

THE WILSHERE COLLECTION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH ANTIQUITIES IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD

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The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford recently acquired from Pusey House, Oxford the Wilshire collection of Early Christian and Jewish antiquities. The objects include the third largest collection of gold-glass fragments in the world. These come from catacombs in the environs of Rome and are decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Another category is represented by inscriptions, most of which come from a Jewish catacomb on the Via Appia. The collection reflects the interests of the original owner Charles Willes Wilshire, who was a keen supporter of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has recently acquired a remarkable assemblage of Early Christian and Jewish antiquities from Rome, consisting of marble reliefs and inscriptions, as well as a formidable collection of gold-glass fragments. For a century or so, they belonged to Pusey House, the Museum's neighbours in St Giles. They had been given the collection by Charles Willes Wilshire, a Hertfordshire landowner, who had stipulated that they should never leave Oxford. It was in the light of this stipulation, and thanks to the generosity of the Governing body of Pusey House, that The Museum was able to acquire the collection at a figure that was considerably less than the current market valuation. As it was, a quarter of a million pounds had to be raised. That this was achieved within a few months was due to the generosity of various public bodies and private individuals. Thanks are due to the National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Art Fund, Victoria & Albert Fund, the Patrons of the Ashmolean, the Friends of the

Ashmolean, the Young Friends of the Ashmolean, Mr Andrew Williams and Professor James Fenton. Professor Fenton also generously donated a copy of the standard work on late Roman gold glass, C. R. Morey's *The Gold Glass Collection of the Vatican Library* (Vatican City, 1959), which includes a detailed catalogue of the three dozen pieces in the Pusey House collection. The marble reliefs were inaccessible at the time of writing, and this overview is restricted to some of the inscriptions (previously discussed by GARUCCI 1872-1881, vol. 3; WEBSTER 1929; ROBERT 1937; KRAABEL 1979) and gold-glass fragments (cf. GARUCCI 1872-1881, vol. 3, VOPEL 1899; WEBSTER 1929; MOREY 1959; VATTONE 2000, GRIG 2004; RINI 2006). It is presented here in the hope that it will be pleasing to our honorand, himself no stranger to Early Christianity or to Rome, and who has from time to time found academic sustenance in Oxford.

Charles Willes Wilshere succeeded to the family estate, The Frythe, Welwyn, Hertfordshire, in 1867. The Frythe was built by Edward Blore in 1846 for William Wilshere, Charles' brother. It is a fine brick-built house and even had its own private chapel. It passed to Wilshere's three daughters on his death in 1906, before becoming in the 1930s a hotel aimed at, according to the advertisements "retired officers, and gentry". On the outbreak of war, some very active officers arrived and announced to the staff and residents that the Frythe had been seized for the war effort. During the winter of 1939 the Frythe was used by Section D (for Destruction) of MI6, before becoming the headquarters of Special Operations Executive (SOE) in 1940 (<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/jeffery.knaggs/Frythe.html>).

What is much more to the point in the present context, however, is that Mr Wilshere's religiosity was of a very special kind. He was an active Anglican layman, and a supporter of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England. It has been said that "Ecclesiastically it was the golden age of the leisured Anglo-Catholic layman, personified in such figures as Athelstan Riley, Lord Halifax, Sam Gurney and Sir Hubert Miller, Bart., the feudal squire of Froyle, whose gamekeepers, valets, butlers and parlour maids were chosen on their ability to serve solemn High Mass in the village church of The Assumption at Froyle and to sing a passable Schubert in G at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning; and Diarmid, Duke of Argyll, a bachelor who sang Evensong to himself and God in a falsetto voice in his chapel at Inverary Castle ..." (SALTER n.d.). It was to such a circle that Mr Wilshere belonged, and Pusey House was a highly suitable repository for his collection. It was named after Edward Bouverie Pusey, who, after the now Blessed John Henry Newman, had been the figurehead of the Oxford

Movement. He was a controversial figure in a world that generally speaking did not hold with his “Roman” ways.

