁰

As for the different names given to this vessel, two of them seem to be

4 A. Abdallah (Ed.), *l'Ordinamento liturgico di Gabriele V, 88 patriarca copto, 1409-1427 / Stud. Or. Chr. Aegyptiaca* 14 (Cairo), 1962), pp. 363 (here Gabriel calls our vessel the *Hamil'l-kâs*, see also note 3), 380 and 438.

5 from the Liturgy of the Coptic Jacobites as given by F.E. Brightmann, o.c., p. 177.

6 V. Mistrîh (Ed.), *Juhanna ibn abi Zakaria ibn Siba, Pretiosa margarita de scientiis ecclesiasticis (Kitab al-gauhara annafisa fi 'ulum al-kanisa)*, *Stud. Or. Chr. Aegyptiaca* 16 (Cairo, 1966), p. 521.

7 A.J. Butler, *The ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, I, Oxford, 1884, p. 109.

8 A.J. Butler, o.c., II, Oxford, 1884, p. 42.

9 J.G. zu Sachsen, *Streifzüge durch die Kirchen und Klöster Ägyptens*, Leipzig/Berlin, pp. 11-12.

10 G.Graf, Ein alter Kelchthron in der Kirche Abu Sefen, *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 4 (1938), pp. 29-36; Cfr. G.Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini*, Louvain (Leuven), 1954, p.4.

of special importance because of their symbolic meaning. The Stand of the Chalice as a *kibootos* (Ark) refers to the Ark of Covenant, while its indication as a *thronos* alludes to the heavenly Throne in texts such as Isaiah 6, Ezechiel 1 and 10 and Revelations 4. At the moment, we don't have yet iconographical evidence of the vessel as an Ark, but, as we will see, we are lucky enough to have two monumental proofs for its interpretation as a Throne, even for examples of a rather early date. I should add, however, that dating of Stands of a Chalice can be very problematic, especially when we are concerned with pieces that were not produced by workshops of Icon-Painters.

We have, in fact, information about old Stands of a Chalice that were made of metal or carved in stone. In this short Note I will restrict myself to mentioning just three of such venerable pieces from days of old.

2. Some Specimina.

1. In the church of Abu Sefein in Dayr al Maymoun (near Beni Suef): limestone. height: 21.5 cm. width: 21.5 cm. (below) and 17.5 cm. (on top). diameter of the aperture on top: 12.5 cm. This undated piece is of a cubical shape.

Decoration: On three sides a Cross with wide ends. On the fourth side an inscription of five lines in Coptic, with XEPE as *Incipit* and with NIXEPOYBIM as *Explicit*, to be translated as: "Hail Thou, heavenly Throne of Him Who is borne by the Cherubim" (see illustration 1).

Near the aperture in the top we see a decoration of simple circles. Damage: On two sides some of the lower part is broken off.

2. In the museum of Dayr es Syrian (Wady-n-Natroun): yellow copper. height: 13 cm. (with feet: 16 cm.). diameter: circa 15 cm.. This undated Stand was originally round. Decoration: On the four panels the Four Living Beings of the Apocalypse are represented, with protruding heads. Each of them has eight wings (see illustration 2).

Damage: On top the diameter is now between 13 and 14 cm., while below the diameter is 15 cm..

Apart from these pieces, which clearly refer to the Stand of the Chalice as the Throne of the Lord, there is another piece, which is also undated:

3. In the library/museum of Dayr Anba Antoniūs (near the Red Sea): copper. height: 15.5 cm. (with feet: 17.25 cm.) diameter of the aperture on top: 10.75 cm.. This piece is of an hexagonal shape.

Decoration: On the six sides, between wide rows of (illegible) Arabic

inscriptions , a Cross with wide ends. (see illustration 3).
Damage: rough restorationwork.

In the next -and last- part of this Note I would like to draw attention to some wooden pieces, i.e. of the species as described by Butler, zu Sachsen and Graf. But, I must first confess that at present I have just thirty-six wooden Stands of the Chalice documented in my files. This means that my information should in no way be considered complete; every Church needed (and needs) to have -at least- one Stand of the Chalice.

Secondly, there are many wooden Stands which are not painted at all, which can nevertheless still be of great beauty:

4. In the library/museum of Dayr Anba Antoniûs (near the Red Sea): wood. height: 19 cm.. width: 18.5 cm. (below) and 17 cm. (on top).

Decoration: arabesques within frames on the sides.(see illustration 4).
Undated.

However, many of them are painted and are, therefore, connected with Coptic Iconography:

5. In the Coptic Museum (Old-Cairo), Inv. 1174: wood. height: 22 cm.. width: 19.5 cm.(below) and 15.5 cm. (on top).

Decoration : the Last Supper, the Holy Virgin with her Child, St. Michael and St. Basilius (illustration 5).

Attributed to the Painter Yuhanna el Armani. ¹¹ This is, at present, the first piece for which we have an approximative date.

Although four of the pieces in my files are possibly of 19th Century Palestinian origin,¹² most of them (thirteen) have been produced in the workshop of Anastasi el Rumi in Cairo.¹³ His Stands are often square in shape and very regular in their Iconography.

