ARRC – Acculturation, Romanisation, Roman Culture: Processes of Integration Across the Roman Empire

Edited by László Borhy, Kata Dévai, Linda Dobosi, and Csilla Sáró

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Edited by
László Borhy – Kata Dévai – Linda Dobosi – Csilla Sáró

Budapest, 2026

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ANNI BONI in Stobi

Gold glass in funerary context

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Abstract: Rescue excavations conducted in 1992 and 1995 at the West Cemetery of Stobi, in advance of highway construction, resulted in the excavation of approximately 2,000 graves. Among the discoveries from the 1995 campaign, Grave 1810 yielded an exceptionally rare find for the cemetery: a fragmented base of a Late Antique gold glass vessel bearing the inscription *ANNI BONI* encircled by a wreath. The inscription, commonly translated as 'good years' or 'prosperous years', appears most frequently on gold glass vessels, although it also occurs on other media such as medallions, plaques, and coins, where it conveys wishes for stability and prosperity.
Despite the prevailing interpretation that such vessels functioned as votive or decorative objects intended for display in domestic or religious settings, securely documented examples from domestic contexts remain notably absent from the archaeological record. Instead, most specimens with known provenance originate from funerary contexts. The discovery of the Stobi fragment within a closed deposit is therefore of particular importance, given that most gold glass vessels preserved in museum collections or private holdings lack reliable archaeological documentation. This paper presents a typological classification of the vessel and contextualises it within its original funerary setting, contributing to the broader discussion of the function and use of gold glass in Late Antique burial practices.

Keywords: Gold glass, funerary context, *ANNI BONI*, Stobi

Stobi is a city in the Roman province of Macedonia, located at the confluence of two large rivers, the Axios and the Erigon (Fig. 1). It began as a small Hellenistic town, mentioned in the 2nd century BC by Livy as the "old town of Stobi",[1] and developed into an important administrative and trade centre during the Roman Imperial period; the grant of *municipium* status during the reign of Augustus promoted its growth.[2] The city underwent two major building phases, one at the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD, and another in the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century AD, when it became the capital of the province of Macedonia Secunda (Fig. 2).[3] Throughout its existence, it was a vibrant city with continuity of urban life for at least one millennium, from the 3rd century BC to the beginning of the 7th century AD.[4]

1 Liv. *Ab urbe cond.*, 39.53.15–16.

2 See Papazoglou 1986, 231; Wiseman 1994. The title *municipium* is mentioned for the first time in the coinage of Vespasian in AD 72–73, see Josifovski 2001; Josifovski 2010.

3 Blaževska 2021, 192, including two additional important periods of the city: the Augustan period, when the city was expanded, and the turn of the 4th century AD, when Stobi underwent gradual transformation into a Late Antique city. See also Wiseman 1986.

4 On the urban transformation of Stobi, see Blaževska 2021. On the end of the city at the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th century AD, see also Wiseman 2007; Pavlovski – Blaževska 2018, 55–67; Nikolovski 2018, 321, 325; Radnjanski 2018; Blaževska – Nikolovski 2022.

