A MOSAIC OF IMAGES
POWER AND DAILY LIFE IN BYZANTIUM

SHOWCASE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

COORDINATED, ORGANISED & EDITED
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Students working on the preparation of the exhibition

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A Mosaic of Images
Power and Daily Life in Byzantium

The second of a series of mini exhibitions of the scientific treasures
of the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University

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Ancient Dining Rooms: *Triclinium* and *Stibadium*

The most important room of an ancient house (*domus*) was the reception and dining room, the so-called *triclinium*. It appeared in the 2nd century BCE and was important for the political scene of the high society, for instance, to maintain good relationships with other aristocrats. The *triclinium* was not only a place for dining and entertaining, but the architecture and decoration of the room was also important for the success of the evening. In the largest *domus* there could be two dining rooms: for example, a summer *triclinium* overlooking the garden.

The *triclinium* was named after the three rectangular couches which were used for lying down while dining. They were placed around a central table. By the 3rd century CE, literary and archaeological sources show a change in the display. The couches became semi-circular, and their shape was by now called a *stibadium*. This triggered a change in the *triclinium*’s architecture, with the development of apses where the semi-circular couches would fit. The final evolution is a combination of a square hall and apses. In order to host a great number of people, aristocrats would build a *triconch*, a dining room with three apses and place a *stibadium* in each of them.

**The Villa del Casale**

In the early 19th century, a luxurious villa was discovered at Piazza Armerina (Sicily), which could be dated to the 3rd century CE (picture 1). This is one of the most iconic houses of Late Antiquity, as it is one of the best preserved. Furthermore, the iconography of its colourful mosaics give us all kind of information about daily life activities at that time. The reconstructed model in display shows a *triclinium* (T) and a *triconch*, a grand dining hall (G), of this well-known villa.

**Object:** Reconstruction of the grand dining hall of Piazza Armerina, Sicily. Clay and cardboard model (© Marion Guy).
Picture 1: Plan of the villa of the Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, including a triclinium (after Polci 2003, fig. 1).
Byzantine Amphorae from West (Italy) and East (Syria)

Venice was a simple port within the western Byzantine territories during the 7th century, but it soon developed into the foremost Byzantine city in northern Italy. By the 12th century, the city was an independent state. As such, Venice acted as a mercantile nation, functioning as a bridge between the Byzantine Empire and the rest of Europe. This pivotal role is demonstrated by the great amount of Byzantine trade in Venetian territory, among which amphorae, which were containers for trading products such as olive oil, wine, grain and other consumable goods (picture 1).

In this display and in these pictures, we see some 7th-century examples of Byzantine amphorae, recovered from archaeological excavations in Byzantine Syria (picture 2). Similar amphorae were not only used in the trade with Venice, but also in other trade connections gradually developed by the Empire developed around the Mediterranean Sea and in the Near East.

The Byzantine amphorae on display were discovered at sites in Turkey and Syria (picture 2). They are characterized by a fine fabric and by a painting decoration in brown or red on the shoulders. This amphora type, produced in the area of Zeugma (an important trade centre along the Euphrates River), is still manufactured in modern-day, northern Syria.

**Objects:** Fragments of Byzantine amphorae with painted decoration, 5th-7th centuries CE.  
**Provenance:** Northern Syria.
**Picture 1:** Example of amphora use in the mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople / modern Istanbul (photo: https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/54/ac/af/54acaf83a1984e3adc4fde23880c024f.jpg).
Picture 2: Picture of amphorae from various sites in the eastern part of the Byzantine empire (after Pieri 2005, fig. 2).
Dress and jewellery in the Byzantine period were very diverse and had many different functions and meanings. The imperial class, for example, set itself apart by wearing a crown, and jewelled red shoes called *tzangia* (picture 2). They are often depicted wearing either the *loros*, a ceremonial garment that was in reality only worn on a few special occasions, or the *chlamys*, a cape-like garment evolved from Roman military dress, fastened with a specific, imperial type of fibula.

Other members of court wore simpler shoes and a *chlamys* with a much less conspicuous fibula. Similarly easy to recognise in images are the poor, who were stereotypically represented as wearing short tunics, occasionally with leggings and simple shoes, while their actual dress was probably more diverse (picture 1).

At the same time, fashion flourished in the border regions of the empire, where elite figures living close to trade routes incorporated all kinds of foreign influences into their dress, regardless of ethnic or religious meaning. Eastern turbans and kaftans and western long-sleeved dresses slowly spread from these borderlands towards the capital (picture 1 left).

