

A note on vasa diatreta / cage cups in Aquileia

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mots-clés : diatreta, Aquileia, recent finding, dichroic glass

Notes

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² A recent list of findings, already a little out-dated, can be found in Gudenrath, Whitehouse 2009, 226, especially concerning dichroic vessels.

³ A synthetic overview on glass circulation in Aquileia can be found in Mandruzzato 2015, more specifically on luxury productions see Mandruzzato 2013.

⁴ It was the bottom of a cup with a medallion depicting a couple incised on gold-leaf found during the excavations of the river harbour (see Brusin 1934, 142).

Fig. 1 Fragment 1, AQ597989, front view.

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Fig. 2 Fragment 1, AQ597989, side view. (© L. Mandruzzato)

In the past few years new fragments of openwork glass vessels have been found in excavations and the theories about their production areas and techniques are still discussed². Also in Aquileia a very interesting new fragment has been found recently, the fourth example of this peculiar technique in the well known northern Adriatic Roman harbour. Though all these pieces have already been published separately, it seems that they are still almost unknown among scholar community and for sure have not been taken into consideration as a group so far.

Aquileia is well known as a glass trading and production centre from the beginning of the first cent. AD as well as one of the most important cities of the late Roman Empire and early Christian age. It is not surprising that among the large quantities of common glass dating from the end of the third - beginning of the fourth century on, there is also good evidence of luxury glass, in some cases coming from different regions of the Empire as imported goods³. A variety of decoration techniques is represented, though each of them only with a few examples : four cups and bottles with mould-blown decoration, five pieces in sandwich-gold glass (one of them lost, but published at the time of finding⁴), three pieces with applied decoration (leaving apart the more common blobs), and at least 19 fragments with incised and cut decoration (without counting the simple linear cut decoration), among them four open-work pieces.

Three of the fragments of diatreta have been in the collection of the Museum since a long time

ago, unfortunately without any reference to their finding context.

For the first two of them, in both cases very small fragments, seem to belong to a vessel with the inner wall made of colourless glass of good quality. One of them (MAN Aquileia, inventory n° 597989, **fig. 1**) has a double garland of oval leaves in emerald green glass, which is attached continuously to the body of the vessel, as can be seen from the side (**fig. 2**).

The second fragment (MAN Aquileia, inventory n° 597990, **fig. 3**) represents the junction element between two circular meshes of a net decoration in deep blue, colourless and turquoise glass. Even if no part of the body of the vessel is preserved, it could be inferred as colourless from the colour of the bridge behind this cruciform element. Despite the fact that the fragments are very small, some information about the technique that was used to produce them can be obtained. In fact evidence of accurate cutting can be noticed on the grooves that surround the frieze of the first fragment as well as on the sides of the bridge of the second one. The coloured glass used for the cut decoration is only on the outer surface of the vessels and the second fragment shows that it was applied only in separate bands. According to my opinion these two sherds could be part of the same vase, even if they do not bear the same decoration, a fact that could be easily explained by their being originally set in different areas of the vessel: under the rim, the vegetal frieze and on the body, the net decoration. Cage cups bearing a decoration in more than one colour, as here, are





Fig. 3 Fragment 2, AQ597990, front view. (© L. Mandruzzato)

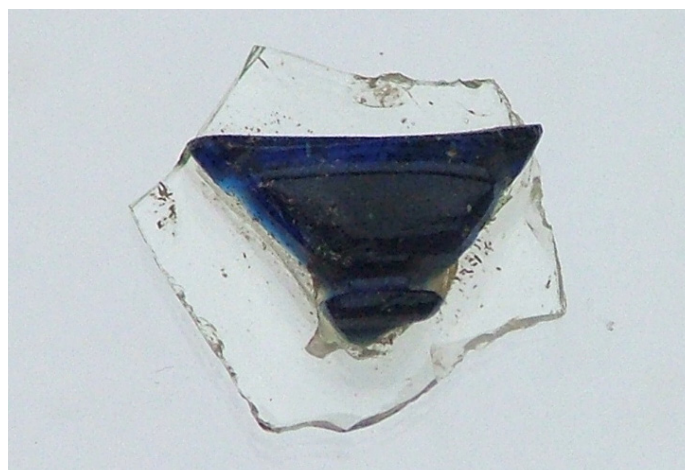


Fig. 4 Fragment 3, AQ60000, front view. (© L. Mandruzzato)