✉ Corresponding author

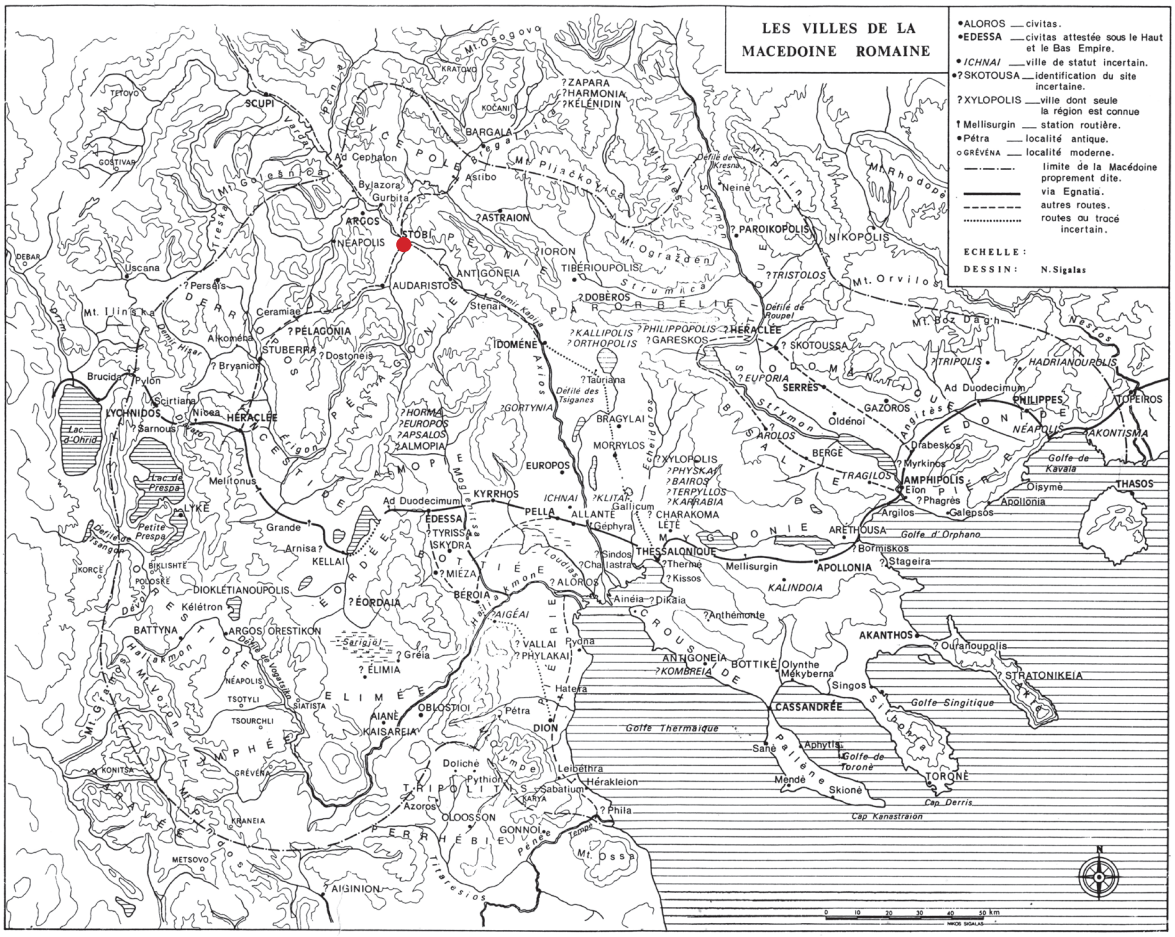


Fig. 1. Map of Roman cities in Macedonia, with Stobi in the north (after Papazoglou 1988).

The West Cemetery of Stobi is the principal burial ground of the Stobaeans identified to date (Fig. 3).[5] It was in use from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD.[6] It extends from the Porta Heraclea towards the south-west. Excavations have been carried out there in several campaigns since the First World War.[7] In 1992 and 1995, extensive rescue excavations were conducted at the cemetery in preparation for the construction of a new highway. Close to 2,000 graves were excavated



Fig. 2. Stobi, aerial view of the excavation area in 2009, with the West Cemetery in the lower part of the photo (Archive of NI Stobi).

5 Another burial ground stretches along the outer side of the north-western fortification wall. It likely belongs to the later building phase and was established perhaps after the West Cemetery had been abandoned.

6 For the internal chronology of the West Cemetery, see Wesolowsky 1973, 103–104. For grave furnishings in the funerary practice followed in the West Cemetery, see Anderson-Stojanović 2018.

7 The first excavation in the West Cemetery of Stobi was carried out in 1918, when graves were discovered around the Cemetery Basilica; see Dragendorff 1919. For more details about the history of excavations of the West Cemetery of Stobi and publications of the findings, see Nikolovski 2020, 370, notes 4–5 and Blaževska 2024, 587, notes 1–4.

in total during the two campaigns. One of the burials uncovered during the 1995 campaign is particularly noteworthy because of a find unparalleled in cemeteries of this period throughout the province of Macedonia.

Before proceeding to the description of the burial and providing information on the context of the find, it should be noted that the various stages of its excavation were not documented, and the available data are limited to a series of photographs kindly provided by colleagues from the National Conservation Center in Skopje, and a brief report by the archaeologist who excavated it indicating the provenance of the find.[8]

Grave 1810 was constructed of rectangular, chiselled sandstone slabs carefully fitted together to form a rectangular cist of unknown depth, approximately 1.4 m wide and 2.2 m long, oriented north-east to south-west (Fig. 4).[9] The space between the slabs was filled with mortar. The grave was covered by three large, irregular stone slabs; all were fragmented, and about half of one was missing when discovered. Once in place, the covering slabs were sealed with mortar to one another and to the walls of the cist.



