

I Hand (Portable) *Candelabrum* from a Byzantine Church in Athribis in Egypt

Archaeological excavations in Tell Atrib in Egypt led to the discovery of a group of objects that had served to light a Byzantine Church of the Holy Virgin from the second half of the 6th century.¹ Nearly all the finds that could be associated with this building beyond all doubt were found in a rubbish dump uncovered on the site of Kom Sidi Youssuf (trench D) excavated in 1980–83.² Their concentration in one spot indicated that they came from a single structure and that they had been discarded in one go or within a very short frame of time. The fill contained chiefly ashes, burnt mortar and small rubble, but also numerous marble elements of architectural decoration (also gilded) and fragments of the liturgical furnishings of the church in the form of a screen altar, ciborium (?) and altar. The finds included also a large set of pieces of bronze *polycandela*, which were fairly common in the Byzantine *oikumene* until medieval times. Glass containers filled with oil, which was the light-giving fuel of the times, were placed in the openings of these bronze chandeliers.

Among these bronzes was an object of ambiguous function, which could not be easily identified by name (**figs 1–2**).³ It could have been a mass-produced element, an individually crafted piece or merely an adapted part of a larger stand. Its features, including shape, material and decoration, put it to fairly coherent group of lampstands found in many museum collections.⁴ Each object of this kind is made up of three morphologically and functionally

¹ Archaeological excavations on Kom Sidi Youssuf in Tell Atrib (now Benha, Greek Athribis, Arabic Tell Atrib) were initiated by the Coptic Committee in Cairo as it was believed that the mound concealed the ruins of a church. Work in 1969 and in 1979–84 brought to light numerous architectural fragments of good quality, which must have come from a large church. To date, however, no evidence of a church or its foundations have been discovered, just elements of its furnishings. Despite the modest source material, the church was determined somewhat prematurely as being of the Holy Virgin – see Barbara Ruszczyc, *Kościół pod wezwaniem Świętej Dziewicy w Tell Atrib* (Warsaw, 1997). Only one written source mentioned the Church of the Holy Virgin in Athribis, giving an idealized description – see Émile Amélineau, *La géographie de l’Égypte à l’époque copte* (Paris, 1893), p. 67 ff. On the bishopric in Athribis in the Byzantine period, see Hans Reinhard Seeliger, Kirsten Krumeich, *Archäologie der antiken Bischofssitze I: Spätantike Bischofssitze Ägyptens* (Wiesbaden, 2007), pp. 60–62; Stefan Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1984), p. 261. The excavations were headed by Dr Barbara Ruszczyc, then curator of the Ancient Art Department of the National Museum in Warsaw, until 1984. Aleksandra Majewska and Tomasz Górecki from the Department were members of the excavation team at the time.

² Ruszczyc, op. cit., fig. 3 (plan), fig. 4 (trench section). The same illustrations were reproduced in Seeliger, Krumeich, op. cit., fig. 6 (plan) and fig. 8 (trench section).

³ The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. 235842 MNW. The *candelabrum* was part of a group of objects which were transferred to the museum following the division of finds from the excavations between the Egyptian and Polish parties.

⁴ John W. Hayes, *Greek, Roman, and Related Metalware in the Royal Ontario Museum. A Catalogue* (Toronto, 1984); Marvin C. Ross, *Metalwork, Ceramics, Glass, Glyptics, Painting. Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 1 (Washington, 1962); Dominique Bénazeth, *L’art du métal au début*

different elements: a tripod stand, a baluster-like shaft topped by a pointed spike (from a few to a few dozen centimeters high), and a pan mounted horizontally, flat or with a hood.⁵

It is not a straightforward task to establish a uniform terminology for this kind of object. It is not a simple candlestick as an oil lamp was often placed on top of the shaft. Laskarina Bouras was of the opinion that a lamp was placed on a shaft when its end was blunt and a candle mounted on it, if it was spiked,⁶ a convenient distinction that is easy to accept, if one forgets that any tripod, whether blunt or spiked, could have been universal in this respect, permitting the use of either lamp or candle.

The English terms for such objects (stands) are lampstand and candlestick, used interchangeably and often intuitively. The choice between the two cannot be treated without reserve, considering that nowhere in the published literature to my knowledge is there an example of a lamp and even more so a candle found in a secure archaeological context, together with the stand, either on or connected with it. Without certainty that it was indeed a source of light, a more appropriate term would be the German *Leuchter* or *Lichthalter*. It is universal in meaning as it renders the essence of the object's function: "object carrying a light source."⁷ To avoid the problems with terminology, I would suggest the use of the term *candelabrum* in this case to specify a stand for a light source, which could be either a wax candle or an oil lamp of bronze.