Mr Wilshere made several visits to Italy, where he purchased ancient artefacts, mostly in Rome. He was not simply “souvenir hunting”, but had a serious objective. Not only did he share with a number of wealthier members of Victorian society an interest in the ancient world and in acquiring some of its remains, but he chose antiquities that threw light on ecclesiastical history, especially the early days of the Christian church, as well as its Judaic roots. He earned a reputation in Hertfordshire as an antiquarian and as “a gentleman to whom archaeology is much indebted for the preservation of many interesting relics which must, but for his intervention, have been lost” (CUSSANS 1874, 117). Mr Wilshere was honoured by Pope Leo XIII for what we are told was “his generosity in giving the top of a triumphal arch which he had rescued from a stone-mason’s yard and piece of Christian glass, both now in the Vatican” (KRAABEL 1979, 42, n. 6). The glass is still to be found in the collections of the Vatican Library (it is No. 79 in Morey’s catalogue), but my colleague Paolo Liverani kindly informs me that the “top of the triumphal arch” can no longer be located. But for all the expressions of friendship between the High Anglican Mr Wilshere and the Pope, Leo XIII took a dim view of the validity of Anglican orders, and said so in his encyclical *Apostolicae Curæ* in 1896.

It is thanks to a detailed study by A. Thomas Kraabel (KRAABEL 1979), that we now know much more about the findspot of the Jewish antiquities in the Wilshere collection. Most of the inscriptions are Jewish, and most are written in Greek, the prevalent language in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. One of them is highly unusual, however, for it while the letters are Greek, the language is actually Latin. The deceased was clearly Jewish, as is indicated by the prominent Menorah.

The text reads *Βενερωσα (Venerosa)*
αυρων (= annorum) XVII
ε (et) κον (cum) μαρι του (marito) ζ (suo)
μησις (menses) XV

As Professor Kraabel points out, the Latin is “far from classical” (KRAABEL 1979, 43-5), but it tells a poignant story of Venerosa, who lived for 17 years, but only 15 months with her husband. Such a mixture of Greek and Latin is not unparalleled among Jewish inscriptions from Rome, and most come, like Venerosa’s tombstone, from a Jewish catacomb discovered in 1857 just off the Via Appia Antiqua in Rome (LEON 1960, 13-16). It was located beneath a vineyard then owned by one Ignace Randanini, and is usually known as the Vigna Randanini catacomb, one of six

known to have belonged to the Jews of ancient Rome. A third of the Jewish inscriptions known from Rome are from the Vigna Randanini, and eight of them are in the Wilshire collection. Most inscriptions have been removed from the Vigna Randanini today, but originally they would have been plastered in front of the rock-cut niches in which the remains of the deceased had been placed.

A word may be in order concerning the Roman catacombs in general. Rome in the third and fourth centuries AD was the capital of a great empire, many citizens of which were being converted to Christianity, thanks in the first instance to the missionary activities of the apostles. St Paul travelled among, preached to, and corresponded with, incipient Christian communities in Asia Minor and Greece before being martyred in Rome under Nero. St Peter shared a similar fate at about the same time. The pagan Romans ideally chose to be cremated-but with the increasing scarcity of timber, burial in elaborate sarcophagi became common. Christians, however, always preferred inhumation, and in this followed Jewish precedent.

The Roman catacombs consist of dozens of separate Christian sites and several pagan and Jewish sites located around the old *pomerium*, or sacred boundary of the city. Catacombs were meant exclusively as places of burial, but gradually cults of martyrs grew around their burial places, churches were built, and Christians chose to be buried nearby. There is a persistent tradition that the catacombs served as places of refuge for the Christians of Rome in times of active persecution, but no evidence survives to support this romantic notion. They were excavated and utilized for a little over two hundred years, from about A.D. 150 until the later fourth century. Experts estimate that between 60 and 90 miles of galleries were dug by, who served as both tunnelers and guides to visitors. Excavation was made relatively easy by the fact that the ground involved consisted of relatively soft volcanic *tufa*, a stone that was easy to dig through and that hardened when exposed to air, eliminating the need for internal bracing. The excavated rock was useful as building material and was readily saleable. The name catacomb derives from the name of the location of San Sebastiano, about a mile beyond the great gateway that also bears the martyr's name. *Ad cat-acumbas* referred to the hollow in which the church and burial area were located, and as this was the only such site that remained known and open to Romans and pilgrims throughout the middle ages, the name stuck and came to be applied to all such underground burial areas.