Apart from being fashionable or class-dependent, dress and jewellery were also thought to hold special powers. Both pagan and Christian symbols, embroidered on garments, were supposed to bring prosperity and ward off the effects of the evil eye, and prayers for protection were frequently engraved on pendants or kept in medallions.

**Object:** Replica of leather shoe, ca. 340-360 CE (made by Olaf Goubitz, ROB).

**Provenance:** From excavations at Cuyk, The Netherlands (courtesy of C. van Driel-Murray).
Picture 1: Fashion drawings showing imperial dress, other court dress, borderland fashion and the stereotype of the poor
(© Floriske Meindertsma).
Picture 2: Mosaic with Justinian wearing the crown, chlamys and tzangia, accompanied by soldiers, members of court, and clerics, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy
(source: commons.wikimedia.org).
This mud-brick has come a long way. Initially found in Tell Deir Alla (an important Bronze Age site in modern day northern Jordan), it currently rests in the Leiden archaeological depot for further study. Leiden University has been heavily involved in Tell Deir Alla, since Henk Franken started an excavation project there in the 1960’s (picture 2).

Tell Deir Alla was occupied from the Bronze Age onwards and would later be incorporated in the Roman Empire, belonging to the province of Arabia Petraea. While neighboring provinces, such as Syria and Egypt, were prosperous at the time, this was not the case for Arabia Petraea. However, being a frontier region, it was an important location for conflicts. For example, a major conflict was the war between the Byzantines and the Sassanid Persians, which started in the 3rd century CE.

In order to keep the borders safe, the regions to the east of Deir Alla were home to great fortifications (picture 1). These buildings were part of the Limes Arabicus, or Arabian border, during Byzantine times. Here, the Byzantine garrisons kept a steady watch over the desert to protect their people against invasions.

The great fortifications make the region an archaeological gold mine. Many of them in the vicinity of Tell Deir Alla have a long history: they were not only used by the Byzantines but by subsequent powers as well. Thanks to the local conditions, these fortifications are still standing today, continuing their long watch over the desert.

**Object:** Mudbrick, unknown date.

**Provenance:** Tell Deir Alla, northern Jordan.
Qasr Azraq, one of the fortresses on the Limes Arabicus. As ‘azraq’ means blue in Arabic, it presumably was named after the local oasis, the only water source within a wide radius.

Picture 1: Qasr Azraq, one of the fortresses on the Limes Arabicus. As ‘azraq’ means blue in Arabic, it presumably was named after the local oasis, the only water source within a wide radius.

Tell Deir Alla, the mudbrick’s original home, excavations in the 1960’s
(source: www.rmo.nl).

Picture 2: Tell Deir Alla, the mudbrick’s original home, excavations in the 1960’s
(source: www.rmo.nl).
Menas Ampullae: The Carrying of Faith

Menas *ampullae* are small ceramic flasks with a depiction of Saint Menas (picture 1). Saint Menas was, in fact, a Roman soldier, who lived under the reign of Emperor Diocletianus (r. 284-305), and was executed for propagating Christianity (picture 2).

In most depictions of Saint Menas, he is dressed in military uniform, holding up his hands in prayer. At his feet are two camels, referring to the story of how, after his death, the camel carrying Menas’ body through the desert stopped, and refused to move further. The final resting place of Saint Menas, at Abu Mina in Egypt, became a popular pilgrimage site.

*Ampullae* contained oil, water or sand, which were blessed by contact with the remains of Saint Menas. His corpse was placed in a reliquary, which had a small hole in the lid, through which oil was poured. Flowing over his remains, the oil became blessed. This sacred oil trickled out of the reliquary into a small container on the side, which in turn was used to fill the *ampullae*. Small flasks containing the consecrated contents were taken home by pilgrims, to be used in times of illness, despair, celebrations or other occasions (picture 1).

Menas *ampullae* have been found in archaeological contexts throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East, and have even been recovered at sites much further away (e.g. in England and Uzbekistan).

**Object:** Two replicas of ceramic Menas *ampullae*, 3rd-7th centuries CE (courtesy of K. Innemée); Modern pilgrim’s flask from Lourdes.

**Provenance:** Egypt; France.
Picture 1: Ceramic Menas ampullae from Egypt
(source: www.RMO.nl).
Picture 2: Depiction of St. Menas (l) with Jesus Christ (r) 
(source: www.larousse.fr).
Mysteries of the Byzantine Marble Trade

Constantinople has been described as ‘a city of marble’, due to its abundance of marble architectural elements. But how were the marble columns, mosaics and sculptures transported to Constantinople?