The bronze *candelabrum* from the National Museum in Warsaw consists of two elements: a baluster ending in a pointed spike and a circular pan, slightly concave and furnished with a central hole for the spike.⁸ The sole decoration of the two elements are grooves, shallow and narrow, engraved with a pointed tool on a turning device of some sort. Two double concentric rings can be seen on either side of the pan. The baluster bears five sets of double grooved lines running around the shaft. The square spike has a blunt end at the top.

The object resembles one of the modules (upper part with spike) used to make metal *candelabra* from the 5th to the early 7th century.⁹ These were used chiefly to light the interior

de l'ère chrétienne. Musée du Louvre. Catalogue du département des antiquités égyptiennes (Paris, 1992); ead., *Catalogue général du Musée copte du Caire, 1. Objets en métal* (Cairo, 2001).

⁵ All three elements of another *candelabrum*, separated before conservation works, can be viewed in Bénazeth, *L'art du métal...*, op. cit., p. 161, fig. (Musée du Louvre, inv. no. E 12956).

⁶ Laskarina Bouras, Maria G. Parani, *Lighting in Early Byzantium* (Washington, 2008), p. 9. Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications, 11.

⁷ On the proper terminology, see Bouras, Parani, *Lighting...*, op. cit., pp. 10–11, where the author used an apparently universal term, "light bearer" (= *candelabrum*), which means a stand for a candle or lamp. Similarly Georg Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger im spätantiken Ägypten nach den Aussagen der griechischen und koptischen Papyri und Ostraka* (Leipzig, 2002); the author writes of "Lampenständer, auf die man eine Öllampe oder eine Kerze stellte bzw. steckte" (p. 121 ff), but uses the common term *candelabrum* for both objects (*Leuchter, Lampenständer*) (p. 122).

⁸ Baluster: height with spike (solid): 13.8 cm, base diameter = 2.1 cm, diameter of ring support under the pan = 2.2 cm. Pan: diameter = 9.1 cm, diameter of opening = 1.65 cm, height (total) = 0.6 cm, thickness = 0.3 cm.

⁹ Twin lamp stands of iron were mentioned in the inventory of the church at Ibion in Egypt (Mundell Marlia Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium. The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* (Baltimore, 1986), p. 263, no. 91), but the most common examples are of an alloy with copper predominating and of bronze (see, i.a., Bénazeth, *L'art du métal...*, op. cit., pp. 156–61; ead., *Catalogue général...*, op. cit., cat. nos 38–55; Hayes, op. cit., cat. nos 229–39; Ross, op. cit., cat. nos 33–34, 38–40, 42–44); silver stands originate from hoards published by Mango, *Silver...*, op. cit., cat. nos 11–12. The dating of these objects is not very precise however. The very high *candelabra* are believed to be from the Roman period, which is a general term encompassing the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Even the silver stands, unless official stamps are in evidence, cannot be dated precisely, see Mango, *Silver...*, op. cit., cat. nos 11 and 12, dated tentatively to the middle of the 6th century. Three low silver *candelabra* with one-element balusters similar to the Warsaw piece bear stamps that enable them to be dated to 550–565, 602–610 and 610–630 (see Mundell Marlia Mango, "The Purpose and Places of Byzantine Silver Stamping," in *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth-Century Byzantium. Papers*

of churches, especially presbyteries, where they were placed near the altar. High *candelabra* were placed on the floor in the more important buildings, whereas the small and middle-sized stands had application in the homes. The balusters could be plain or, especially in the case of the higher ones, they could be made of separately cast elements, modules of different size, combined in a variety of arrangements.¹⁰ The tripod stand for mounting the baluster was also cast as a separate element. The baluster ended in a square or round spike that narrowed toward the top and had an either blunt or pointed tip.¹¹ A flat or slightly concave pan was placed on the spike to catch the dripping wax (or oil), thus protecting the lower part of the stand or the hand of the person carrying it. Either a candle or a lamp was placed on the spike.¹² Lamps of bronze produced for the purpose had an opening in the base for the spike, otherwise being indistinguishable from the ordinary bronze lamp.¹³ Placing a lamp on a stand increased the space that could be lighted in this manner.¹⁴

