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Contents

ARTICLES

An “Effaced Itinerary”:

Joanna de Silva by William Wood

ADAM EAKER, 9

After a Long Cruise by John Carlin:

Mutiny and Maritime New York

DANIEL FINAMORE, 23

The 1869 Regensburger Silberfund:

A Seventeenth-Century Hoard of Silver

ALLISON STIELAU, 33

Souvenirs in Silver:

Daguerrean Constructions by Joseph Cornell

VIRGINIA MCBRIDE, 59

RESEARCH NOTES

A Byzantine Censer and the

“Flaming Womb” of the Virgin

EVAN FREEMAN, 75

Drawings of Parade Carriages for

Cardinal Francesco Maria de’ Medici

ROMINA ORIGLIA, 86

Persimmon and Peonies: Orange-Colored Glass and

Enamels from the Qing Imperial Workshops

JULIE BELLEMARE, FEDERICO CARÒ, KAREN STAMM, 96

An Early Etching by William Welles Bosworth

ANDREA M. ORTUÑO, 107

MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.

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A Byzantine Censer and the “Flaming Womb” of the Virgin

EVAN FREEMAN

A small cast copper alloy object in The Metropolitan Museum of Art displays a figure in relief with hands upraised in an orant gesture (fig. 1). The figure is inscribed **MP ΘΥ**, the Greek abbreviation for “Mother of God,” which was the standard epithet for the Virgin Mary in the icons of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. Before it was acquired by The Met in 1999, the piece was dated to the eleventh or twelfth century and described as the “handle of a wide and low cup for some liturgical use, perhaps a paten.”¹ Helen Evans, Mary and Michael Jaharis Curator of Byzantine Art Emerita, more recently assigned this object to the thirteenth to fourteenth century and identified it as the handle of what was once a Byzantine *katzion* censer.² Although the censer survives in a fragmentary state, comparisons with



fig. 1 *Katzion* fragment. Byzantine, 13th–14th century. Cast copper alloy, $5\frac{9}{16} \times 4\frac{7}{8} \times \frac{3}{8}$ in. (14.1 × 12.4 × .9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Estate of Lawrence J. Majewski, 1999 (1999.519.11)

fig. 2 Censer attached to openwork flange in the shape of two animals. Byzantine, 1301–1400. Copper alloy, L. 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (36 cm), D. $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (1.9 cm), Diam. $3\frac{1}{8}$ in. (7.8 cm). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, purchased 1980 (inv. AN1980.19)

similar censers and depictions of *katzia* enable us to propose a reconstruction of the censer’s original form and functions, and to argue that The Met’s *katzion* juxtaposed burning coals with the icon of the Virgin to evoke metaphors of the Virgin’s child-bearing as fire.

The use of incense was already well established in Byzantium when the *katzion* censer was fashioned, although Byzantine censers often took a different form. Christians began incorporating incense into religious rituals from the fourth or fifth century.³ The Byzantines deployed incense in church services, public ceremonies, funerary contexts, and domestic spaces. Hanging censers were common throughout much of Byzantine history, combining a bowl-like receptacle suspended from chains and a ring or hook that served as a handle. Hanging censers were often made from silver or copper alloy, as seen in examples preserved at The Met, including a silver censer with six holy figures dated to about 582–602,⁴ a sixth-century copper alloy censer with non-figural ornament,⁵ and three silver censers displaying holy figures from the Syrian village of Attarouthi.⁶

The *katzion* emerged as a new type of censer in the Middle Byzantine period.⁷ The term appears in lists of equipment for the invasion of Crete in 949 in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*.⁸ The *diataxis* of Michael Attaleiates from March 1077 is among the earliest ecclesiastical inventories to mention *katzia*, referencing a censer that was made of silver and apparently decorated with a figure on horseback, perhaps a military saint.⁹ Sources indicate that *katzia*, like hanging censers, were commonly made of silver and

bronze. *Katzia* differed in form from hanging censers by combining a censer bowl with a horizontal handle and sometimes incorporating a lid or a foot. The oldest surviving *katzia* are copper alloy and date from the eleventh or twelfth century.¹⁰ Like hanging censers, *katzia* often bear figural decoration or non-figural ornament.

