

THE BRAZIER

Jean-Baptiste Humbert – I was roaming around northern Jordan, and I discovered an incredible site. There was an outer wall built with huge stones - five or six tonnes, a cyclopean wall, the sort you dream of. The shards strewn around it dated back to the Iron Age. OK, so it was a beautiful Iron Age fortress. I said fine, that's for me. But archaeology is a stream of surprises: this Iron Age fortress, as revealed by the subsequent dig, had actually been dismantled by the Romans, been converted into a Byzantine monastery which had later been turned in an Omeyyade palace - the first Muslim dynasty that ruled Syria.

So I started digging out the first level, the Omeyyade palace that nobody knew. Then, almost in the midst of the garbage dump, there was a large, rusty, iron plate. I thought, ok, this an old English container, nothing remarkable. But I was wary, and said let's take a look. Since the plate was very breakable, I covered it with resin and thought I'd open it in the late afternoon. But the maneuvers around the plate had aroused the neighbours' interest, so there were twenty-five people waiting for the lifting of the plate. They were sure that under the plate was a hoard of Turkish gold. But when I removed the plate, I discovered a trove of small bronze objects. There were figurines, gryphons with large, beautifully designed wings - they stood on wheels, which raised some intriguing questions; there were ivory objects, there were animal-shaped cake moulds, there was an elephant and a billy goat, both hinged. They were like new. All from the 8th century AD... So, there was all this stuff, and by then it was dark... No way to put off until the next day. So we're digging at night, by a car's headlights. And the rumour spread among the onlookers, there were almost a hundred of them by 11 o'clock, and they're all whispering "It's gold...". I answered "No, it's not gold..." - "Yes, it's gold!" - "It's not gold, gold doesn't form oxides, look, this is highly oxidised." And here comes the physics-and-chemistry teacher, and he takes a look and says "It's gold!" So we're in a fix, there's a commotion that's getting dangerous. On the following day a messenger comes to see us, and says, "The prefect wants to visit and see the thing." So we set the large brazier on the table; luckily, it has a Dyonisiac decoration, a Greek heritage, and it's quite erotic. So here comes the prefect with his aides, his car, suit and tie and all; so I greet him and he bends down and goes "Oooh...", and prudely retires.

So this brazier, very surprisingly, can be taken apart. It is obviously an object from a nomadic world. People traveling from the Hejaz to Damascus required their princely furniture, and the brazier was a moveable item, likely for a bedroom, with embers lasting all night and so on. So it could be taken apart, the handles were the dancers, they were set up in the brazier corners, rods were assembled and inserted in the gryphons' feet in order to maintain the entire piece. And the gryphons themselves held the wheels. The main plate, which survived,

displays six figures under arcades, the setting is a grenade - so it's a love-apple - and the subject is indeed rather licentious. Oh, it's not that overwhelming, it's probably largely inspired by Greek culture. The surprising fact is that we know of no other example. So far, it's one of a kind! I must admit that in my entire career, it's the most beautiful piece I ever offered to Science...

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