Fig. 3. West cemetery of Stobi, 2009 (Archive of NI Stobi).

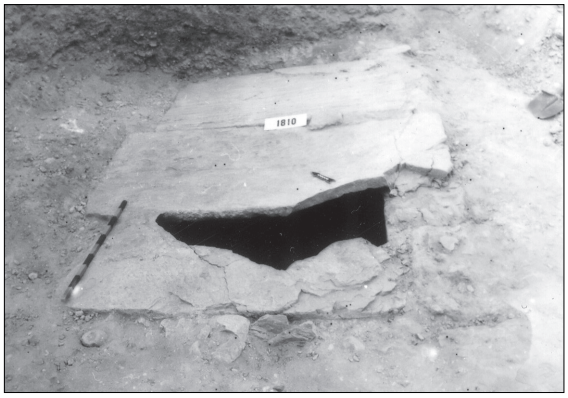


Fig. 4. Grave 1810 before the opening of the cist. Excavation photograph, 1995 (Archive of the National Conservation Center, Skopje).



Fig. 5. Grave 1810 after the removal of the cover slabs, with planks inside. Excavation photo, 1995 (Archive of the National Conservation Center, Skopje).



Fig. 6. Grave 1810 after excavation, with the skeletal remains of the deceased *in situ*. Excavation photograph, 1995 (Archive of the National Conservation Center, Skopje).

8 Dimitrovska 2020, 92–93. I thank my colleague Marina Dimitrovska from the National Conservation Center in Skopje for providing me with the excavation photos of the grave.

9 Dimitrovska 2020, 93.

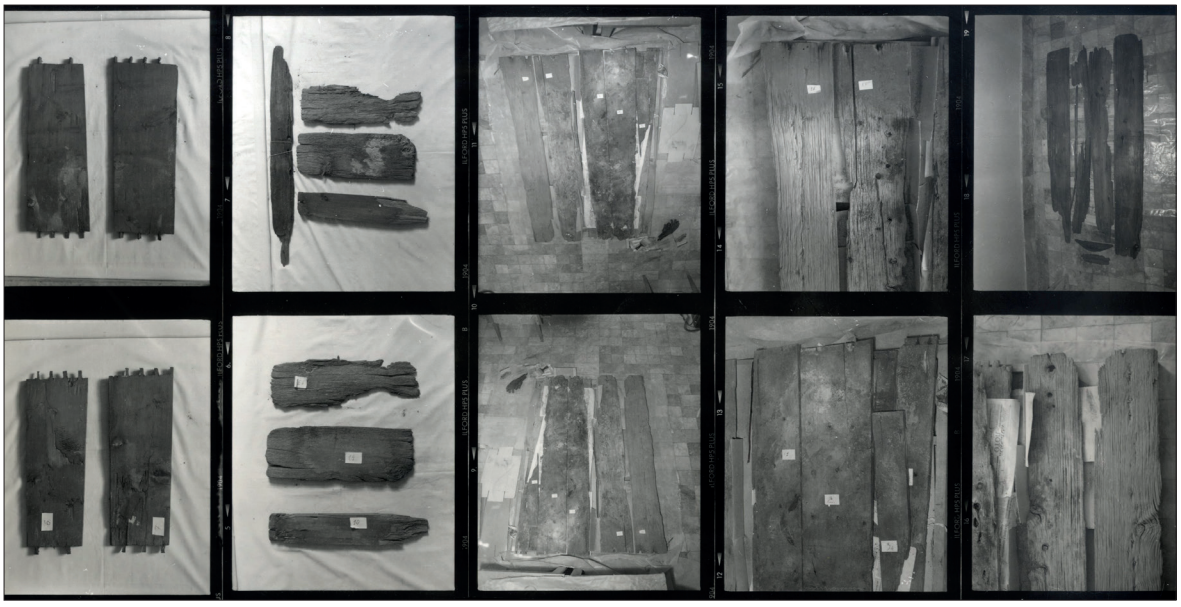


Fig. 7. Remains of the wooden coffin (Archive of National Conservation Center, Skopje).

