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# ALTE VITRIE

L'ARTE DEL VETRO E DINTORNI



his edition of **"Alte Vitrie"** is dedicated to the world of ancient and medieval archaeology, with a couple of contributions that describe precious, rare and unique objects: a pot found in a tomb in Altino and fragments of a glass found in Piedmont from the late middle ages featuring decorations that preserve multicoloured traces. Finally, we

present the Museum of Aquileia about a year on from its reopening, now with an updated exhibition which includes a collection of glass items which is quite extraordinary in terms of both quantity and quality.

Editorial Staff



MARGHERITA TIRELLI

## THE BLUE POT FROM TOMB 628 IN ALTINO

**T**he tomb was discovered in 1969 in the cemetery on the Via Annia to the north of Altino. The pot, which was a vase containing cremated remains, in translucent dark blue blown and ground glass, is 20 centimetres tall and its precise typology is not easily defined. Indeed, the vase possesses a tall opening with a convex profile, an ovoidal body and a slightly concave base; the hemispherical lid boasts a pommel top. The pot and lid have the same engraved concentric line decoration, grouped together in bands of two or three. A theory has been put forward more than once that it may have been produced in Alessandria at the beginning of the 1st century AD.

The pot was recovered in fragments above sesquipedalian brickwork which constituted the base upon which it stood, and along the margins of which, subdivided into two groups, fifteen ugentaria in yellow, blue, purple and colourless glass had been arranged, the only elements of the grave goods still preserved. No trace was found of the cover which probably originally protected the burial site and which must have consisted of a sawn half amphora, according to a model which was frequently used in cemeteries in Altino.

Tomb 628 was laid within a vast funerary enclosure, whose front, overlooking the Via

Annia, measured 9 metres, as specified by the relevant inscription (pedes XXX). It was originally richly decorated by a pair of octagonal altars crowned by an acanthus ornament, as the recovery of an altar fragment and its crown near the western corner of the front of the enclosure suggests, according to a model which can be frequently found in Altino.



The blue pot and the grave glass goods of the Tomb 628 in Altino

The burial site, undoubtedly characterised by one of the most precious ossuary vase specimens found in Altino, seems to be isolated with respect to the others, of which there are around twenty, distributed within the area inside the enclosure, and whose grave goods reflect an average, standard of wealth. Furthermore, the fifteen ugentaria provide clear documentation of an important funeral ceremony with abundant spreading of oils and perfumes upon the closure of the tomb. These factors considered together clearly point to a high social class for the occupant of the tomb, and the fact that this extraordinary ossuary vase was reserved for it confirms that, as it is in itself an object of undoubted prestige. No objects were found among the personal grave goods

which might have given clues with regard to the sex of the tomb's occupant. Nevertheless, following studies carried out on exceptional documented and recorded materials (more than 130 ossuary vases have been unearthed at the cemetery), we can state that those who were cremated and deposited inside these glass vessels were almost exclusively the women and children of the municipal elite.



Ideal reconstructive hypothesis of an enclosure with cylindrical altars

## AN ENAMEL DECORATED GLASS

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The relic presented here comes from the "Santo Stefano" in Turin block, explored almost in its entirety in various excavations over a twenty-year period starting from 1982 within a wider context of the area's regeneration. After a long period of only sporadic occupation, in the late middle ages another period of stable occupancy began with the establishment of craft industries and subsequently the construction of medieval building complexes which are partially preserved on higher levels (the Broglia house). In particular, these glass fragments were unearthed from the inside of a shaft-like rectangular structure which may have once been a pantry or used for storing ice. The glass, recomposed from a number of fragments, is tall and slender, with a slightly truncated cone-shaped body, a wide outwardly curved edge. The base has a rounded, flawed rim, but one could imagine a circular base applied with a receding cone (Measurements: diameter of edge 8.5 cm, maximum preserved height 7.5 cm, thickness of edge 0.1 cm, thickness of sides 0.1 cm) (Fig. 1-2). The vessel is made from colourless blown glass with green highlights. It shows some processes of deterioration (opacification, dark and white film formation) which have only slightly affected the multicoloured enamel decoration framed between two bands positioned at the top and between two strips positioned at the bottom, yellow in colour, bordered by two thick red lines. In the band positioned under the edge there is an inscription of gothic characters which reads " : + [:] [A]VE . GRATIA . PLEN[A] "; the



