The Evidence for Jewellery Production in Constantinople in the Early Byzantine Period

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Introduction
In the jewellery catalogue of the Benaki Museum in Athens, Bertha Segall stated: 'Die Mode scheint damals international gewesen zu sein'. With this statement, Segall puts into plain words what others had only hinted at before, that techniques, shapes, motifs, and styles were popular all over the Byzantine Empire and beyond its borders. As the term ‘international’ is ambiguous in this context, this phenomenon would better be called ‘interregional’. Among ‘interregional’ types is, for instance, the crescent-shaped pierced-work earring, which was one of the most popular forms found in Early Byzantine jewellery. Such earrings have been found, for example, in Mersin in Cilicia, Polis in Cyprus, Syria, Keszthely-Fenékpuszta in Hungary, and at Menouthis in Abuqir Bay, Egypt. As explanation for the wide geographical distribution of crescent-shaped pierced-work earrings and other pieces of jewellery, it has been suggested by many scholars that all jewellery with ‘interregional’ features was made exclusively in the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, probably in a state workshop, and distributed from there. However, this seems unlikely, since some of the pieces of jewellery found in the recent excavations in Abuqir Bay in Egypt show that provincial centres also were able to produce jewellery of a high quality in the ‘interregional’ fashion (Pls 1 and 4). Thus, not everything that is of a high quality, or follows the ‘interregional’ style, seems to come from the capital. The ‘interregional’ fashion may, therefore, rather be due to the influence of one leading workshop, whose techniques, shapes, motifs, and styles were copied elsewhere. The workshop in question could indeed have been situated in Constantinople. Constantinople became the imperial capital after Rome under Constantine the Great, and it may likewise have taken over the former capital’s role as a jewellery trendsetter. But what is Constantinopolitan and what is not? In order to answer this question it is first necessary to examine and discuss the previous scholarly research.

The state of research
A large number of pieces of Early Byzantine jewellery have alleged Constantinopolitan provenances, most of which are probably based on the statements of dealers and are, therefore, not wholly reliable. Some pieces of Early Byzantine gold jewellery may indeed have been scientifically excavated or found in the capital, but, to my knowledge and in contrast to base metal jewellery, none has been published yet. However, various attempts have been made to attribute jewellery to Constantinople. One approach, accepted by various scholars, is to attribute jewellery to Constantinople on the grounds of its high quality. Attributing jewellery by its quality may succeed in some cases, but fail in others, since, as stated, provincial workshops were able to produce jewellery of the same high quality as one might perhaps expect from Constantinople.

In addition, several pieces of jewellery that are decorated with imperial motifs or inscriptions have been attributed to Constantinople, among them a pendant with two embossed gold discs that resemble an imperial medallion, recently published by Rosenbaum-Alföldi. As I have argued in a recent publication, Rosenbaum-Alföldi’s localisation of the pendant to Constantinople cannot be justified as she has misunderstood its inscription, and the pendant may well have been made elsewhere, possibly in Egypt where it was allegedly found. It must also be noted that jewellery with medallions or coins does not necessarily originate from Constantinople. Although medallions and coins were bestowed on high officials and army members by the imperial family as known from literary sources, not all were struck in Constantinople, and, as Boyd has convincingly pointed out, it often remains unclear whether medallions and coins were set into the jewellery directly after being struck or some decades later, possibly at another place. This is, for example, the case for a medallion of Theodosius (379–95) from the Assiût hoard, which was reused in the late 6th or early 7th century when it was inserted into a pendant that was made to be suspended from a torc with late 6th-century coins. Furthermore, many pieces of jewellery with inserted medallions and coins have alleged Egyptian finds, and certain motifs in their decoration seem to point to Egyptian workmanship, as is the case, for example, of the coin-set jewellery from the Assiût hoard and for a pair of bracelets allegedly from the Fayoum or Behnresa. Moreover, and in contrast to medallions in general, because jewellery was set with coins this does not necessarily imply that coin-set jewellery was made in Constantinople or that its owner was a member of the imperial family as coins were also considered to have had amuletic powers; coins may appear on jewellery for this reason alone. Furthermore, as observed by Deppert-
Another attempt to localise jewellery production to Constantinople has been made by Arrhenius, who argues that jewellery with 'cement cloisonné', by which she means garnet inlays that were embedded by adhesive materials with a high gypsum content, was made in the capital. It may indeed be possible to attribute certain pieces of jewellery to the same workshop with the help of scientific methods, but, as has been convincingly argued by Foltz in a review of Arrhenius' study, adhesive materials can change their composition when buried in the earth. In addition, most pieces of jewellery with 'cement cloisonné' listed by Arrhenius were found outside the Byzantine Empire.