The *candelabrum* in question was discovered on Kom Sidi Youssef together with elements of bronze *polycandela* and architectural elements. The context leaves no doubt as to dating and provenance of the objects, which can be dated in consequence to the second half of the 6th century.¹⁵

The unique form of the object needs to be considered when interpreting the piece. It differs from all known *candelabra* in that it has separately produced shaft (baluster) and pan, and that it has no tripod. The first feature can be explained by practical needs: it is easier to store and carry from place to place an object that can be dismantled. It is also easier to produce it in two pieces than casting it in a much bigger mold, which the pan in a perpendicular plane to the shaft axis would require. The absence of a typical tripod foot is somewhat surprising;

of the Symposium Held May 16–18, 1986 at The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore and Dumbarton Oaks, Susan A. Boyd, Mundell Marlia Mango, eds (Washington, 1992), fig. 5 on p. 213). Analogous *candelabra* (including the Warsaw piece) are dated to the 2nd half of the 6th – early 7th century.

¹⁰ The form of one of the bronze balusters in particular suggestively justifies Marvin Ross's views on the "composition" of baluster elements making up a stand and the joining of the same versus similar modules, see Ross, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 38 and p. 36 ff. The profile of the shaft in this case is not very differentiated and is made up of three identical segments.

¹¹ See n. 6.

¹² See n. 8.

¹³ The lamps featured a characteristic vertical and rather narrow opening in the bottom and body, which allowed the lamp to be mounted in a stable way on a stand. The lamps also had a base ring to let them stand independently on any flat surface. Examples of bronze lamps with holes in the bottom: Bénazeth, *L'art du métal...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 119, 149; ead., *Catalogue général...*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 121; Hayes, *op. cit.*, no. 215 (depth of hole about 3 cm), 216, 218, 220, 222, 225 (depth of hole 6–7 cm), 226, 228, respectively the shallowest and the deepest openings, giving an idea of the range.

¹⁴ Especially in the case of stands that are more than 100 cm high, see Ross, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 39 (118 cm); Hayes, *op. cit.*, cat. nos 229–30 (121 cm); *Frühchristliche Kunst in Rom und Konstantinopel. Schätze aus dem Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst Berlin*, Christoph Stiegemann, ed. (Paderborn, 1996), on p. 250 the author mentions stands that are up to 160 cm high. *Candelabra*, which are so high, are more often of Roman date. In the 5th–6th century, there is a clear division into three groups of stands (based on sources cited in n. 8): from 21 to 33 cm, from 37 to 53 cm and from 70 to 95 cm high.

¹⁵ *Candelabra* with nearly identical balusters, dated by stamps from Antioch and Constantinople, come from the same period and confirm the chronology, see Mango, *The Purpose...*, *op. cit.*, p. 213. See also a bronze *candelabrum* from the collection of the Coptic Museum in Cairo, inv. no 5179 (Bénazeth, *Catalogue général...*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 49), which has the upper part (baluster) tied with wire to the tripod stand (fig. 3). It is impossible to tell whether this was originally a hand *candelabrum* that was wired to an accidental but matching stand or it was originally one piece and was repaired in this fashion.

this missing element indicates that it could have been only carried in hand, assuming it was used at all.¹⁶

A *candelabrum* without tripod base is without parallel in the known assemblage of ancient lighting devices, hence one should consider the circumstances in which it was made. It could have been crafted in this way from the beginning, being intended as a portable device, although as such it was definitely less universal than the small stands on tripod feet.¹⁷ It could equally well be accidental, being in reality the upper part (segment) of a larger, damaged piece (as, e.g., the objects from Cairo and London, **figs 3–4**), which could not be repaired for whatever reason and the element was reused as a portable hand *candelabrum*. The baluster bears no evidence of being joined to another segment at the bottom, but the polishing at this end may have removed any traces that may have existed. The polishing, however, could be the effect of smoothening the cast after taking the baluster out of the mold. It is therefore impossible to determine with complete certainty whether the object was cast originally as a small hand *candelabrum* or was an adapted, reused element of a higher stand.

