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The typology, history, and authenticity of Roman marble craters

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DAGMAR GRASSINGER, *RÖMISCHE MARMORKRATERE* (Monumenta Artis Romanae XVIII, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein 1991). 238 pages, 94 plates with 256 photographs, 63 drawings. ISBN 3-8053-1087-0. DM 188-

Summary of Grassinger's *Römische Marmorkratere*

Fat, drunk, and stumbling, Silenus staggers through some of Rubens' best-known canvasses. Inspiration for the figure came in part from a much earlier work, an ancient marble vessel that Rubens saw on a sojourn in Rome, presumably between 1605 and 1608.¹ That vase, the Borghese crater (fig.1), had been discovered in the Gardens of Sallust and in Rubens' day was one of the chief treasures in the Borghese Collection. Its beauty was well recognized in the early 19th c. when France, purchasing antiquities in that collection, paid a price for the crater surpassed only by the cost of the famous Borghese Warrior.² Stone vessels similar to the Borghese crater, but hardly as beautiful, can now be found throughout Europe and the United States.³

Over 60 examples of the original ancient Roman genre of marble craters are extant. Most are fragmentary, but a few, like the Borghese crater, are well preserved. The craters were often large — some up to 170 cm high — and are generally decorated with Dionysian revellers. Most seem to have stood in Italian villas and gardens. Despite their often splendid appearance, the vases have received little attention in scholarly literature. Merlin and Poinssot analyzed in over one hundred pages the magnificent craters from Mahdia, and Froning in similar detail dated and interpreted the Medici crater. Hauser and Fuchs treated far more craters, but (given the broader scope of their investigations) not always in comparable detail.⁴ Now Dagmar Grassinger has fully researched most craters, gathering 60 examples (and over 20 very fragmentary possible examples) in *Römische Marmorkratere*, a shortened version of her dissertation written at Karls-Ruprecht-Universität, Heidelberg. She describes, catalogues, and analyzes her objects thoroughly. Many clear photographs and Klaus Wildt's fine drawings of the vases supplement her catalogue.

Grassinger dates the Roman craters (pp.13-43) by meticulously examining the styles of their figures and vegetal reliefs and by comparing them to firmly dated works such as the Conservatori's Pontios Rhyton and the Naples Telephos Relief. She finds that the earliest craters — those from the Mahdia shipwreck (cat. nos.53-57) — are from 100 B.C. or slightly earlier and that no craters appear for the next 40 or 50 years. In the last three decades of the republic, their numbers increase and include well-known, important examples: the Louvre's Borghese crater as well as the Pisa, Medici, Salpion, and Villa of the Papyri craters (cat. nos.23, 26, 8, 19, 21). The boom continues into the age of Augustus when the Townely Vase (cat. no.13) may have been created. The number of craters then declines rapidly, and only one (from Aquincum, cat. no.6) appears in the 2nd or 3rd c.

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- 1 C. Dittrich in: W. Schmidt (ed.), *Dialoge: Kopie, Variation und Metamorphose alter Kunst in Graphik und Zeichnung vom 15. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Dresden 1970) 56-57, no.64.
 - 2 Recounted by Grassinger 181, cat. no.23.
 - 3 Three copies of the Borghese crater type appear at Versailles (Merlin and Poinssot [infra n.4] 143). For vases in the Jardin Royal des Tuileries: M. Le Cte. F. de Clarac, *Musée de sculpture antique et moderne II* (Paris 1828-30) pl.262.
 - 4 F. Hauser, *Die neu-attischen Reliefs* (Stuttgart 1889); A. Merlin and L. Poinssot, *Cratères et candélabres de marbres trouvés en mer près de Mahdia. Notes et Documents IX* (Paris 1930); W. Fuchs, *Die Vorbilder des neuattischen Reliefs* (20. Erg. JdI, 1959); H. Froning, *Marmor-Schmuckreliefs mit griechischen Mythen im 1. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Mainz 1981).