The catacombs stretch out along the principal highways that leave Rome in every direction. They vary in the degree of elaboration with which they are decorated. Some might have *arcosolia* decorated with pagan motifs,

while others might have explicitly Christian scenes such as the Raising of Lazarus, or the Good Shepherd. Old Testament scenes are frequently found as well: Adam and Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, or Jonah and the Whale, or the Boys in the Fiery Furnace: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who had refused to worship the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's golden idol and paid the penalty. Their story made an appropriate paradigm for Christian martyrdom. Daniel in the Lion's Den played a similar role: another story of one who had fallen foul of a pagan potentate. They are mostly painted in a rough and ready unsophisticated style that is characteristic of much early Christian art.

Some of these motifs are to be seen among the gold-glass fragments in the Wilshere collection, as we shall presently see. There is more however to be gleaned from the Vigna Randanini catacomb whose decoration was rather more sober, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of aniconic representation. The only adornment is a Menorah, the image which appears on most of the inscribed tombstones in the Wilshere collection. One of these (WEBSTER 1929, 151, No. 5) is in Latin, or at least mostly in Latin, written in Roman characters. The Menorah attests to the Jewish faith of the deceased, and the inscription reads: "Alexander, sausage-seller (*butularius*) in the market who lived 30 years, a good soul and the friend of all": *anima bona, omniorum amicus*. So far so good, but the last sentence presents problems if it is read just as Latin: *dormitio tuo inter dicaeis*: "may your sleep be among the just", where *inter dicaeis* is somewhere between a transliteration and translation of the Greek μετὰ τῶν δικαίων. This phrase recurs on another of the Wilshere inscriptions (WEBSTER 1929, 151, No. 9) that is incomplete, but which clearly came from the tomb of Zotikos who is described as *archon*, indicating meaning that he was President of his particular Jewish Community. And just as was the case with Alexander, his "sleep is with the just". There are additional symbols, some carved and some painted. There is a two-handled drinking vessel carved below, and perhaps another, handleless vessel nearby. In the bottom right is an elegant seven-branched candlestick incised – or so it would appear – as an afterthought, and an ethrog painted in summary fashion.

Another inscription has preserved the original colour with which the letters and symbols were emphasised. It is decorated with two Menorot, and was set up by Pardos to his daughter Sabina, who lived for 16 years. It concludes "in peace is her rest". These inscriptions have a timeless, touching, simplicity.

The inscriptions are not the only Jewish artefacts to come from the Vigna Randanini. There are hundreds of Jewish *inscriptions* known

from Rome, but the perhaps the rarest of the Wilshire artefacts, and certainly of the Jewish pieces, is a fragment of greenish glass (Fig. 1; MOREY No. 359; AN 2007.6a)¹ with part of the representation of a Menorah. Two of the branches can be seen, and on top of one them is a golden lamp with a handle and a burning wick. To one side is a lighted taper. Although very fragmentary, this is an important artefact, and judging by earlier drawings, there was slightly more of it to be seen in the nineteenth century. There is also part of an inscription.

This piece will serve to illustrate something of the technique employed by the craftsmen who made the rest of the gold glass in the Wilshire collection. Imagine that the complete disc was at the bottom of a bowl, the walls of which have been broken off. There is a very thin layer of gold sandwiched between two layers of glass. The upper layer is perhaps only about 1 mm thick and would have continued into the fragile wall of the bowl, while the base is perhaps 5 mm thick. The amount of gold used is minimal. It is said that an ounce of gold can be beaten into a sheet covering 9 square metres, and judging by the cracked condition of some of the details here, this gold was beaten thinner still. Nevertheless, it required a certain amount of dexterity to cut the designs, and to line everything up during the glassmaking process.

One piece (Fig. 2; MOREY No. 366; AN 2007.13) is comparatively well preserved: and we should recall that practically all known pieces of early Christian and Jewish gold glass were already fragmentary in antiquity. There is a complete vessel in the Cleveland Museum of Art, but it is widely suspected to be a modern forgery. The fragments are said to have been found in the Roman catacombs, already trimmed down to their central medallions and then embedded in the plaster near a tomb, but since the catacombs have been systematically explored and looted since the early 17th century, none remain *in situ*. The bowls were originally drinking vessels, as is suggested by the wording around the central medallion here: PIE ZESES - "drink and long life to you" in Greek, but written in Latin characters. Perhaps a quarter of the known gold glass fragments contain allusions to drinking and life.

