

The Mystery of the Silver Bowl from Kldeeti, Georgia: Is this a Portrait of a Roman Emperor?

Summary

This paper examines a silver vessel discovered in 1941 at the Kldeeti cemetery, Georgia, aiming to propose a new interpretation regarding the identification of the male portrait depicted on its central medallion. Fragments of the medallion, together with pieces of its decorative frame and a section of the bowl's low ring foot, were uncovered during earthworks conducted by local villagers. As a result, crucial contextual information, such as the number of graves excavated and the precise association of artefacts with individual burials, has unfortunately been lost.

Alongside the vessel, coins and other luxury items, including an adornment with a gemstone engraved with a male figure, were also recorded within the same assemblage. Based on the stylistic and comparative analyses, together with the numismatic evidence, the Kldeeti cemetery has been attributed to the second century AD.

The surviving fragments of the medallion depict a bearded man in left profile, characterized by curly hair, a straight (or possibly ridged) nose, and a raised eyebrow. The composition was likely framed by a dotted circular band and a relief ring, as suggested by the preserved fragments. Although the damaged condition of the medallion complicates identification, close parallels can be found among the imported Roman silverware of the second century discovered in the Armaziskhevi royal necropolis. This group of shallow silver bowls, distinguished by their low ring feet and decorated central roundels, includes examples portraying Antinous, the Tyche-Fortune, and a bearded man, possibly Emperor Hadrian(?). The Kldeeti portrait shows the closest resemblance to the silver bowl from the Bagineti sarcophagus, which features a gilded central roundel depicting Marcus Aurelius. The similarity in facial features and in the framing of the medallion suggests that the Kldeeti bowl likewise portrays Marcus Aurelius or one of the Emperors of the Antonine dynasty.

The *didrachms* of Caesarea of Marcus Aurelius and Antoninus Pius found at Kldeeti, together with the discoveries across Georgia including the gems and aurei of the Roman emperors, indicates that imperial gifts reached the Kingdom of Iberia during the reign of the Antonine emperors. This assumption is further supported by the written sources emphasizing the intense diplomatic interactions between Rome and Iberia. It is therefore proposed that the Kldeeti bowl represents a portrait of a Roman Emperor and that such vessels supposedly arrived in Kldeeti as redistributed imperial gifts from the royal court at Mtskheta. The date of the Kldeeti cemetery and its location within the borders of the Kingdom of Iberia further reinforce this interpretation.

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