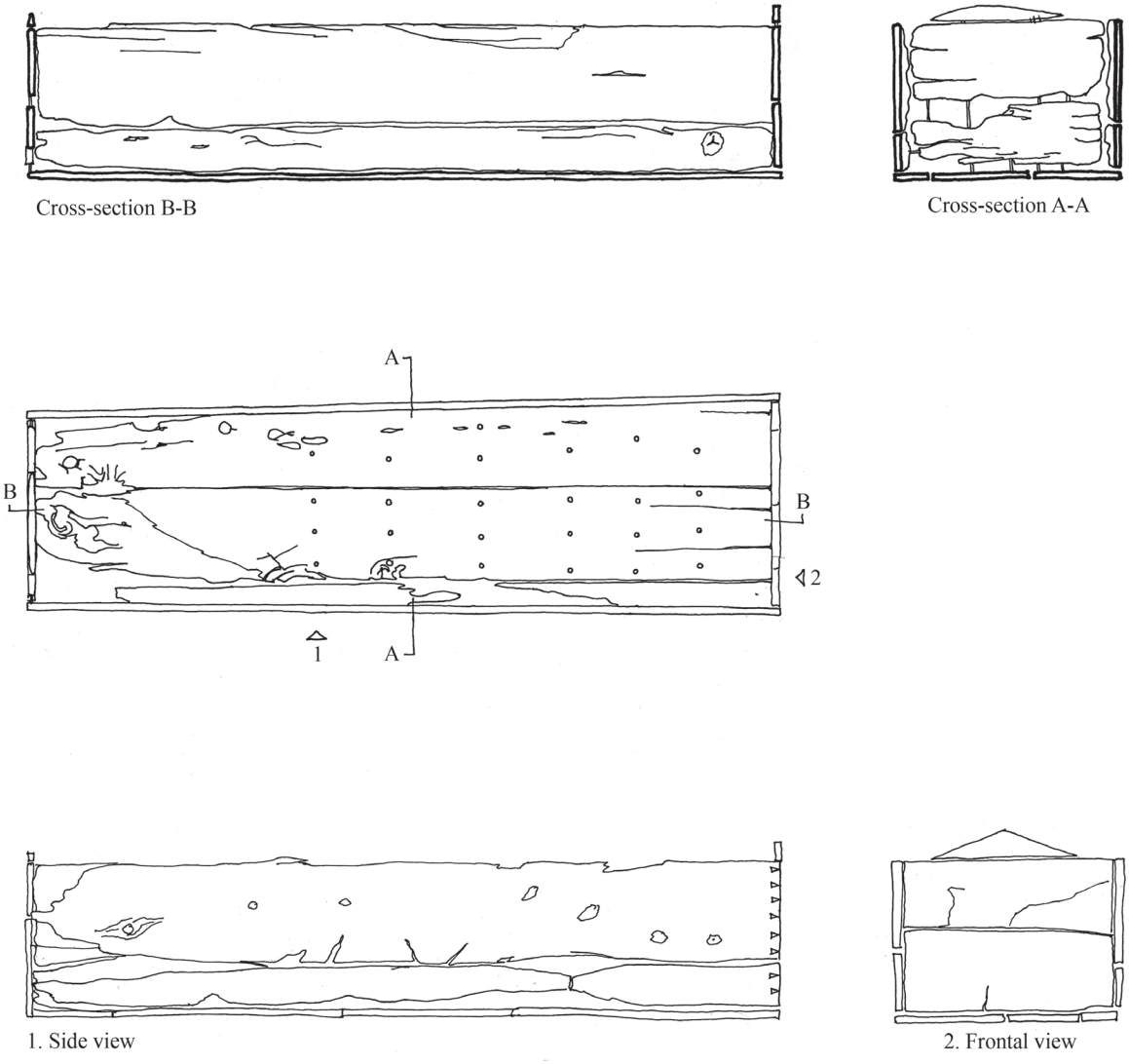


Fig. 8. Reconstruction drawing of the coffin (Archive of the National Conservation Center, Skopje).

A wooden coffin with a design resembling arched tile graves was placed within the cist (Fig. 5).[10] According to the field report, the planks were supposedly made of pine.[11] Wood does not always preserve well at Stobi, which makes this find unique in the West Cemetery.[12] A single skeleton in a supine position was found beneath the planks on the marble floor. Anthropological analysis determined that the deceased was a 40–45-year-old male (Fig. 6).[13] Beneath the skull, a compact pile of wood shavings, probably once wrapped in cloth, was discovered; it was interpreted as a makeshift pillow supporting the head of the deceased.