Based on a study of the imperial mosaics in San Vitale in Ravenna, Brown has assigned some extant pieces of jewellery to Constantinople, for example a necklace with wire links and beads from the Lambousa hoard. This necklace, though, was probably made in Cyprus, as indicated by the depiction of single birds on its pierced-work closure discs – a feature found on many necklaces from or allegedly from Cyprus. Other pieces similar to those on the Ravenna mosaics may well come from Constantinople, but this would require further research.

As most previous attempts to attribute specific pieces of jewellery to Constantinople have failed, this matter has to be approached anew by a more systematic study of the literary sources, contemporary representations, and extant pieces of gold jewellery. As will be shown below, jewellery production in Constantinople can be divided into the production of insignia for the military and for officials in state workshops, the production of insignia and jewellery for the imperial family in a court workshop, and, finally, the production of jewellery for the general public in independent workshops. The subsequent sections follow this division. First the literary sources will be discussed alone, then the images and the extant pieces of jewellery side by side.

**Literary sources**

In the Early Byzantine period, three independent departments (comites) were responsible to the emperor, and each had its own treasury: the praetorian prefect, the sacrae largitiones, and the res privatae. The sacrae largitiones had existed from the 3rd century and were in charge of tax collection, the payment of troops, of the imperial mints, mines, and, most importantly, the state factories in precious metals. It was divided into scrinia (sub-departments), two of which were concerned with gold: the scrinium aureae massae ('the recipient of the tested gold bars'), and the scrinium auri ad responsum, which 'perhaps dealt with returns of gold stocks in the diocesan depots'. A law of 384, which found its way into the Codex Justinianus, lists the technical staff working for the comes sacrarum largitionem: there are, among others, aurifices solidorum (minters of solidi), aurifices specierum (goldsmiths), sculptores et ceteri artifices (engravers and other craftsmen), argentarii comitanenses (silversmiths), and barbaricarii (craftsmen for parade arms and armour). As suggested by Kent, the latter may also have been responsible for the production of fibulae. The main office of the comes sacrarum largitionem was situated in Constantinople, but according to Jones it may also have had a large number of staff and material depots (thesauri) in the provinces. This is corroborated by numismatists, who, though they maintain that the aurifices solidorum were mainly active in the imperial mint in Constantinople, have suggested that there is also evidence for the minting of gold coins elsewhere at specific times. In addition, some silver vessels bear imperial control stamps with portraits of the Byzantine Emperors Justinian (from 541) and Phokas (602–10), which can possibly be attributed to imperial mints in Cartaghe and Antioch-on-the-Orontes. These silver vessels may thus have been produced in the regional scrina argenti. Furthermore, workshops of the barbaricarii are known to have operated not only in 4th-century Constantinople but also in Antioch. The production of state-controlled precious metal goods was thus not limited to the capital. However, it has been suggested by Grierson that gold coins were only struck ‘when and where the emperor was in residence’. Until Heraklios (610–41), emperors rarely left Constantinople after the reign of Arkadios (395–408), so most gold coins were probably minted there. The same could hold true for the production of other state-controlled gold goods.

The literary sources provide no satisfactory evidence about the range of products manufactured by the aurifices specierum. It is known, however, that the comites provided insignia for high officials and the military elite, among them most prominently buckles, fibulae and torcs, but probably also rings bearing the emperor's image and bracelets. As mentioned above, the barbaricarii may have been responsible for the production of fibulae, and it is thus tempting to assume that they were also responsible for the production of other military insignia. If this was the case, the aurifices specierum could only have been in charge of insignia and jewellery for the imperial family. As indicated by Codex Justinianus 11:12, which was first formulated during the reign of Leo I (457–74), imperial insignia had to be made by palatinis artificibus or palace workmen. The aurifices specierum probably belonged to the palatinis artificibus and thus to the court workshop. It is also possible that they and not the barbaricarii produced military insignia other than fibulae.