One can hypothesize on the role of a hand *candelabrum* in rituals celebrated inside the church. The small scope of light given by the device and the lack of a hood combined with the need to carry it in the hand limited its function to lighting a restricted space inside a closed building.¹⁸ The church in Athribis would have been lighted presumably by hanging bronze chandeliers, which were in common use everywhere in the Byzantine sphere.¹⁹ Fragments of such devices were also found in the excavated rubble from the Athribis church. Thus the use of this particular object would have had sense only in specific conditions, such as the dim interior of the building of the church. The *candelabrum* thus must have had an auxiliary and secondary role in lighting the church, where there must have been at least five chandeliers, each with from six to several glass lamp containers. The oil in these glass containers would have had to be topped up for the liturgy and afterwards the lamps would be put out. This was

¹⁶ Generally, even the small late antique *candelabra* have some kind of stand. The smallest *candelabrum* that has been recorded was 9.5 cm high, see Vera Zalesskaya, *Monuments of Byzantine Applied Arts 4th-7th Centuries. Catalogue of the Hermitage Collection* (Saint Petersburg, 2006), cat. no. 225, a few were 13–14 cm high: *Koptische Kunst. Christentum am Nil, 3. Mai bis 15. August 1963 in Villa Hügel, Essen* (Essen, 1963), no. 182 (13 cm high); *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century. Catalogue of the exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978*, Kurt Weitzmann, ed., exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New York, 1979), cat. no. 319 (13.2 cm high); Bénazeth, *Catalogue général...*, op. cit., cat. no. 55 (14 cm high); Inna A. Antonova, *Chersonesus of Tauride* (Kiev, 1989), p. 106 (very low, no dimensions given). One should also mention a small home *candelabrum* from the second half of the 4th century, made of bronze. It had a tripod base, simple column shaft topped by an open lamp with tubular candle holder inside, see *Villa rustica. Römische Gutshöfe im Rhein-Maas-Gebiet (eine Ausstellung des Bonnefontenmuseums Maastricht)*, Marjorie De Grooth, Hilde Hiller, eds (Freiburg i.Br., 1988), fig. 14.

¹⁷ Schmelz, op. cit., p. 123; portable *candelabra* are attested in a few papyrus sources from Egypt. They were carried most probably in processions or in similar ceremonial circumstances.

¹⁸ Open spaces in late antique Egypt were lighted by clay lanterns with oil lamps placed inside them. They took on the shape of a small domed "house" with an opening on one side, directing the stream of light in one direction. See Barbara Johnson, *Pottery from Karanis. Excavations of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, 1981), fig. 76: nos 131–33; Louise A. Shier, *Terracota Lamps from Karanis, Egypt. Excavations of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, 1978), pl. 55 (Lantern Mich. 7716); Tomasz Górecki, "The pottery 1988–1989," in Włodzimierz Godlewski, Tomasz Derda, Tomasz Górecki, "Deir el Naqlun (Nekluni), 1988–1989, Second Preliminary Report, Nubica," *International Journal for Coptic, Meroitic, Nubian, Ethiopian and Related Studies*, 3/1 (1994), fig. 17.3; Bouras, Parani, *Lighting...*, op. cit., p. 5. Such a device was not needed inside the church where there was no wind.

¹⁹ Describing the church of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople, Paulos Silentiarius devoted a great deal of attention to its rich lighting. See Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire: 312–1453, Sources and Documents* (New Jersey, 1972), pp. 89–91.

an easy task – it was enough to extinguish the flame. The “guardian” of the light (subdeacon?) putting out successive lamps had to light his way inside the church.²⁰ In a closed interior, moving down the church aisles to either light the chandeliers before the morning prayer or to put the out after the service, one could easily carry a small *candelabrum* with a burning candle or lamp without the risk of it being put out by accident (**fig. 5**).²¹

Many indications suggest that the *candelabrum* was used as a portable device. It was less universal than a device with base and could not have been left standing, if the situation required it, but it was sufficiently functional to have served its role. At the present stage of research it cannot be determined whether this small *candelabrum* was cast in this form or whether it was adapted from a bigger light stand.

Translated by Iwona Zych

²⁰ Not much is known about persons lighting and putting out the lamps (or candles) in churches, how this was done and what tools were used for the purpose. A 12th-century Byzantine miniature depicts a subdeacon (?) taking down lamps hanging under an architrave or ceiling most probably in order to top them up with oil, see Maria Evangelatou, “Pursuing Salvation through a Body of Parchment: Books and Their Significance in the Illustrated Homilies of Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos,” *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 68 (2006), pp. 239–84, fig. 1b.

²¹ There is no certainty in this case whether the interior of a building was being lighted, because candles were more expensive and served more ceremonial functions (e.g., in processions) and were seldom used for private purposes. See Bouras, Parani, *Lighting...*, op. cit., p. 1. Practical considerations argue in favor of the oil lamp, which was cheaper in use, as the chief source of light.