A well-preserved copper alloy *katzion* in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford dated to the fourteenth century can help reconstruct The Met’s *katzion* (fig. 2).¹¹ The Ashmolean *katzion* preserves a bowl-like receptacle for coals and incense, a flat openwork element with a griffin motif that extends horizontally from the bowl, and a long handle affixed to the underside of the openwork element. The Met’s fragment corresponds with the openwork element on the Ashmolean *katzion* and still preserves a curved edge beneath the icon of the Virgin where a bowl was previously affixed. Two small holes above and below the Virgin show where a long handle was also once attached. Metal censers became hot when coals were placed inside them, so long handles helped distance the user from the heat source to avoid being burned. Many surviving *katzia* preserve similar holes for attaching long handles. So, although The Met’s *katzion* has been identified as a “censer handle,” it is unlikely that the *katzion* was actually held by this fragment.

Byzantine sources say little about how *katzia* were used, but artistic depictions of *katzia* from as early as the thirteenth century offer clues. A panel icon of the Dormition of the Virgin from Novgorod dated to about the beginning of the thirteenth century shows a bishop holding a golden *katzion* with red coals



Fig. 3a, b Icon with the Dormition of the Virgin, and detail. Novgorod, early 13th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



fig. 4 Dormition of the Virgin wall painting, 1260s. Sopoćani Monastery, Doljani, Serbia

fig. 5 Prothesis niche wall painting, ca. 1380. Church of Saint Demetrios, Markov Monastery, Sušica, North Macedonia



over the Virgin's head (fig. 3a, b).¹² The bishop holds the *katzion* by a long handle that recalls the Ashmolean censer. A *katzion* similarly appears in the large wall painting of the Dormition at Sopoćani Monastery in Serbia from the 1260s (fig. 4).¹³ Here, a bishop is shown holding the long handle of another *katzion*, this time with a lid that has been flipped open, toward the Virgin's midsection. The presence of *katzia* censers in such images of the Dormition have led scholars to speculate that *katzia* censers were used at funeral services. The discovery of a *katzion* in a burial at Mistra has lent further support to this hypothesis.¹⁴

Wall paintings from about 1380 in the Church of Saint Demetrios, Markov Monastery, near Skopje suggest that *katzia* may have been used in other settings as well. An image of a public procession with an icon of the Virgin, which is part of a larger cycle illustrating the Akathistos hymn, includes a deacon with a *katzion*.¹⁵ Another *katzion* appears in a wall painting in the prothesis niche to the north of the altar in the same church, where the clergy prepared the bread and wine before the celebration of the Eucharist (fig. 5).¹⁶ This painting depicts the dead Christ as the Eucharistic offering with liturgical implements. Saint Stephen appears on the right vested as a deacon and offers incense over Christ

with a *katzion*. This painting of Stephen with the dead Christ may again point to a funerary function for *katzia*. But since the clergy also offered incense during the preparation of the Eucharistic bread and wine, this painting indicates that *katzia* may have been used in the prothesis rite as well.¹⁷

The presence of religious iconography on some *katzia* may signal that they were used for such church services. *Katzia* with zoomorphic and other non-figural motifs may likewise indicate nonecclesiastical functions.¹⁸ However, religious iconography often adorned personal objects in Byzantium, and nonreligious ornament could also be found in churches. So, decorative motifs should not necessarily be taken as an indicator of religious or nonreligious use. However, an inscription on another *katzion* fragment, preserved at the Benaki Museum in Athens and dated to about 1300, may indeed refer to an ecclesiastical context (fig. 6).¹⁹ Decorated with an icon of the Virgin and Child, the Benaki *katzion* offers the closest comparison with The Met's *katzion* in terms of iconography. The Virgin is identified as the Mother of God "Therapiotissa," which likely refers to the Church of the Virgin Therapiotissa in Constantinople, where this censer was probably used. It is possible that The Met's *katzion* similarly served an ecclesiastical function.

fig. 6 *Katzion* fragment.
Constantinople, ca. 1300.
Bronze, cast and engraved,
11¼ × 8¾ in. (28.6 × 21 cm).
Benaki Museum, Athens
(inv. 11402)



In addition to the *katzia* at The Met and Benaki with their icons of the Virgin, other *katzia* dating from the eleventh to fourteenth century display icons of Christ and saints.²⁰ All of them feature decoration on similar flat surfaces that were affixed to the incense bowl like The Met's fragment. In all cases, the icons are oriented outward, away from the handle, implying that the images were meant to be viewed by an audience.²¹ The fact that *katzia* were held in front of the user rather than swinging on chains would have made their decoration more perceptible than images on hanging censers. In the prothesis rite before the Liturgy, *katzia* would have

been seen by the clergy who performed this service, and in funerals and processions, *katzia* would have been visible to a broad audience of clergy and laypeople.