In addition to the information that can be gained from the literary sources on the state workshops, Codex Justinianus 11:12 also provides some information on imperial jewellery: it regulates the combined use of emeralds, hyacinths (probably sapphires), and pearls. These materials may, therefore, have been an imperial prerogative. This is corroborated by a poem written by Claudianus, who describes the garments of the Emperor Honorius (395–423) as bedecked with emeralds, amethysts, and hyacinths, and by images that show imperial garments with stones in these colours. According to the Codex Justinianus (11:12), these materials had to be removed from bridles, saddles, and belts while other stones and decorative techniques remained officially approved. In addition, no one was allowed to wear and decorate fibulae and curcumi with any stones. Violating these laws resulted in a fine of 50 pounds of gold. Furthermore, no person was authorised to produce jewellery that was reserved for the imperial robe and cult, with the exception of finger-rings for both sexes and women's jewellery; it was also forbidden to produce jewellery in order to present it to the imperial family. Violation of this decree
resulted in a fine of 100 pounds of gold and the death penalty.  

Finally, as previously mentioned, Codex Justinianus 11:12 legislates that jewellery for the imperial family had to be produced by palatinis artificibus or palace workmen, and not in private houses or other workshops.

Constantinople, as the capital of the Byzantine Empire, probably boasted a large quantity of smaller, independent gold workshops and perhaps a goldsmith’s guild such as that known to have been operating in Alexandria. However, there is no evidence for privately run gold workshops in Constantinople in the literary sources, and a Constantinopolitan goldsmith’s guild is only mentioned later by the early 10th-century Book of the Prefect.  

Codex Justinianus 11:12 indicates that goldsmiths also worked in private houses. This could also have been the case for Early Byzantine Constantinople, as the Book of the Prefect later prohibits Constantinopolitan goldsmiths from working in private houses; they became bound to workshops on the Mese, Constantinople’s main street. Thus, and since private copper-, silver-, and blacksmiths had workshops on or close to the Mese in the Early Byzantine period, one could draw the conclusion that privately run gold workshops were located, although maybe not exclusively, in the same area in the Early Byzantine period.

