



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Description of the Oegstgeest bowl



Figure 1: The bowl viewed from above. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.



Figure 2: The bowl viewed from below. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.

The bowl is 21 centimetres in diameter and 11 centimetres high (Ill. 2 and 3). The inside of the bowl is decorated with a number of motifs, all finished in gold leaf. The decorations are divided into three vertical zones, separated from one another by a gilded plant or tree, which is crowned by a rosette with a flower motif or sun symbol. The vertical zones are further divided into two horizontal zones by a narrow band of gold leaf running around the bowl at half-height. In the lower horizontal zone, the large plants or trees are divided from one another by a small plant or tree on a band. In each zone, the upper frieze is decorated with a scene representing animals running towards the left. The animals are partially engraved with pointillé decoration, and filled with gold leaf. They appear to be running on the gilded band in the middle of the bowl. The first frieze probably represents three deer and the second frieze two bucks head to head. A dog also appears on this frieze. The third frieze contains two mythical animals. The animal on the left seems to have a human leg in its mouth and is running away with its long tail between its legs. Only a fragment of the third animal has been preserved. In view of the long thin tail matching that of the dog on the image on the second frieze, this was most probably also a dog. The bowl was dented at some point in the past, but it is unclear when this happened.



Figure 3: The gold ornamental plate in the bowl. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.

The gold decorative disc in the middle of the bowl (Ill. 4) is divided into four sections originating from the central oval gold-encased garnet, and each of these sections is demarcated by further rows of gold-encased garnets. Each section contains a gold-encased garnet pointing towards the middle, and a few small ornaments of knotted gold wire. The edge of the disc is decorated with a frieze with gilded ornaments. The disc itself shows multiple traces of use: it is slightly deformed, which probably happened at the same time as the indentation of the bowl. In addition, sharp imprints are visible which have partially pierced the gold. Scratches are also visible on the surface. In one place, a small hole was drilled in the base which pierces through both the base of the bowl and the gold disc. The fact that the raised burr, resulting from the drilling, is on the inside of the bowl indicates that the hole was drilled from the outside. The decorative disc is attached to the base by four gold rivets.



Figure 4: First mount on the outside of the bowl. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.



Figure 5: Second mount on the outside of the bowl. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.

The outside of the bowl features two mounts with a raised ridge, which also form an eye at the top for the suspension rings used to hang up the bowl (Ill. 5 and 6). Both mounts are made of cast silver and have a fairly high raised ridge. Both sides of the mounts are decorated with a stylised animal motif which already appeared in the wax model before casting.



Figure 6: Detail of the silver ridge on the mounts. Photography: Restaura, Haelen.

The silver ridge of the mounts is gilded (Ill. 7). This is also true of the underside of the mounts, where two faces appear. The silver mounts are also decorated with thin plates of gold. These gold plates are further decorated with encasings containing garnets. Around the garnets are small ornaments of gold filigree thread. The gold plates are attached to the silver base plate with three rivets. The rivets are made of gilded silver. The rings are indented, and a golden plate with filigree thread has been fitted in one of them. This golden plate is fixed with three rivets. Although the two mounts show striking differences, their manufacture and the way the components are secured to the bowl are the same. This suggests that the mounts were fitted to the bowl at the same time. Both mounts show signs of wear and tear, with the gilding on the protruding elements such as the edges and the top of the ridge having been worn away.

Striking elements

This bowl is a composite object. The bowl itself is presumably an antique artefact, possibly dating back to the Late Roman Empire (300-500 AD). The iconography of the images in the bowl itself seems to indicate an Eastern origin, in particular the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. At a later stage the central disc was secured to the base of the bowl. The disc itself may originally have been part of a cloak pin, although it may also have been manufactured especially for this bowl. Form and decoration point to the German Rhineland, and to the first half of the seventh century (600-650 AD). What is remarkable is the cross-shaped layout of the garnets on the central disc; was it intended to cover up an older, profane representation on the base of the bowl? In that case, the cruciform disc could be seen as a symbolic victory of Christianity over the older gods. The mounts with the suspension rings are also later additions to the bowl and equally point to the Rhineland as a stylistic source of inspiration. With these diverse features, the bowl symbolises the culture of exchange that typified the Late Roman period and the early Middle Ages, where objects and ideas travelled great distances.

Despite the bowl being divided into three equal sections, it most probably only ever had two mounts with rings. No indications of any third mount were found before or after the bowl's restoration. Just to be on the safe side, after the restoration was completed, x-ray images were made of the three sections where the mounts would be likely to appear. No holes were found for fixing rivets at the location of the presumed third mount. Despite the fact that some parts of the bowl are missing in this area, the fixtures for a third mount should nevertheless have been visible, especially if we compare the position of the rivets used to secure the other two mounts. This artefact is therefore apparently not an example of a so-called *hanging bowl*, as known from English and Scandinavian Early Medieval contexts. The two suspension rings would be very useful if the bowl were to be suspended; when hanging, the richly decorated inside of the bowl would have been clearly visible. Another possibility is that the bowl was not yet completed at the time of the deposition and that it was still intended to be equipped with a third mount with a suspension eye and ring. In that case, the bowl is not only a composite object, but also an object in the process of manufacture.

Finally, a few remarkable traces of damage should be mentioned. We already noted that the bowl is indented. This indentation might have been caused by the pressure of the soil on the bowl. This pressure also resulted in the bowl breaking into many pieces. The indentation caused the central disc to become misshapen. The previously mentioned sharp imprints and scratches on the central disc may have been caused by the use of a knife while eating, although these kinds of bowls have in the past primarily been associated with drinking bouts. The bowl may however also have been used in rituals, such as hand washing. The most striking sign of damage is however the small hole that was made in the bottom of the bowl from outside. This caused the bowl to leak, and can therefore presumably be seen as a conscious attempt to make the bowl unusable as a drinking vessel.