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5 I had the chance of discussing this aspect with David Whitehouse after the publication of the fragment in the first volume of the catalogue of the glass collection of the Museum of Aquileia (see Mandruzzato, Marcante 2005, 116, n° 348) in the occasion of his visit to the museum in 2006, and he seemed to share my opinions about this piece.

6 The fragments, inventory nn° 537490 and 576337, were found during two different campaigns of the excavations conducted by the Dipartimento di Studio Umanistici of the University of Trieste at the so called "domus dei putti danzanti" in Aquileia in 2009 and 2011. I am grateful to Federica Fontana, director of the excavation, and Emanuela Murgia, who published the object at the moment of the discovery, for allowing me to analyse and present the piece in this paper.

7 This kind of traces are quite similar to those observed on some fragments of unfinished diatrete cup form Grenoble (see Colardelle *et al.* 2012, figg. 18-21).

8 On this very special quality of glass see Kucharczyk 2014, 29-35 with more bibliography.

known from some famous examples like the cup from Braunsfeld in Cologne, or the Trivulzio cup in Milan, both with e three colour decoration on colourless glass.

The inner part of the third fragment (MAN Aquileia, inventory n° 60000) shows a wall of clear colourless glass, in this case with a decoration in deep blue (**fig. 4**). This piece was bought by Luisa Bertacchi, the former director of the Museum, for the collection in 1968, and the only thing we know about its finding is that it was found somewhere in Aquileia or surroundings. This shard is quite interesting because the decoration is not of the more frequent net type, but rather a figurative motif in the shape of a goblet or vase. Another peculiar feature is that the decoration is continuously attached to the inner wall on three sides, leaving only the upper side unattached and thus making the small goblet hollow. This fact can be explained either by the necessities of this kind of decoration or possibly the cutting is unfinished⁵.

The last example of open-work cage cup from Aquileia, more precisely a small group of sherds of the same vessel, is a new finding⁶. Unfortunately, despite its recent discovery during a stratigraphical excavation, not much can be added to the

chronology of the group by the finding context, since it was a very mixed up filling layer. Five shards of the dichroic cage cup have been recovered in two separate moments, a little less than of one third of the complete cup is preserved, although most of the decoration is broken (**fig. 5**). The cup has an out-splayed rim underlined by a relief moulding on the outside. A thick garland, a triple row of oval leaves, runs under the rim. The frieze departs from the two sides of a knot, represented by four vertical lines, and meets on the opposite side with a non preserved circular element. Below runs an inscription in capital letters, which originally should have consisted of 18 letters, but only two of them are completely readable; an E on the largest shard and a R on a separate fragment. The upper hooked part of another letter could be read at the end of the main fragment, but it is not possible, according to my opinion, to be sure whether it was a B, as suggested (Murgia forthcoming), or another letter, S being one of the possibilities. The proposed reading BIBE VIVAS FELICITER (Murgia forthcoming) is fitting with the few preserved letters and the reconstructed length of the toast. On the largest shard the traces of three bridges on a line under the inscription frieze seem to indicate the beginning of an open-work net decoration. All the fragments on the outer surface show clear signs of cold working, the attachment of the bridges on the wall is irregularly squared, the surface made uneven by the presence of circular traces of grinding⁷. The vessel, as mentioned before, is made of dichroic glass, opaque light green in reflected light and intense amber in transmitted light⁸. No chemical analysis has been done so far, but it seems very likely that gold-silver alloy and copper were added to the batch to obtain this peculiar effect.

The evidence given by these few finds from Aquileia strengthens the impression that only cuttingskills were required for the production of *diatrete* glass, without any relation to the kind of decoration used, even if this method is extremely complex to perform and requires a very highly specialized craftsmanship⁹.