Contemporary images and extant pieces of jewellery

Insignia for high officials or the military, as produced by the barbaricarii and/or the aurifices specierum, are depicted in several images: for instance, belt buckles and crossbow fibulae are shown among other insignia in the miniatures of the Notitia Dignitatum. Crossbow fibulae are also shown on the mosaic panels in San Vitale in Ravenna. As mentioned above, the jewellery on these panels was attributed to the state workshop by Brown. In Ravenna, crossbow fibulae are worn by some of the officials that accompany the Emperor Justinian (527–65) and his wife Theodora. Justinian’s bodyguards on the grounds of their techniques, shapes, and motifs. As stated, jewellery for the imperial family seems to have been made by the aurifices specierum. Images that show imperial insignia or jewellery should, therefore, reflect their work. Most information is provided by the above mentioned mosaics in San Vitale in Ravenna: Justinian, for example, wears a diadem that is decorated with stones in the imperial colours and with a fibula that terminates in white, tear-drop shaped beads. His fibula consists of a circular setting with a red inlay framed by a row of pearls and, above, a semi-circular green ornament, possibly a setting as well, with three protruding, tear-drop shaped blue stones. Three pendants, similar to those on his crown, are suspended from his fibula. Theodora’s fibula resembles Justinian’s, but her crown is more elaborate than that of her husband: it is decorated with rows of pearls, alternate rectangular and oval settings with green and red inlays, respectively, and tear-drop shaped blue stones; long pearl pendilia are suspended from her crown (Pl. 2). Her earrings consist of simple gold hoops from which are suspended a square setting with a green inlay and a wire pendant with a pearl and a tear-drop shaped green or blue bead. Similar earrings are also worn by most of the women in her retinue. In addition, Theodora wears a jewelled collar decorated with pearls. It has a rectangular claw-setting with a green inlay in its centre, framed by two ovoid claw-settings with red inlays. Several pendants of equal length with white, tear-drop shaped beads are suspended from the collar. Woman 3 is shown with a similar, but less elaborate collar with green tear-drop shaped pendants (Pl. 3). Such collars are frequently depicted on other imperial images, for example on ivories with the Empress Ariadne in Florence and Vienna. Analogous to these are suspended from her crown (Pl. 2). Her earrings consist of simple gold hoops from which are suspended a square setting with a green inlay and a wire pendant with a pearl and a tear-drop shaped green or blue bead. Similar earrings are also worn by most of the women in her retinue. In addition, Theodora wears a jewelled collar decorated with pearls. It has a rectangular claw-setting with a green inlay in its centre, framed by two ovoid claw-settings with red inlays. Several pendants of equal length with white, tear-drop shaped beads are suspended from the collar. Woman 3 is shown with a similar, but less elaborate collar with green tear-drop shaped pendants (Pl. 3). Such collars are frequently depicted on other imperial images, for example on ivories with the Empress Ariadne in Florence and Vienna. Analogous to
the crown with pendants and the fibula with pendants, these collars seem to have been reserved for female members of the imperial family from the 6th century through to the medieval period. Furthermore, Theodora and woman 2 on the Ravenna mosaics wear necklaces with wire links and tear-drop shaped green beads. Woman 5 of Theodora’s entourage is shown wearing a gold bracelet with a circular closure link, and woman 2 wears a simple finger-ring (Plate 3). Apart from the insignia, all the general jewellery types depicted on the Ravenna mosaics can be paralleled with women’s jewellery from all over the Byzantine world and beyond. The same holds true for individual shapes like claw-settings, square settings with green inlays, the alternation of differently shaped settings, pendants with tear-drop shaped stones, and rows of pearls strung on wires. This indicates that ‘interregional’ techniques, shapes, motifs, and styles were known in imperial jewellery.

Two images seem to confirm the predominant role of emeralds, hyacinths, and pearls in imperial jewellery as indicated by Codex Iustinianus 11:12: the daughter of the Pharaoh in the 5th-century mosaics of Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome, and Agnes in the 7th-century apse mosaic of Sant’ Agnese in Rome are both depicted in the robes of the Byzantine empress. Their jewellery and garments are embellished with stones and beads in the colours of emeralds, hyacinths, and pearls: green, blue, and white.

A late 6th-century jewelled collar with pendants from the Assiût hoard, housed in Berlin, probably belonged to a female member of the imperial family: such collars are frequently depicted on other imperial images, for example on the above mentioned Ravenna mosaics and on the Ariadne ivories (see note 53). Also, the Berlin collar uses materials that one would expect on imperial insignia – emeralds, sapphires, amethysts, and pearls – and its ornamental details resemble those ‘interregional’ features that are shown on the jewellery on the San Vitale mosaics (Pls 2–3).

The technical and decorative details of a pair of bracelets and a necklace from the same hoard resemble those of the collar so closely that all these pieces were probably made as a set in the same workshop. Their details confirm what has been proposed as Constantinopolitan on the grounds of contemporary representations of jewellery: the bracelets, for example, are of the same type as those worn by woman 5 of Theodora’s entourage in the Ravenna mosaic panels (Pl. 3). In addition, all these possibly Constantinopolitan pieces from the Assiût hoard are decorated with claw-settings, square settings with green inlays, the alternation of differently shaped settings, and rows of pearls strung on wires.

The high settings and alternate square and circular settings of a jewelled cross in the Treasury of St Peter’s, Vatican City, Rome, tally with those details that are shown on images of imperial jewellery and with those that appear on the Constantinopolitan group of jewellery from the Assiût hoard. The cross in St Peter’s can be identified as an imperial dedication by its inscription, and has been attributed to Justin II (565–78) by Belting-Ihm. It could, therefore, have been produced by the aurifices specierum and/or the palatinis artificibus in the capital. According to a legendary medieval account, five crosses decorated ‘with various costly stones’, possibly similar to the cross in St Peter’s, were dedicated together with other liturgical objects to the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople by Justinian (527–65).