On The Met's and the Benaki's *katzia*, the juxtaposition of the Virgin with the incense bowl is suggestive. On both censers, the bottom of the icon terminates at the Virgin's torso. This break is positioned immediately above the censer bowl, whereas *katzia* decorated with icons of Christ and saints do not closely juxtapose these figures with the incense bowl. When coals and incense were placed in the censer bowl of The Met's and the Benaki's *katzia*, their position would have corresponded

with the implied location of the Virgin's lower torso or pelvis, in other words, her womb. As such, the censers would have evoked widespread metaphors from patristic texts, homilies, and hymnography that interpreted the Virgin's conception and childbearing in terms of fire.

Associations of fire with divinity predate Christianity, appearing in several passages of the Hebrew Bible. Moses encounters God in the burning bush, God leads the people of Israel through the wilderness as a pillar of fire, and a seraph touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a burning coal, to name just a few well-known examples.²² Later, Christian writers reinterpreted many of these episodes as prefigurations, or "types," of Christ. For Clement of Alexandria writing about the turn of the third century, it was Christ as the Word of God who spoke through the burning bush to Moses and led the Israelites as the pillar of fire.²³ For the eighth-century John of Damascus and other Byzantine writers, the burning coal of Isaiah evoked Christ in his divine and human natures, as well as the Eucharistic bread as Christ's body.²⁴

Byzantine writers extended such fire imagery to describe the Virgin Mary as well. Objects containing fire were apt metaphors for the Virgin who contained the Son of God in her womb. For the fourth-century Gregory of Nyssa, the burning bush was not only an image of Christ but also an image of Mary's virginity, since the bush burned but was not consumed.²⁵ And since Isaiah's coal was commonly interpreted as an image of Christ, several Byzantine writers interpreted the tongs that held the coal as an image of the Virgin.²⁶ Such metaphors also manifested themselves visually in Byzantine art, as with icons of the Virgin as the burning bush, which became popular in Sinai and the Holy Land in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and depictions of the tongs and coals in two manuscripts containing homilies on the Virgin by the monk Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos from the twelfth century.²⁷

The incense altar of the Jewish temple described in Exodus 30 offered another potent image for Christian interpreters. Exodus 30 states: "You shall make an altar on which to offer incense; you shall make it of acacia wood . . . You shall overlay it with pure gold."²⁸ A canon (hymn) for the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin attributed to the eighth-century Andrew of Crete says of the Virgin: "You have become a gold censer, because the Word under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit planted fire in your womb, and became visible in human form, O pure Mother of God."²⁹ As a sacred object that contained fire, the altar of incense in the

Jewish temple offered Byzantine hymnographers and preachers another poignant image for describing the incarnation of the Son of God through the Virgin.

Byzantine commentators also deployed this typological approach for interpreting Christian ritual, describing censers in church services as symbols of Christ and his mother. A commentary traditionally attributed to Germanos of Constantinople, more recently attributed to an anonymous author of the seventh or eighth century, states: "The censer demonstrates the humanity of Christ, and the fire, His divinity." A ninth-century Latin interpolation of this same text elaborates: "The interior of the censer is understood as the [sanctified] womb of the [holy] virgin [and Theotokos] who bore the divine coal, Christ, in whom 'the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9)."³⁰ Maria Evangelatou has argued that depictions of censers in Middle and Late Byzantine images of the Dormition carried these same associations.³¹ For example, a wall painting at the church of the Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera in Cyprus from about 1192 features a bishop pointing toward a censer that he dangles above the Virgin's abdomen. The abovementioned bishop who stretches his *katzion* toward the Virgin's midsection in the Dormition at Sopoćani likely carried the same incarnational symbolism.