The coffin was constructed from fifteen wooden planks, with several dovetail joints preserved at the ends of the long boards and end boards (Fig. 7).[14] A few wooden coffins with such joinery have been discovered in the necropolis of Marina El-Alamein in Egypt (Fig. 8).[15] Two of the long boards at the bottom feature six vertical rows of four holes each, most probably for smaller planks that connected them. One end of each plank is dovetail-shaped for joining it to the end boards. Most of the wood was preserved, allowing an ideal reconstruction of the coffin (Fig. 9).[16]

Unfortunately, during documentation, more attention was given to the wooden coffin than to the exact positions of the grave finds and the osteological remains. The grave also included a few other organic finds: some cotton cloth, some woven wool, and worked leather, for which no photographic documentation is available, and the finds themselves have not survived. It is

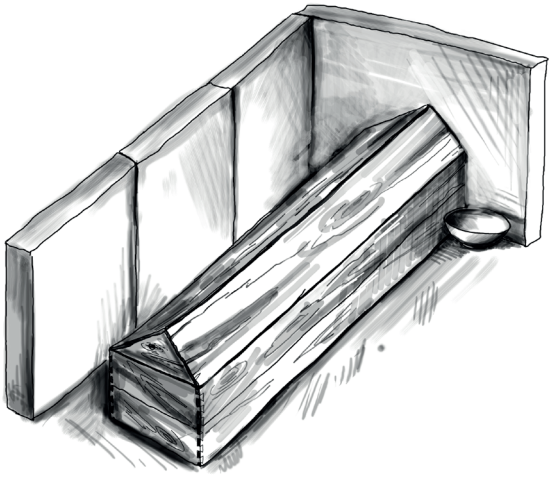


Fig. 9. Reconstruction drawing of Grave 1810 in the West cemetery of Stobi (by Tome Filov).



Fig. 10. Bone die from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).



Fig. 11. Bone *pyxides* and a bone lid from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).

10 On arched tile graves in the West Cemetery of Stobi, see Anderson-Stojanović 2018, 58, 60. Graves of this type have also been identified within the city walls, above the Building with Arches, and are dated after the last quarter of the 4th century and the early 5th century AD; see Shurbanoska – Jakimovski 2010, 97.

11 A hypothesis since the planks have not been analysed.

12 The mortar used for sealing the grave and its solid walls and bottom contributed greatly to the preservation of the wooden coffin.

13 The analysis was carried out by Fanica Veljanovska. I thank Nikola Hadzi-Nikolov, documentation officer at the Archaeological Museum of North Macedonia, for sharing the results of the morphological analysis.

14 Zych 2003, 73–78 mentions three different joinery techniques used in coffins of the period.

15 Zych 2003, 77, Fig. 4.b.

16 The reconstruction of the coffin and the technical documentation were prepared by Tome Filov from NI Stobi.

therefore difficult to discuss how these materials were used, whether they formed part of clothing, bags, or something else.[17] The grave also contained a bone die (Fig. 10), a very common find in the West Cemetery of Stobi; two bone *pyxides*, one with its circular lid (Fig. 11); a single Middle Roman colour-slipped bowl (Fig. 12); and a few glass tokens (Fig. 13) that may have functioned as inlays for furniture or, more likely, as gaming pieces, especially in light of the die. The bottom of the grave had been paved with local pink marble breccia, on top of which the wooden coffin and most of the grave offerings were placed.



Fig. 12. Middle Roman colour-slipped bowl from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).



Fig. 13. Glass tokens from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).

The focus of this paper is a gold sandwich-glass vessel. It was discovered in numerous fragments but was skillfully reassembled by a glass conservator at Stobi (Figs 14–15).[18] Fragments from the lower and upper parts of this vessel were inventoried as belonging to two different vessels and were refitted only during conservation. The bottle was made of transparent, slightly greenish, almost colourless glass; its rim broke off. The long cylindrical neck gradually widens before narrowing at the junction with the squat spherical body. The upper horizontal part of the shoulder is decorated with two concentric incisions, each about one millimetre wide and spaced several millimetres apart.[19] The vertical part of the belly is embellished with a horizontal band of roughly evenly spaced indentations, seven of which are at least partially preserved, while one is completely missing. Their width varies between 2.3 and 2.5 cm, while their height is around 2.1 cm. They were made while the vessel was still attached to the blowpipe, most probably by pressing the surface with a round object, perhaps jacks. The indentations correspond closely to the grasp of a human hand (Fig. 16), suggesting that they may have been designed as convenient grips in addition to serving a decorative, aesthetic purpose.