Fig. 5 Fragment 4, AQ537490, front view. (© L. Mandruzzato)

No clues could be obtained where these vessels may have been produced, as Aquileia has always been an important trading centre, with good connections with the eastern Mediterranean, through its harbour, to central Europe, through routes that were already used long before the Roman occupation of this part of Italy, and to Rome. Local production cannot be completely excluded, as the rich market of the ancient town may have attracted an itinerant *diatretarius*, eager to be in touch with wealthy clients. The fragments from Aquileia give evidence of at least three openwork vessels, putting Aquileia together with Rome, Cologne, Trier and Dülük Baba Tepesi, in Turkey, in the short list of the major finding sites for *diatreta* glass¹⁰.

Catalogue¹¹

1 (fig. 1 and 6d)

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, inventory n° 597989

Provenance : unknown, but Aquileia.

Dimensions : height 1,9 cm, length 2,1 cm, thickness 0,16 cm

Colourless and emerald translucent green glass.

Wall fragment, possibly from the upper part of a cup, with a horizontal vegetal frieze.

2 (fig. 3 and 6e)

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, inventory n° 597990

Provenance : unknown, but Aquileia

Dimensions : width 2,3 cm, length 0,6 cm

Blue, colourless and turquoise translucent glass

Openwork decoration, probably from the wall of a cup, with a cruciform junction element between two circular meshes.

3 (fig. 5 and 6a-c)

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, inventory nn° 537490, 576337

Provenance : Aquileia, via Gemina (*domus dei "putti danzanti"*), US 543 (2009) and US 705 (2011)

Dimensions : height max 6,2 cm, diameter reconstructed 10,8 cm, thickness 0,18 cm

Dichroic glass semi-opaque light green (translucent orange in transmitted light)

Five fragments, two of them matching, of a bell shaped cup with out-splayed rim and open-work net decoration under a vegetal frieze and an inscription.

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9 A synthetic description of the production technique can be found in Whitehouse 1997, 223, as opposite to other theories by Rosemarie Lierke, who tries to suggest an easier way of producing this kind of glass non only by cutting skills (see Lierke 2013).

10 All the other sites were already mentioned by Costanze Höpken, while suggesting that this kind of vessel seemed to be obviously strictly linked with wealthy and important cities of late antiquity (see Höpken 2012, 246).

11 Since the first two fragments from the museum's collection were only mentioned in the catalogue of the museum and not exhaustively published and the dichroic fragments, although object of two articles were not all presented with the inventory number and complete dimensions a short file for these three pieces is added. For the fourth piece see Mandrizzato, Marcante 2005, n° 348.

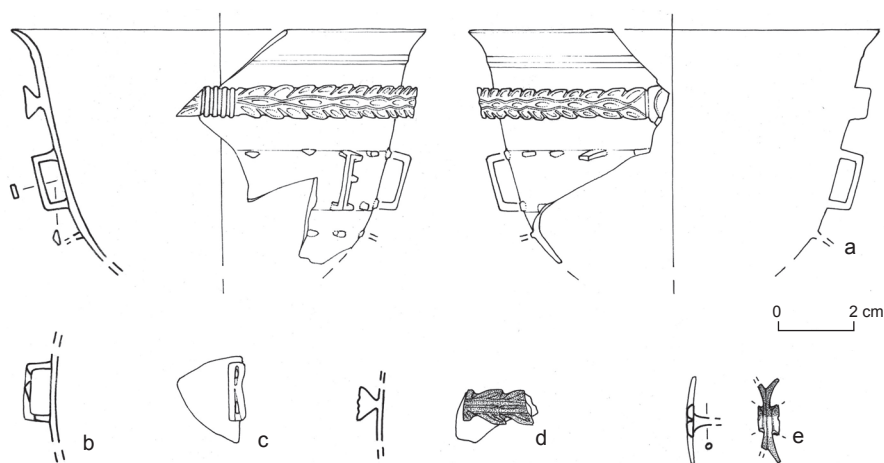


Fig. 6 a-c) dichroic cup fragments, d) fragment 1, e) fragment 2 (scale 1:2)
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Paris, 29^e Rencontres (2014)



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