Such textual and visual associations of censers with Christ and the Virgin reveal that juxtaposition of the icon of the Virgin with the incense bowl was meant to conjure similar meanings in The Met's *katzion*. We can now imagine the reconstructed object, with its lost incense bowl and long handle reattached, held by a cleric in a funeral service, procession, or in the prothesis rite. The censer bowl would be filled with burning coals and incense, from which wisps of fragrant smoke would rise, giving the impression that the Virgin's womb was swollen with divine fire. The censer and the icon of the Virgin are conflated. The censer and its contents became an extension of the image, of the Virgin's body: a multimodal actualization of the Virgin's miraculous conception of Christ as divine fire.

The form and decoration of The Met's *katzion* also suggest parallels with contemporary depictions of the burning bush. In the twelfth-century Kokkinobaphos manuscripts, the ogival form of the burning bush is remarkably similar to the outline of The Met's *katzion* fragment.³² In several works of art that depict the Virgin and Child within the burning bush, such as the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century triptych at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai (fig. 7a, b), the Virgin raises her hands in an orant gesture while the



Fig. 7a, b Triptych with twelve feasts, saints, and the Virgin of the burning bush, and detail. Late 14th or early 15th century. Tempera on panel. The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

Christ Child appears over her torso in a manner that is analogous to the image of the Virgin and the position of the censer bowl on The Met's *katzion*. Such images of the burning bush may well have inspired the form and decoration of The Met's *katzion*.

If The Met's *katzion* was used in the prothesis rite, its decoration would have further resonated with the symbolism of the prothesis, which interpreted the Eucharistic bread and wine in terms of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ. In this setting, The Met's *katzion* likely evoked Byzantine descriptions of the Virgin's womb as an oven.³³ In the first kontakion (hymn) on the Annunciation attributed to the sixth-century Romanos the Melodist, Joseph addresses the Virgin: "O Radiant One, I see a flame and burning coals around you; hence, Mary, I am shaking; protect me, and do not consume me! Your faultless womb has suddenly become an oven full of fire."³⁴ Elsewhere, Mary's womb-oven is described eucharistically as a bread oven. In his ninth-century homily on the Annunciation, Photios I of Constantinople states: "Hail, because thou hast brought to all of us the ambrosia of the life-giving bread, baked in thy flaming womb as in an oven."³⁵ Byzantine writers continued to employ such imagery for centuries, sometimes mixing the metaphors of censers and ovens to present Christ as a coal, incense, and baked flesh all at once, as in the twelfth-century homily of John Phournes: "For you are truly the gold censer, in which the coal of divinity was placed, and when it had burnt the proffered flesh of Christ in the form of incense it filled the world



with the fragrance from his body."³⁶ In the prothesis, The Met's *katzion* would have visually evoked such richly layered metaphors for the incarnation.

Surviving in a fragmentary state, the significance of The Met's *katzion* is obscured to the modern viewer, but by reconstructing its original form and function, we encounter an object with decoration that was carefully integrated to generate rich meanings. By combining object, image, and ritual substances such as coals and incense, The Met's *katzion* actualized metaphors of the Virgin's childbearing as fire.