Turin, enamel decorated glass, front (photograph Angelo Carlone, by permission of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities – Turin, Royal Museums – Museum of Antiquity)

underlying band includes the main decoration formed by a dark red circle with a white outline; at the centre of the circle is a white lamb whose ear, eye, nose and fleece are rendered with short red lines. The lamb is depicted with the typical iconography of the Agnus Dei, symbol of Christ, with the head turned towards the slender cross which it holds in its right hoof. The filling of the halo surrounding the head is green with a white outline; the white cross has lobed ends on the shorter arm and a thin section facing upwards at the visible extremity of the longer arm. The cross is used to represent the so-called flag of Christ, usually a red cross on a white background. The circle with Agnus Dei is positioned in correspondence with the first word AVE; unfortunately the glass has many defects on the back,

but in correspondence with the last word PLENA one can sense the presence of another circle, perhaps featuring a cruciferous lamb as well. Alongside the circle are plant motifs constituted by elongated trilobate leaves in a green colour outlined in red and proceeding in long stems. At the lowest point an extremely small portion (due to its flaws) of the yellow strip outlined in red has been preserved. This was intended to mark out the decoration towards the base of the vessel. The subject of the decoration and the technique utilised, the typical yellow strips with red outlines, the inscription and the associated decoration, allow the specimen from Turin to be attributed to the so-called Aldrevandin beakers. The production of such objects, known from isolated discoveries or museum collections, was traced back to the 13th century and located in one of the crusader states on the Syrian coast, albeit destined for the European market, and this is why they assumed the name of Siro – Franchi glasses. In more recent years, the idea that it was a category of materials produced in Venice between the end of the 13th and the middle of the 14th century has been commonly accepted. The title given to this typology of object derives from the name Aldrevandinus, written on a specimen which is preserved intact at the British Museum. As well as Aldrevandinus or Bartolomeus, other names written on glasses can also be found in Venetian archive documentation from the same period in which they are indicated with the status of painters on glass. The increase in the number of relics unearthed in archaeological excavations or recognised in museum deposits has revealed widespread diffusion both in the Mediterranean region and in central and northern Europe. This indicates that the Venetian glassmakers and traders played an active role in the reworking and exportation of stylistic and technological models originating from Muslim countries. The commercial agreements forged between Venice and the Knights of the Teutonic Order favoured trade with the eastern Mediterranean until the fall of Acre in 1291, when the Knights had to return to Venice, remaining there for around twenty years before moving permanently to Germany. In the same way, relations between Venice and the Hanseatic League allowed the subsequent diffusion of such products into central and northern Europe. The close relationship with producers from the east is also confirmed by the uniformity of the chemical composition highlighted by archeometric analysis carried out on the basic glass and on its enamels. However, this wide area of distribution, from Estonia to Palestine and from Russia to Ireland, allows one to hypothesise that these products remained items of luxury though they were not restricted to a small elite. On the contrary, they could also be traded at attractive prices for the middle classes. The figurative repertoire that can be observed on the glasses is rather varied and can be divided, despite a number of variants, into four categories: real or mythical animals; busts of figures of a religious connotation, engraved

within arches supported by columns and flanked by particularly large leaves and racemes (see above the variant of the Turin glass which, however, finds no immediate correspondence); heraldic coats of arms separated by similar plant motifs; figures relevant to court life. All these iconographic themes were well-known in Venice and elsewhere in the late Middle Ages and they inspired glass painters when they had to abandon Muslim models in order to aim specifically at the European market. The glass originates from an area close to the centres of religious and secular power in Medieval Turin: the cathedral, the bishop's palace and the castle of the Acaja (Palazzo Madama). However, it seems more likely that the disposal of products in use at the court occurred directly on the premises. The discarding of the painted glass may be connected with the noble Broglia family, owners of the nearby site of the Corona Grossa Hotel, or "Casa Broglia", since 1323. The glass therefore could have been purchased as a luxury product from Venetian traders; given the aforementioned characteristics, it can be chronologically placed between the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century. The specimen shown here assumes particular importance due to the rarity of evidence of such items not only in Piedmont but, at least as far as we know, in the entire north-west of Italy.



Turin, enamel decorated glass, back (photograph Angelo Carlone, by permission of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities – Turin, Royal Museums – Museum of Antiquity)

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# THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF AQUILEIA

The National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia was founded in 1882 in order to host an already considerable collection of archaeological findings from excavations carried out in Aquileia and the surrounding area. The collection has been constantly added to and enhanced right up to the present day. One of the best represented materials in the museum is glass, which accounts for more than 5000 objects covering a time period which runs from the 6th century BC up to the 16th century AD. The best represented era is that of the Roman Empire, with a wide range of tableware items and containers for ointments and aromatic or medicinal substances originating from various production areas. The early products from Aquileia's glassmaking workshops are distinctive due to the intensity of their colour, a characteristic of Roman glassware from the early first century AD, and due to the subtlety and brightness of the glass. Production from the latter stages of the Roman Empire, at a time when the town's expansion reached its peak, despite being more standardised in form and almost exclusively green coloured, is obviously is that which boasts the highest quantity in the collection.

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[www.museoarcheologicoaquileia.beniculturali.it](http://www.museoarcheologicoaquileia.beniculturali.it)



Rhyton configured to an animal protome, second half of the 1st century AD (photo by Marina Raccar, © Italian National Committee AIHV-MAN Aquileia)



Group of miniature containers, 1st century AD (photo by Marina Raccar, © Italian National Committee AIHV-MAN Aquileia).

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support of  
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Cover:  
The blue pot in  
the Tomb 628  
from Altino