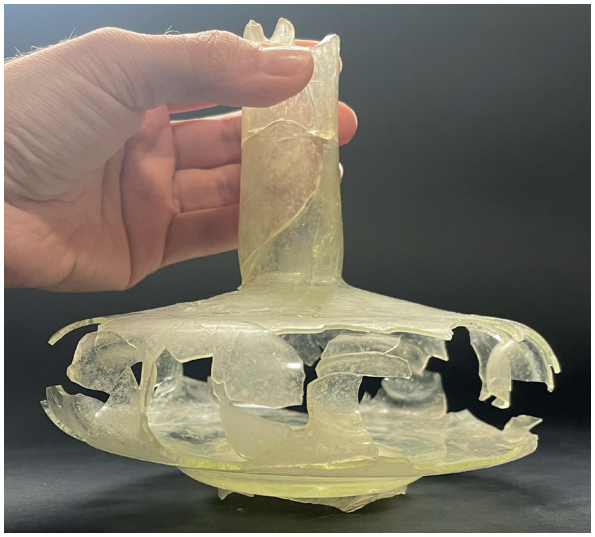


Fig. 14. Gold-glass vessel from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).

The base of the vessel is decorated with an inscription (Fig. 17). Inside the base ring, the inscription *ANNI BONI*, framed by a circle of lozenges, is visible; the individual elements of the decoration were

17 All three materials were interpreted as parts of clothes on the preliminary report of the excavation; see Dimitrovska 2020, 93, Note 131.

18 I thank Biljana Jankulovska-Peeva, the glass conservator in NI Stobi, for her help.

19 For the technique of engraving glass vessels and the wheels of various sizes used throughout the process, see Nagel 2020.



Fig. 15. Glass sherds before conservation from Grave 1810 (Archive of NI Stobi).

formed from gold leaf (Fig. 18). The letters are well designed and evenly spaced, not compressed or staggered. The inscription and the decorative motifs were applied to the background before the sealing of the ring base. The base ring is only partially preserved, with several small fragments missing. During production, the base was prepared first, and the decoration was added to its surface (Fig. 19). Next, the vessel body was formed separately and attached to the top of the decorated base while still hot and malleable. The joint remains visible as a distinct line between the two parts of the vessel. The uneven distribution of glass around the ring base (Fig. 17), with one side showing a noticeable excess of material, demonstrates that the glassblower had to press the body of the vessel more on one side and was somewhat careless when attaching the two parts. As a consequence, the vessel itself is poorly balanced, a common issue in vessels made using this technique.



Fig. 16. Indentations fitting fingers perfectly (Archive of NI Stobi).

Several scholars have identified Rome as a centre of production for such vessels, based on the abundance of gold-glass finds in its catacombs;[20] however, others have suggested Cologne and

20 On gold-glass as grave finds in the catacombs of Rome, see Santis 2000. For a detailed analysis of the function of gold-glass vessels, see Rutgers 2017, 104–107. For data on the function and cost of gold-glass vessels, see Howells 2015, 60–65. For a distribution map of gold-glass finds, see Howells 2015, 54, Fig. 14; Zanone 2011, 64, Fig. 1.

the Rhine Valley as possible centres of origin.[21] Howells even suggests that "the production of these pieces centred on Rome itself, perhaps by a very small number of craftsmen of Egyptian origin".[22] Of course, the variety of gold-glass vessels is too great for them to have been made by a single workshop; the general consensus therefore holds that they were probably made in a few workshops at different locations.[23] The process of making a gold-glass vessel is quite simple, the only difficult part being the execution of the imagery.

Vessel form is a distinctive feature of the gold-glass vessel from Stobi. The technique is usually applied to open vessels, typically plates and bowls. Gold-glass items may not have been the most expensive objects to acquire—that distinction would belong to silver and gold plates—but they were evidently considered valuable possessions by their owners, as the context of this find, as a grave offering, underscores. To ensure that the gold leaf decoration remained visible and legible in the finished product, glassworkers generally applied it to open forms, in which the decoration embedded in the base could be seen clearly. At present, I am not aware of any other closed gold-glass vessel.