No image from the private realm seems to have survived that would provide information about private jewellery production in Constantinople: no ordinary woman is depicted wearing jewellery, for example, on the numerous figural sculptures from, or allegedly from, Constantinople in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. In addition, the early
Byzantine bronze costume accessories from the recent palace excavations in Istanbul have not been published yet, and no piece of Early Byzantine gold jewellery from a scientific excavation in the same city seems to be known. It is thus difficult to attribute jewellery to privately run workshops in the capital. It is, however, quite likely that these workshops copied the works of the aurifices specierum or palatinis artificius, which were operating in the same city.

**Conclusion**

The wide geographical distribution of techniques, shapes, motifs, and styles in Early Byzantine jewellery can only be explained by the influence of one important, trend-setting workshop or workshop group. This workshop or workshop group was probably situated in Constantinople, where jewellery production can be divided into three sectors: the production of insignia for high officials and the military elite by the barbaricarii and/or the aurifices specierum; the production of imperial insignia and jewellery by the aurifices specierum and the production of ordinary men’s and women’s jewellery by privately run workshops. It seems impossible to tell, which of these three sectors was (most) responsible for the ‘interregional’ fashion, though the imperial jewellery produced by privately run workshops. It seems impossible to tell, which of these three sectors was (most) responsible for the ‘interregional’ fashion, though the imperial jewellery produced by the aurifices specierum clearly shows ‘interregional’ features. Imperial jewellery is, therefore, the most likely trendsetter. There are a number of feasible possibilities as to how the ‘interregional’ fashion may have spread, for example through models, pattern books, or travelling craftsmen. However, as indicated by some of the jewellery from Abuqir Bay and other pieces, it can be excluded that all high-quality jewellery with ‘interregional’ techniques, shapes, motifs, and styles was made in Constantinople (Pls 1 and 4).

**Notes**

4. See n. 2.
5. Stolz (n. 3), 130–4.
8. Almost all published pieces of jewellery have been attributed to Constantinople, and it is thus impossible to list them all.
12. Boyd (n. 11), 142f.
14. On the Assiut material, see Y. Stolz, ‘Eine kaiserliche Insignie? Der Juwelenkragen aus dem sog. Schatzfund von Assiût’, *JBZGM* 53 (2006), 521–603, at 555–62; for the bracelet in Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Inv. no. 38.64.38; Ross (n. 11), 44–6, no. 46, pls XXXVI, XXXVII; I. Baldini Lippolis, *L’oreficeria*
I. Coinage, Kommission, 10), Vienna, 1981, 289–91; P. Grierson, Alleinregierung (610–720). Rekonstruktion des Prägeaufbaues aus Hahn, from 680 until Leo III (717–41), in Sicily from Tiberius I (578–82) to and later under Tiberius II (578–82) until around 780, in Sardinia or Justinian II (685–95) until Leo III (717–41), in Ravenna in the 5th century, in Naples possibly from Constantine IV (668–85) (608–10) and under Heraklios perhaps in 617, in Carthage from (1963), 806–15 on the armour. 

2. VI. 2:22:7 (Krueger [n. 22], 464). 


18. Stolz, 'Intelligible Beauty'.
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New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. no. 17.190.1664 and 17.190.1670, Berlin, Antikensammlung, Inv. no. 30219, 506: Stolz (n. 14), 556f.


For a coloured image of Theodora see, G. Bovini, *Ravenna und seine Mosaiken*, Munich, 1962, fig. 41; Ariadne in Florence, Bargello: W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz, 1976, 49f., no. 51, pl. 27; Ariadne in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum: *ibid.*, 50, no. 52, pl. 27.

Stolz (n. 14), 521–603.

Feppert-Lippitz (n. 16), 63.

Bucharest, Muzeul National de Istorie a Romaniei.

Deppert-Lippitz (n. 16), 57–9, with fig. 20.


New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. no. 17.190.1664 and 17.190.1670, Berlin, Antikensammlung, Inv. no. 30219, 506: Stolz (n. 14), 556f.

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Stolz (n. 14), 521–603.


