

## BOOK REVIEW

*Medusa's Gaze: The Extraordinary Journey of the Tazza Farnese. Emblems of Antiquity.* By MARINA BELOZERSKAYA. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii + 292. \$24.95/£14.99. ISBN 978-0-19-973931-8.

The *Tazza Farnese* is a sardonyx cameo made from a geode, 21.7 cm. in diameter, carved into the form of a shallow bowl. On the inside are representations of Isis, her son Horus, and a personification of the Nile: the entire scene is open to various interpretations but seems to relate to the abundance of the river. On the outside is the head of Medusa. Of exceptionally high artistic quality, it belongs in the flourishing Hellenistic/Roman tradition of carved stones, and is the largest of its genre to survive. It seems to have originated in the Ptolemaic court, and since the eighteenth century (with some exceptions due to warfare) has resided in the Naples archaeological museum. It acquired its modern name when in the possession of the Farnese family.

This intriguing book is, interestingly, not really about the *Tazza Farnese*. Rather it is a fascinating account of how one piece of ancient art survived the vicissitudes of over 2000 years to be visible in a museum today. Information about the *Tazza* itself, at least before the Renaissance, is exceedingly sparse and speculative. Although it can confidently be said that it was carved in late Hellenistic times, the piece is not documented until a drawing was made at the beginning of the fifteenth century by a calligrapher at the court of the Mongol leader Timur (or Tamurlane), perhaps in Samarkand (99). Samarkand is a long way from Alexandria, and how the *Tazza* got there is the focus of the first half of the book.

Belozerskaya's account of this extraordinary journey is almost totally speculative, but somehow that does not matter, as she has presented a rich and thoroughly absorbing account of plausibilities, with solid attention to the environment of the art collecting world. Since there is no documentation of the piece before the fifteenth century, when and how it left the Ptolemaic court is its first mystery. Belozerskaya may certainly be excused for fixating on the most famous Ptolemy, Kleopatra VII, but the only hint that the *Tazza* may have belonged to her is its subject matter, as Isis was the queen's alter ego. It may have been among the spoils that Octavian brought to Rome after her death, but there are other possibilities that Belozerskaya outlines (and some that she does not): it may have

already been in Rome (Kleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII, had many debts to prominent Romans), or even remained in Alexandria when the Romans took over, eventually to move to Constantinople. The possible locations of the bowl after the end of the Ptolemies are so tangled that it is difficult for Belozerskaya to choose, but this does not diminish the quality of her narrative. Whether or not the cameo belonged to Kleopatra VII, Belozerskaya later places it in Constantinople, eventually in the hands of the noted collector Constantine VII in the tenth century. Then she identifies it as the "large dish of onyx" owned by the emperor Frederick II in the thirteenth century. One can see that the spottings of the *Tazza* are infrequent, but Belozerskaya has filled out her narrative by absorbing vignettes of the world in which the object necessarily moved. There is a tendency to turn speculation into fact (see p. 80)—although to be sure healthy and astute speculation is a necessary part of good scholarship—but what is most interesting is the picture that Belozerskaya has presented of the world of art collectors in late antiquity and medieval times, supplemented with a good account of the Christianizing of ancient art, a strange world view that nonetheless insured its survival. One can sometimes lose sight of the *Tazza* itself, for its environment is so well described, with solid character studies of the personalities who probably saw or acquired it.

But it is in the early fifteenth century that the object emerged from obscurity, only to create another mystery: how did it end up at the Timurid court? This is perhaps the most remarkable event in its history, since it was now incredibly far from the locale of its origins (although Timur went as far west as Damascus and Aleppo). Belozerskaya describes well the world of the Timurid court and its interest in art, and offers—again—several different ways in which the piece could have made this latest extraordinary journey. But then it was back in Europe, perhaps the "dish of carved chalcedony" owned by Lorenzo di Medici in 1471 (p. 143). From this time—although sightings remain rare—the history of the *Tazza* is more linear, moving into the Farnese family and eventually to the Naples museum.

This is an exciting book. It is well written, literally hard to put down, with good illustrations and solid notes and bibliography. In many places it is a work of speculation rather than fact, but such is the nature of the *Tazza* itself, and anyone who reads the book and then sees the object, or has seen it, will never look at it in the same way again.

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