On their four sides we can always admire the Last Supper and mostly the Holy Virgin with her Child and the archangel Michael. These three Items must have been obligatory in Anastasi's days. For the last side, however, a kind of variation must have been possible. Admittedly, he decorated it mostly with St. Gabriel, but at least three times Anastasi was asked to paint the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt and, at least once,

¹¹ A well-known painter active in Cairo from 1742 to 1783.

¹² One in Dayr al Baramous, one in Dayr Anba Antoniûs and two in Bush (Dayr Anba Bula and Dayr Anba Antoniûs).

¹³ The Icon Painter Anastasi el Rumi worked in Cairo between, at least, 1832 and 1871 A.D..

he was asked to paint the famous authors of the Liturgy, St. Basilius and St. Gregory¹⁴ and another time St. Basilius alone.¹⁵ Normally the angles near the aperture on top are decorated with four small Cherubim. The motives of this decoration betray a firm inspiration from the Liturgy-itself, as we can see on the following example:

6. In the Coptic Museum (Old-Cairo), Inv. 1173: wood. height: 26 cm.. width : 22 cm.

Decoration: The Last Supper, The Holy Virgin with her Child, St. Michael, The Communion of St. Mary of Egypt (illustration 6), four small Cherubim (near the aperture on top).

Painted by Anastasi el Rumi in 1833 A.D..

All dated Stands of the Chalice from Anastasi the Greek that are in my files were painted between 1823 and 1865 A.D.. I am quite sure, however that this can be just a part of his total production in the field, because I am never surprised to find Stands from his workshop while visiting Churches and Monasteries in Egypt.

In this very short Note I have been able to present just one of the characteristic features of the Coptic Orthodox Liturgy, which I came across while making an inventory of the Icons in the Coptic Museum in Old-Cairo. I can only hope that further research will enable us to discover more about the origin and the meaning of the 'Stand of the Chalice'.¹⁶
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14 On this piece (in Dayr Abu Maqar) both archangels are painted near the Holy Virgin. On the last side here St. Macarius has been painted.

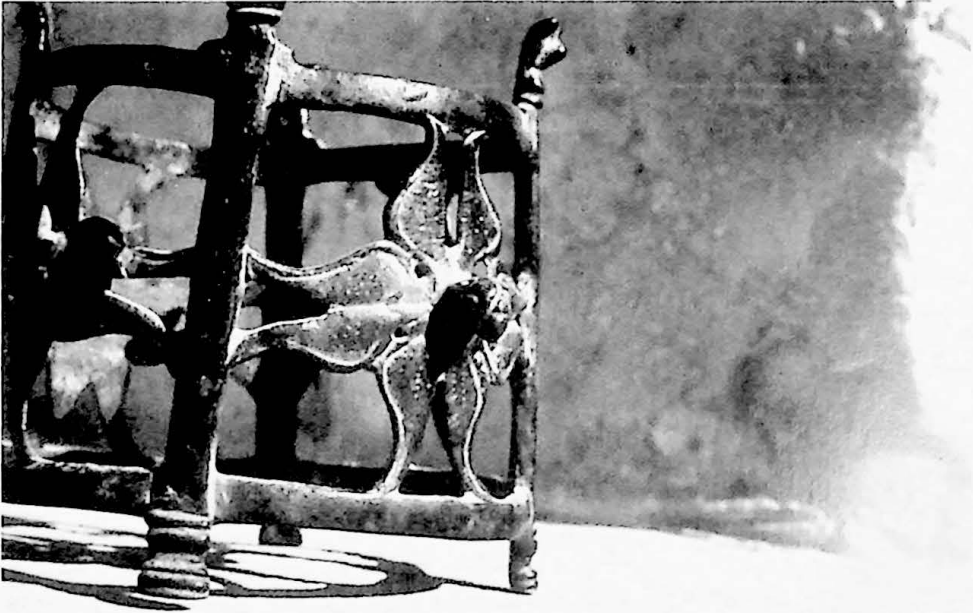
15 In a booklet on Christianity in Akhmim, written by an anonymous author in Arabic, a wooden 'Stand', made by an unknown painter, is represented with, on one of its sides, a portrait of Pope Kyrillos, possibly the Fourth of this name (1854-1861). This must be considered exceptional! Its appearance must be explained that he was born near Akhmim. I thank Abuna Youssab el Souriany for this and for other informations. Indispensable assistance has also graciously been given by H.G. Bishop Samuel, by Abuna Arsanus el Anba Bula and by Abuna Maximous el Anthony. To all of them, and to so many others, I express my warmest thanks. The English text of this Note has been revised by Rémy Chavannes.

16 For an earlier, even more preliminary study see: Paul van Moorsel, Ein Thron für den Kelch in: E. Dassmann (Ed.), *Tesserae, Festschrift für Josef Engemann*, Münster/Westfalen, 1991, pp. 299-303.

17 Illustration 1: by the author; nos 2,3 and 4: by Mat Immerzeel; nos 5 and 6: by Hans Hondelink.



1: Limestone Stand in Dayr al Maymoun.



2: Copper Stand in Dayr es Syrian(detail with eagle).