

PREFAZIONE

The Dark Ages of early medieval Europe were not as dark as they appear to be. When Constantine transferred the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, in the fourth century A.D., and when the glitterati of Rome fled the Eternal City, its lights dimmed, but they did not go out. The strong social habits, artistic traditions, and superior craftsmanship of the late classical world received the rough, tribal invaders from the North, absorbing what they brought to create new artistic forms, new social structures and customs. At the same time, continuing ties with the eastern Mediterranean not only reinforced the older classical traditions, they also contributed to the growth of a new society. This mixture of social and historic forces in Italy produced a vibrant culture in the fifth through the seventh centuries that has too often been left in the dark.

The Canoscio hoard presents the largest treasure found in Italy from the late antique period. In this book, Marco Aimone compares the Canoscio treasure to many similar Italian hoards discovered in the past two centuries, and, in so doing, throws new light on classical traditions that stand solid during this period of change and turmoil, while illustrating the input of the new invaders, as well as the effect on the West of a new, Christian Byzantium.

This treasure came to light on July 12, 1935, in a field near the village of Canoscio near Città di Castello, in Umbria, central Italy and is now preserved in the Museum of the Cathedral of the city. Aimone presents a comprehensive introduction, describing in detail the circumstances of the find by three peasants plowing the land. Various officials were notified of the discovery. The objects were collected and, in all, the twenty-six separate pieces were assembled that now form the body of the treasure on display in the Cathedral museum. However, in the process of collection and establishment of ownership, some objects disappeared. Through a remarkable detective process, Marco Aimone has located six more objects, two plates and four spoons. These six objects, missing from the original display, were purchased by Hitler from an antique dealer in Rome and taken to Berlin for Hitler's own museum, which he planned to build in his favorite town, Linz. They were discovered by the allies after the war and distributed to various collections in Germany. Among them is the well-known plate with relief depicting Meleager, presently in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich; its provenance from Italy had remained unknown until now.

Aimone devotes the body of his work to a comprehensive analysis of each object, accompanied by very good photographs and invaluable maps. His elegant and sensitive drawings – mainly, but not only, of spoons – are one of the most helpful contributions where the photographs alone cannot convey adequate detail. In the long and wide-ranging conclusion, Aimone pulls his detailed analysis together to consider the larger questions raised by this treasure from Canoscio and other treasures found elsewhere in the Byzantine world. In the first place, he establishes beyond doubt that these objects belonged to a private family, and were used in the continuing Roman tradition of the *convivium*. Although decoration and inscriptions are Christian in character, the treasures had nothing to do with a religious ceremony, or burial. Not only that, but the objects come from different workshops, mainly Rome, Ravenna or Carthage, and further East; they also came from different periods. They were purchased from different sources, collected, used and passed on from one generation to the next. Eventually they were hidden in the early seventh century on the occasion of battles between Byzantines and Lombards, and never recovered.

One of Aimone's most intriguing discoveries is that a type of grid was used to trace the designs on at least two of the plates: the second of two plates showing a large cross with two lambs on either side (n. 2), and the Meleager plate in Munich (n. 26). The lightest and almost invisible straight lines are traced into both plates in the same manner. This process has not previously been noticed

and it suggests not only how the silversmith worked, but the possibility of distinguishing between different workshops.

Marco Aimone, a young scholar who only recently completed his formal studies, is the author of several articles leading up to this major publication, along with a comparable book on the Desana treasure: *Il tesoro di Desana, Una fonte per lo studio della società romano-ostrogota in Italia*, BAR International Series 2127, 2010. The Desana treasure consists of fifty-one pieces of jewelry and precious objects, owned also by a single family, discovered in a field between the villages of Desana and Trino, near Vercelli, in Piedmont, northern Italy. The Desana treasure was discovered in 1938, and is now preserved in the Museo Civico di Arte Antica in Turin. The two books on the Desana Treasure and the Canoscio Treasure complement each other, in the sense that they illustrate the belongings of late Roman families during the troubled years of the invasions into Italy after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Desana treasure consists mostly of jewelry and clothing adornments, the Canoscio treasure of priceless adornments of the banquet. Through these artifacts, Aimone traces relationships between the different factions who lived in Italy, at the same time reconstructing the local production of valuable artifacts, commercial and social relationships and the continuing bonds with Constantinople. During the period of these treasures, trade relationships with the East remained strong, at least until the Moslem conquests in the ninth century. Greek and Syrian merchants established communities in southern Italy, Sicily and France, in contact with the barbaric kingdoms of the Lombards, the Franks, the Visigoths and even the Anglo-Saxons. Only when the Moslems conquered Sicily, these relationships changed, but that is a chapter beyond the limits of this book.

This book concludes with the publication of eleven supporting documents, and a comprehensive bibliography. The documents invite a wider readership than just the art historian. These two books establish Marco Aimone as an accomplished scholar and an elegant writer whose books will be at the elbow of all future scholars of Medieval art and archaeology, especially that of the Dark Ages.

January 31, 2014

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