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NOTES

- 1 Gómez-Moreno 1968, no. 87.
- 2 “Censer Handle with Virgin Orant,” MMA online collection catalogue, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/472758>.
- 3 Harvey 2006, 75–83; Caseau 2007.
- 4 MMA 1985.123.
- 5 MMA 1999.519.10.
- 6 MMA 1986.3.11, 1986.3.12, and 1986.3.13.
- 7 Bouras 1981; Bouras and Kazhdan 1991; Barmparitsa 2010; Bender et al. 2014; Hedrick and Ergin 2015.
- 8 *De Ceremoniis* 2.45, in Dagron, Flusin, and Feissel 2020, 330–31, 338–39.
- 9 “κατ’ἱερ ἀργυροῦν ἀχρῦσωτον· ὁ καβαλλάριος· ἰστῶν”; Gautier 1981, 91. Additional early references to *katzia* appear in wills and inventories from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For example, a private will dated to 1098 mentions a large silver *katzion* with a cover (“τὸ δὲ γε κατ’ἱόν μου τὸ μέγα τὸ σκεπαστὸν τὸ ἀργυρὸν”); Lefort, Oikonomidēs, and Papachryssanthou 1990, 179. An inventory of the Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, Mount Athos, from December 14, 1142, mentions a bronze *katzion* (“κατ’ζήν χαλκὸν ἔν”); and a silver *katzion* (“κατ’ζήν ἀργυρὸν”); Lemerle, Dagron, and Ćirković 1982, 74–75. An inventory of the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian on Patmos from September 1200 mentions a silver *katzion* (“κάτ’ζιν ἀργυρὸν ἔν”); Astruc 1981, 21.
- 10 A bronze *katzion* dated between the eleventh and twelfth century is preserved at the State Museum-Preserve “Kherstones Tavriysky” in Sevastopol, Crimea; Frings and Willinghöfer 2010, 304, no. 378. A copper *katzion* dated to the second half of the twelfth century is preserved at the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg; Piatnitsky et al. 2000, 115–16, no. B94.
- 11 Buckton 1994, 200–201, no. 217.
- 12 Lazarev 1997, 35–36, pl. 7.
- 13 Wratislaw-Mitrović and Okunev 1931, 147–48.
- 14 Xynogopoulos 1930, 129–30; Drandakis 1952.
- 15 Ševčenko 1991, 50.
- 16 Djurić 2014, 123–25.
- 17 A ninth-century Latin interpolation of the *Historia ekklesiastike* attributed to Germanos I of Constantinople describes the use of incense during the prothesis; Meyendorff 1984, 72–73. See also the recent discussion of the redactions and dating of this commentary in Zheltov 2021.
- 18 Xynogopoulos 1930; Barmparitsa 2010, 228, 230.
- 19 See catalogue entries by Anastasia Drandaki in Vassilaki 2000, 362–63, no. 42; Cormack and Vassilaki 2008, 235, 432, no. 207; and Drandaki, Papanikola-Bakirtzi, and Tourta 2013, 155, no. 73.
- 20 For example, the *katzia* mentioned in note 10 above. See also the copper *katzion* with military saints at the Benaki Museum; Drandaki, Papanikola-Bakirtzi, and Tourta 2013, 154, no. 72.
- 21 Note, however, that the large size of the Virgin Therapiotissa *katzion* at the Benaki has led Drandaki (in Vassilaki 2000, 362) to conclude that this censer was rarely moved.
- 22 Exodus 3; Exodus 13; Isaiah 6.
- 23 For example, Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 1.8, in Marcovich 1995, 14.
- 24 John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* 4.13 (86), in Kotter 1973, 196; see also Evangelatou 2014.
- 25 Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.20–21, in Musurillo 1964, 39–40.
- 26 Evangelatou 2019, 84–85.

- 27 Collins 2006, 97–108. On the illustrations in the Kokkinobaphos manuscripts (Vaticanus Graecus 1162 and Parisinus Graecus 1208), see Linardou 2011, 147–48.
- 28 Exodus 30:1, 3 (NRSVUE).
- 29 Andrew of Crete, *Canon in B. Mariae Nativitatem*, in PG 97:1324C. English translation adapted from Evangelatou 2005, 121.
- 30 Germanos, *Historia Ekklesiastike* 30, in Zheltov 2021, 102; Meyendorff 1984, 78–81.
- 31 Evangelatou 2005.
- 32 Vaticanus Graecus 1162, fol. 54v; Parisinus Graecus 1208, fol. 73v. See Linardou 2011.
- 33 The womb-oven metaphor predates Christianity and was widespread in ancient Greece and the Ancient Near East. See DuBois 1988, 110–29. Its use in Byzantium was not limited to descriptions of the Virgin, as seen in the *Greek Life of St. Leo Bishop of Catania* 26–27, in Alexakis 2011, 172–75. I thank Dimitris Krallis for bringing this text to my attention.
- 34 Romanos the Melodist, *On the Annunciation* I (36.15), in Maas and Trypanis 1963, 287; English adapted from Arentzen 2017, 186.
- 35 Photios of Constantinople I, Homily 5, 7; in Laourdas 1959, 60, and Mango 1958, 121.
- 36 John Phournes, “Λόγος περὶ τῆς Μεταστάσεως τοῦ πανσέπου σώματος τῆς Θεοτόκου· ὅτι ἀνέστη ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν πρὸ τῆς κοινῆς ἀναστάσεως,” in Palamas 1860, 276; Evangelatou 2005, 125.

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METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 58

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