The ‘Marzamemi II church-wreck’ was excavated in 2013, yielding valuable information on the Byzantine marble trade. This merchant ship sank in the waters of Sicily, with its original cargo of architectural elements, such as marble columns, capitals and bases (picture 1). The nickname of the wreck refers to the elements being destined for an Early Byzantine church (picture 2). The ship’s origin, route and destination could not be identified, but the cargo reveals that marble architectural elements were shipped as pre-fabricated parts, to be assembled on location.

Proconnesus Island, located east of the Sea of Marmara, became famous in Byzantine times, for the trade in Proconnesian marble to areas as far away as Europe and the Middle East. The islanders profited greatly from the beautiful blue-white marble, and the island became a focus of luxury, where Emperor Justinian I built his palace. A change in the elite’s building program during the 7th Century meant misfortune for merchants. Renovating existing buildings was now favoured above building new ones, leading to the end of the Proconnesian marble trade.

On the ship were two different types of marble: Proconnesian and Thessalian. It is suggested that the ship of the Marzamemi II church-wreck made stops in the northern Aegean and along the Sea of Marmara. The marble jar shown here originates from the Aegean and could have been traded in a highly-organized system, comparable to the marble trade system in Byzantine times.

**Objects:** Replica of marble column; marble jar, date unknown (probably Bronze Age period).
**Provenance:** Cyclades, Aegean.
Picture 1: A 3D-scan of the marble cargo of the ‘Marzamemi II church-wreck’
(source: Leidwanger 2015).

Picture 2: Marble columns in the basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe, 6th century
(source: www.unesco.org).
Animals are represented in Byzantium in various ways: from depictions in art and architecture (picture 1) to their remains left behind within a context. The artefacts displayed here represent the animals which were most prominent in Byzantine daily life as well as their function in society.

The Yenikapi Harbour excavation in Istanbul, previously known as Constantinople, gives zoo-archaeologists a detailed insight into the function of animals within the city. During this excavation, cattle bones were found, on which butchery marks were present. This could be an indication for the trading of meat and/or its use as a consumption animal.

As can be seen in the mosaic (picture 1), secondary products such as milk and wool from sheep also played an important role, since most Byzantine settlements subsisted on a dairy economy. Picture 2 shows the use of animals for their strength within an agricultural context, which also attributed greatly to Byzantine diet.

**Objects:** Humeri from cattle and sheep/goat. Contemporary bones from their past counterparts. On loan from the zooarchaeological laboratory at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden (courtesy of T. van Kolfschoten).
Picture 1: A mosaic depicting the process of the milking of a goat, as found in the Byzantine Imperial Palace
(Photo by J. Powell, Rome).
Picture 2: A mosaic depicting rural daily life, with draught cattle and agricultural practices, as found in Uthina 
(after Gauckler 1896, 230).
Mosaics as Byzantine Carpets and Wall Paintings

A mosaic consists of individual, small, cut cubes of stone, terracotta, marble, semi-precious stones or glass, which the Byzantines called *tesserae*. These cubes were fixed on mortar and arranged to create patterns, images and written text (in the case of the Byzantine Empire, often in Greek words).

Mosaics were placed on walls, ceilings, vaults and floors in a variety of domestic, religious and civic buildings; and they were thus part of the architecture of a building (*picture 1*). Their decorative function sets them apart from other architectural materials, because Byzantine mosaics often contain symmetrical and detailed imagery in bright, contrasting colours with outlined figures.

Mosaics can be studied in a number of ways: one can look at the materiality and reconstruct the production sequence; one can try and date it through various methods; and one can look at the iconography in order to understand the underlying meanings (although these can be numerous simultaneously and often differ per person or place in the building) apart from the already mentioned architectural and decorative function of the mosaic.

One such underlying meaning is that of power: to reinforce and show the power of the Byzantine Emperor and Empress in a propagandistic way (*picture 2*); to show the wealth and power of the patron, who could afford such an expensive mosaic; and to attract Christian, magical, demonic, pagan, or superstitious (or a combination of these) supernatural forces for the benefit or good fortune for those walking over the mosaic or in the building that housed them.

