

# An Early Byzantine Chained Ornament from Sulumağara (Islahiye)\*

(Pl. 1. 41-43)

## 1. *The discoveries of Islahiye*

In September 2002, M. Önal undertook a rescue excavation on the site of a VI<sup>th</sup> century church at Sulumağara, near the village of Islahiye, at about 60 kms SW of the provincial capital of Gaziantep. The excavation revealed a sanctuary with a basilical plan and an annexe with a decorative mosaic floor<sup>1</sup>. In the choir of the church, lying on the ground, were discovered the piled-up fragments of a bronze ornament, which seems to have hung under the vault or the ceiling of the nave. This must have fallen to the ground when the building collapsed, as the remains of the roof lay immediately over it.

The Sulumağara find consists of several bronze elements; despite their extreme fragmentation, caused by the weight of the collapsed superstructure, the main pieces which can be recognized (as well as several chain fragments and isolated rings), are (pl. 41-43):

- a chi-rho set within a circle of thin openwork bronze sheet, with a suspension chain (pl. 42, 1);
- two cast crosses, separated by a chain segment similar to the former (pl. 42, 3);
- another circular ornament of bronze sheet, of which the position cannot be determined (pl. 42, 4).

The chi-rho plate is an openwork circle, with a diameter of 92,5mm, 1,2mm thick, of which the border slightly widens at the top and bottom (max. height 108 mm) to accommodate two suspension holes. The plate therefore hung between two chains, many fragments of which survive, and was set either above or below the two suspended crosses next described. The XP(ΙΣΤΟϚ) monogram was very simply obtained by adding a side loop to the upper corner of a saltire or St Andrew's Cross. The preserved segment of chain shows two series of rings separated by a filiform segment.

The two cast crosses are of the same type, although their height varies slightly (166 and 172 mm). The upright beams are thickened at the centre and have widened extremities. The transverse beams (112 and 113 mm respectively) are attached by a bronze rivet. Some remains of the suspension chain are preserved between the two upright beams, made as before of a series of seven rings, a filiform segment and five rings. The latter are cast and of a form which occurs particularly frequently at this period: two neatly rounded parts set perpendicularly. The filiform section between the two crosses retains traces of a very fragile ornament, made of thin bronze sheet and almost wholly disintegrated.

The last part of this ornamental hanging seems to be made of one or two thin bronze sheet discs which, no doubt due to their technique, show concentric breaks (diam. *c.* 125 mm, thickness 0,7 mm). When discovered, one of these discs showed on one face clear traces, in corrosion products, of the arms of a cross: it can therefore be presumed to have lain close to the bottom of the whole arrangement, and certainly below the crosses, as they had collapsed

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by M. Önal in this volume, p. 275-282.

onto it. But the nature of these discs, and even how they fitted into the hanging, remains unknown.

We therefore have here one, or even two, church ornaments made of vertical bronze suspensions, comprising as a minimum two crosses and a chi-rho linked with chains. This type of ornament, often combined with a lighting device, was probably not rare in Byzantine churches, although it is not common to find them *in situ* : in Sulumağara, only the particular circumstances of a sudden collapse of the building allowed the device to be preserved under the demolition debris of the church.

## ***2. Hanging lighting devices and palaeo-Byzantine church ornaments***

Around the Mediterranean countries, but especially in the East, we know various functional and / or decorative accessories to which the Sulumağara find can be compared. When the context is known, such objects are generally found in churches, and they can be identified as a category specific to this building type.

The best defined category is that of hanging devices : they usually consist of a circular base, equipped on one edge with three rings intended to take suspension chains. Such devices, which can have a circular or a crown-like form, could be fitted with glass lamps or metal candlesticks<sup>2</sup>. They are known from the V<sup>th</sup> to the XI<sup>th</sup> century AD; some representations show them in their functional context (Sinaï tabernacle, on the Ashburnham Pentateuch, in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris<sup>3</sup>). The technique of riveted arms for the crosses is typical (extending down to Egypt<sup>4</sup>) : a recent discovery from Byllis (Albania) documents it with a *terminus post quem* of the late VI<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>.

Both to get a lighter weight, and for decorative purposes, lighting devices are often of open-work. When the object has the form of a crown, the decoration is often reduced to a succession of geometric lights. But, when the centre is not totally open, it can contain some symbolic motifs, most often a simple cross (by the Copts<sup>6</sup>). A large circular object in the Sétif Museum (Algeria), with an opening in the form of a cross and the letters a and o, with a diameter of 21 cm and having a strong vertical suspension mechanism, was also, most probably, part of a lighting device<sup>7</sup>.

Other liturgical accessories are ritual devices rather than with furnishings, such as incense-burners, known from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other. The one preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid could come from Almeria : it is made of a hexagonal box, hanging on the chains linked to a more solid suspension. At the mid-length of this chain there is a footed cross with a ring at top and base<sup>8</sup>. In fact, suspension chains for incense-burners and for lighting devices cannot be distinguished once dismantled and without their ends<sup>9</sup>. Simple crosses, often augmented by pendants hanging from chains, are also known. Such decorations appear, in Turkey itself, on the palaeo-Byzantine wall paintings of Küçük Tavsan Adası, near Bodrum<sup>10</sup>. All these vertical suspension assemblages have an infinite variety of compositions ; no doubt church ornamentation of this time was making use

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<sup>2</sup> Olcay 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Bénazeth 1992, 162.

<sup>4</sup> Bénazeth 2001, 195 ; 215-217.

<sup>5</sup> Nallbani 2002, fig. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Bénazeth 1992, n°E 11916 and E 11873.

<sup>7</sup> Sintès, Rebahi (dir.), 2003, n°146.

<sup>8</sup> Almagro-Gorbea 1964-65, 181 *sqq.* ; Palol 1990, 148 and n°121.

<sup>9</sup> Bénazeth 2001, 210 *sqq.*

<sup>10</sup> Andaloro 1998, fig. 10-12.

of the atmosphere created by several such mobiles, hanging from the dark ceilings, as can be seen nowadays in some orthodox sanctuaries.

Archaeological discoveries of isolated elements do not always allow specialists to attribute them to one ornament type or the other, as can be seen for example in Oylum Höyük<sup>11</sup> or in Greece at Corinth<sup>12</sup> : all these crosses, made of two unequal parts very similar to the one of Sulumağara, are like ours, pierced at the top and the bottom to allow them to be integrated into a vertical hanging.

### ***Conclusion***

Although modest, this discovery adds to our knowledge of palaeo-Byzantine bronzes, which so far are less known in Turkey than in Syria or in Egypt<sup>13</sup>. In the early Byzantine church, the sacred space of the cult building made use of several pieces of equipment that were especially produced for the purpose and could not be used in civilian buildings or other secular spaces. The relative abundance of such bronzes, starting in the late V<sup>th</sup> or early VI<sup>th</sup> century in numerous regions of the Byzantine empire, shows the important rôle played by the Church in daily life as well as in the economy of the period. We can assume that this position had a similar effect on the production of wooden furniture, ornamental textiles etc., making religious society a major force in several aspects of the palaeo-Byzantine economy.

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<sup>11</sup> Özgen/Helwing 2001, fig. 47, c-d.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson 1952, pl. 90, no.1507 ; G. Davidson mentions some parallels in Italy, in the late necropolis of Nocera Umbra (MonAnt XXV, 1918, 164 fig. 12 ; 243 fig. 123 ; 294 fig. 155).

<sup>13</sup> Wright 2000, 169.

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