Perhaps a quarter of the known gold-glass fragments have inscriptions dedicated to hedonism and the enjoyment of life, the most common of which is probably the phrase *ΠΙΕ ΖΗCΑΙC* ('Drink, may you live!').[24] The phrase *ANNI BONI* on the glass vessel from Stobi appears on a few vessels of different types. Two parallels bearing the phrase *ANNI BONI* are known in gold sandwich-glass, both gold-trail glasses with their inscriptions set within a cartouche.[25] According to Filippini, the phrase means 'Happy New Year', a salutation representing an antique



Fig. 17. Photograph of the inscription. The uneven distribution of glass around the attachment site of the two parts is visible around the base ring (Archive of NI Stobi).



Fig. 18. Outline drawing of the gold leaf pattern on the base of the gold-glass bottle (by Tome Filov, Archive of NI Stobi).

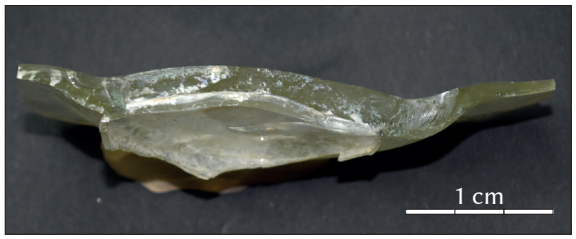


Fig. 19. Profile of the vessel base with the line of attachment of the two parts (Archive of NI Stobi).

21 Howells 2015, 53.

22 Howells 2015, 55. The assumption that the craftsmen were of Egyptian origin is based on the Alexandrian dialect of the Greek inscriptions on portrait medallions made in the gold-glass technique.

23 For an identification of workshops producing gold-glass vessels, see Engemann 1969; Rutgers 1995, 83; Nüsse 2008; Howells 2015, 57–58.

24 Vickers 2011, 610; Cameron 1996, 300; on the phrase *ΠΙΕ ΖΗCΑΙC* on glass vessels, see Auth 1995.

25 Filippini 1996, 122, 124; Howells 2015, 144, Cat. no. 55.

convivial tradition.[26] It can also be translated as 'good years' or 'prosperous years'; it was used to commemorate times of political stability, imperial success, or prosperity. It reflects the Roman belief that certain periods, particularly during an emperor's reign, were especially favourable or blessed. Morey's catalogue mentions two further gold-glass items with *ANNI BONI* inscriptions, both of unknown provenance.[27]

The identification of a glass vessel identical in form, decoration, and indentations in the archaeological record has proved challenging and, so far, unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the shape of the neck and its 'waist' are useful traits for placing the vessel within a broader chronological framework encompassing the 3rd century AD (Fig. 20).

No other gold-glass vessel is known from the province of Macedonia, let alone one with an entirely preserved profile. However, vessels of the same type—bottles with a cracked-off rim and a squat spherical body with indentations—have been found in other archaeological excavations across Macedonia. One example, dated to the 'advanced Roman period', was discovered in Veroia;[28] another, dated after AD 261, in Menis near Pella;[29] a third, dated to the first half of the 3rd century AD, in Nea Kerdyllia near Amphipolis;[30] and a fourth, dated to the end of the 3rd century AD, in Thessaloniki. The latter was found together with a fusiform flask, which typically appears in the region from the end of the 3rd century AD onwards.[31] Based on these parallels from within the province, the glass vessel from Stobi may tentatively be dated to the 3rd century AD.