**Objects:** Piece of mosaic; parts of mortar (courtesy of M. Driessen).
**Provenance:** Udruh, Jordan.
Picture 1: 6th-Century mosaic of St. Apollinare, Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy (after Bayet 2014, 54).
Picture 2: 6th-Century mosaic of Empress Theodora along with her court, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy
Solid Currency in the Dark Ages - The Dollar of the Middle Ages

The golden solidus was first introduced by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century CE to stabilize the Roman monetary system after continuous devaluation by his predecessors resulted in hyperinflation (picture 1). The solidus would become the principal currency of Late Antiquity as well as during the Early Medieval period due to its stability. Its wide use during the Middle Ages is evidenced by its abundance within the numismatic archaeological record within and outside the borders of the Byzantine Empire.

Due to its stability and widespread use, the solidus has often been described as ‘the dollar of the Middle Ages’. Many of the upcoming kingdoms in Western Europe went as far as copying the solidus due to the amount of trust that was placed in this golden coin. It is no coincidence that the word ‘solid’ derives from the solidus as it was indeed the most solid currency of its time.

The solidus consisted of 95.8% gold and was as pure as refinement techniques permitted at that time. The coins were made at mints that were situated in important regional cities of the Byzantine Empire, which allowed the emperor to tightly control the quality of the coinage. The solidus would maintain its weight, purity, and size until as late as the 11th century CE.

**Objects:** 3 replicas in plaster cast, paper and tin-foil of a tremissis, ca. 600.
**Provenance:** Minted in Lombard Italy (courtesy of A. Pol).

Picture 2: Aureus depicting Augustus Caesar: The aureus was the primary golden currency within the Roman empire until Emperor Constantine I replaced this coin with the solidus due to the former’s fiscal instability.
Late Antique Dining in the Spotlight

Little is known about the role played by lighting in the design and use of Late Antique aristocratic houses. However, lighting was a crucial element in every room, as it shaped atmosphere and complemented room decorations. Digital ray-tracing programmes have advanced considerably in recent years, which provides more opportunities to research the role of lighting in Late Antiquity.

Candles and terracotta lamps, such as the two objects on display, were the preferred choice of artificial light and were favoured from Imperial times onwards. However, in Late Antiquity, aristocrats developed a preference for bronze and glass lamps to light their rooms. Whereas bronze lamps were more durable, glass ones were less heavy and could thus be used in complex lamp holders (picture 1).

A triclinium, or dining room, required artificial lighting, because the dining room was usually used in the evening hours. The House of the Bronzes, in modern western Turkey, serves as an example. Here, a six-lamped circular candelabra, also known as polykandelon, was suspended above the dining table (picture 1). As such, a spotlight effect was created, which is unlike the blanket lighting our modern lamps produce, which aim to illuminate the entire room. Meals were thus, literally, highlighted and eaten in a low-light intimate ambience. This would have set the mood to relax, converse, or even spark some intimate action.

Objects: Two earthenware oil lamps, as used in Late Antique houses.
Provenance: Galilee, Israel; Ta’as, the Tabqa Dam Region, northern Syria.
Picture 1: A bronze twelve-lamped circular candelabra, or *polykandelon*, dating to the 6th century
(source: www.byzzantinemuseum.gr).
Picture 2: Reconstructing of a triclinium (dining hall) with lightning
(source: www.unesco.org).
Interested? Recommended for further reading:

* **FASHION, MAGIC & STEREOTYPES IN DRESS AND JEWELLERY:**


* **MOSAICS AS BYZANTINE CARPETS AND WALL PAINTINGS:**


* **CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CONSUMPTION:**


* **SOLID CURRENCY IN THE DARK AGES – THE DOLLAR OF THE MIDDLE AGES:**


* **MYSTERIES OF BYZANTINE MARBLE TRADE:**

* **MENAS AMPULLAE AS BYZANTINE PILGRIM SOUVENIRS:**


* **BYZANTINE AMPHORAE FROM WEST (ITALY) AND EAST (SYRIA):**


* **ANCIENT DINING ROOMS: TRICLINIUM AND STIBADIUM**


* **LATE ANTIQUE DINING IN THE SPOTLIGHT:**


* **A BRICK THAT StANDS THE TEST OF TIME:**


Photo made by Audrey Aijpassa.
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The exhibition displays were made by:

Ancient Dining Rooms: *Triclinium* and *Stibadium*
Marion Guy

Byzantine Amphorae from West (Italy) and East (Syria)
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Map made by Mike Kneppers

*Mosaic image on front cover made by Ruben van Dijk.*