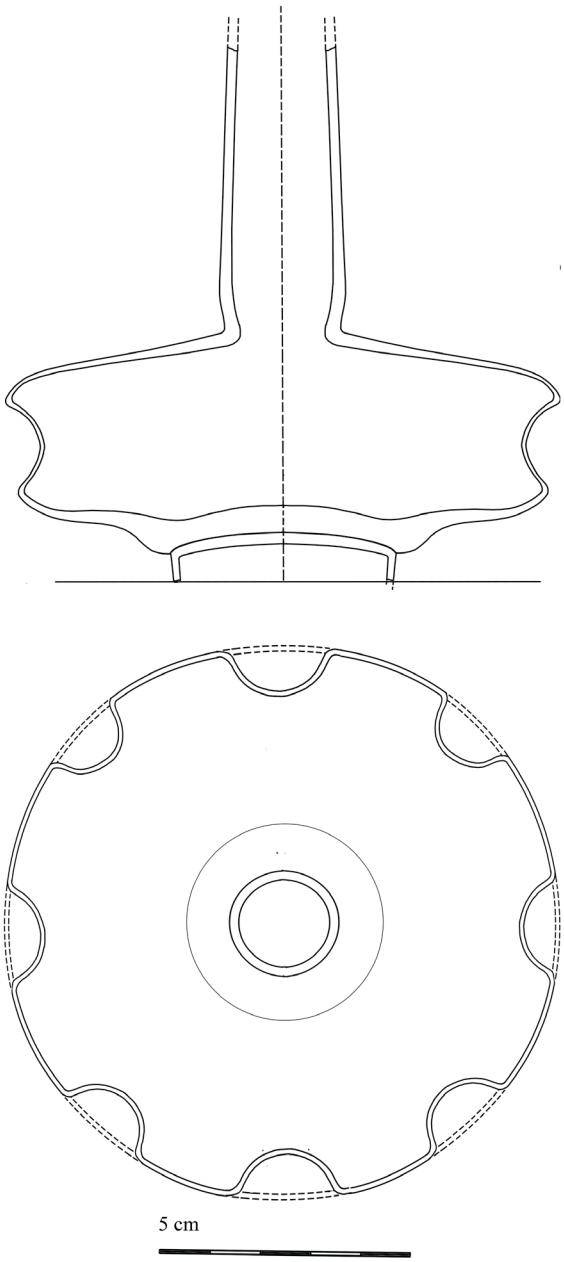


Fig. 20. Gold-glass vessel - profile view (top), top view (below).

Other finds in the associated assemblage may help refine the dating of the grave. Middle Roman colour-slipped bowls appear in funerary contexts at Stobi from the end of the 2nd century to the beginning of the 4th century AD.[32] Excavations at the Theatre in Stobi in 2021 brought to light several fragments of various Middle Roman colour-slipped vessels from a fill layer containing 3rd-century AD

26 Filippini 1996, 118.

27 Morey 1959, Cat. nos 304 and 409.

28 Petsas 1964, 353, pl. 414δ, mentions a fine example found in a grave.

29 Chrysostomou 2000, 455–467, Fig. 19.

30 Malama – Darakis 2008, 346, Pl. 78, MA 7076.

31 Antonaras 2017, 97, Cat. no. 205, Pl. 8, VII.

32 Anderson-Stojanović 1992, 120–121, Form 19, dates this shape between the late 2nd and the early 4th century AD.

material, which was used to form a level of use in the early 4th century CE.[33] The dating value of the bone artefacts (the two *pyxides* and the die) in the grave containing the gold-glass vessel is low and cannot help date the feature. The part of the Western Cemetery where the grave was discovered comprises five burial periods, distinguished on the basis of grave types, burial ritual, and grave goods.[34] A 50–70-year hiatus separated Burial Periods III and IV, during which the excavated part of the cemetery was not used.[35] Grave 1810 most probably belongs to Burial Period IV, spanning the entire 3rd century AD.

This grave type in the excavated part of the West Cemetery at Stobi was the most frequent during the 3rd century AD.[36] All finds in the grave assemblage can be broadly dated to the 3rd century AD, which corresponds to the general dating of gold-glass vessels.

The burial must have belonged to a person from the higher echelons of society who could afford such an elaborately decorated glass vessel, a wooden coffin, and a finely made stone-slab cist, all of which were well above the standard burial practice in the West Cemetery during the 3rd century AD. The vessel was placed in the grave as an offering for the deceased, so that it could serve him in the afterlife.

This unique glass vessel is the first example of its kind discovered in the entire province of Macedonia, placing Stobi among the few Roman cities across the empire to yield such a find. The discovery of a gold-glass vessel in a closed context is exceptionally rare, as most known examples are held in private or museum collections and were acquired with little or uncertain provenance data. Furthermore, the fact that the gold-glass vessel from Stobi is a closed one, which must be empty—and into which one must peep through the rim—for the inscription to be visible (unless it is filled with water), makes it even more intriguing and unusual. This find offers new insight into the presence of gold-glass vessels in the province of Macedonia during the 3rd century AD.

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Liv. *Ab urbe cond.*: Titus Livius, *Ab urbe condita.*

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33 For the context of Middle Roman colour-slipped ware from the excavations of the Theater in Stobi, see Pavlovski forthcoming. The vessel in question was discovered in Basket F4.54.1, Sector 118, together with a barely legible *antoninianus*, also dated widely to the 3rd century AD.

34 Wesolowsky 1973, 103–104.

35 Wesolowsky 1973, 126–127.

36 A grave of two adults of the same type was discovered in the West Cemetery of Stobi in 2013. It contained an Isings Type 82, variant A1 bottle as the single addition (Isings 1957); it was dated to the end of the 2nd–beginning of the 3rd century AD.

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