There is a married couple shown in the central medallion; the wife with an elaborate hair-do, and jewelled around the forehead. She has a jewelled collar, and embroidered clothes. She holds a scroll with both her hands: her marriage lines, perhaps. Her husband wears a tunic and pallium with a border. Then, in the outer decorative band, there are scenes

1. AN = Ashmolean Museum, Antiquities.

from the Old and New Testaments. Directly above the couple is Christ curing the paralytic. "Take up thy bed and walk", he is reported to have said, and here we see the former cripple actually doing so. Next to the right is the Raising of Lazarus, who is still swathed in a shroud. Then comes God upbraiding Adam and Eve, with the serpent and the tree between them, and then Abraham about to sacrifice the infant Isaac before his hand was providentially stayed by the arrival of an angel bearing a ram. There is no angel, but the ram is there. And finally Moses striking a rocky cliff from which water streams down.

We must, however, keep this gold glass in proportion. We are dealing with the late Roman equivalent of "People's Art", rather than high status luxury items. There are some pieces of late Roman gold glass that are truly remarkable, such as a roundel now in the Museo Civico in Brescia (VOLBACH and HIRMER 1958, fig. 61). The knotted dress of the woman in the centre indicates that she was a devotee of Isis, and the image of the family of Vounnerius Caramus, that is almost like a Daguerrotype in its detail and clarity, shows the high quality of what was made at altogether another level of glass production for pagan patrons.

The portraits of Peter and Paul in the central medallion (Fig. 3; MOREY No. 388, AN 2007.35) come nowhere near those standards. The figure in the outer frieze is said to be Susanna standing above them between two trees. She holds her hands out in the position of prayer – the "orant" position – and wears a tunic decorated with a vertical strip of buttons or gems, a mantle with lateral floating folds, and wearing earrings and a veil. There is a naive directness about these images that is always unsophisticated, but at times endearing. The inscription, "dignitas amicorum", or "the worthiness of friends", is another regular invocation on these glass drinking vessels, invoking conviviality. Another fragment (Fig. 4; MOREY 365; AN 2002.12) has a beardless Christ about to crown with wreaths, assuming he has another in his missing hand, a certain John and if these individuals are saints, then probably Peter. We have already had Peter and Paul, here John certainly, and on another fragment (Fig. 5; MOREY 363; AN 2007.10) around a small central image of Christ, there are Peter, Luke, and Sustus, or Pope Sixtus II, who had been martyred in AD 258, some decades before the bowl was made in the 4th century.

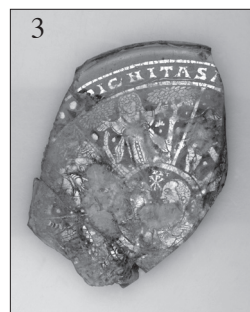
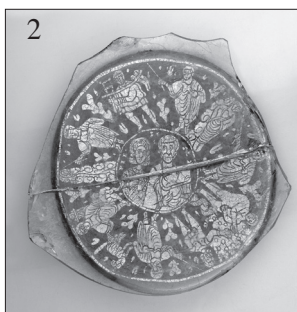
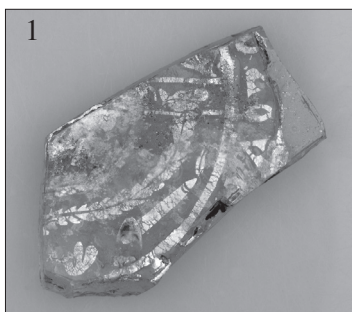
Another fragment (MOREY 360; AN 2007.7) has Petrus, Paulus, Julius and Sixtus, much more clearly legible on a reversed drawing (Fig. 6). Yet another fragment (MOREY 364) is a little more accomplished than some of the others, and has an additional red pigment, also sandwiched between two layers of glass. Again a reversed drawing is helpful (Fig. 7). It shows

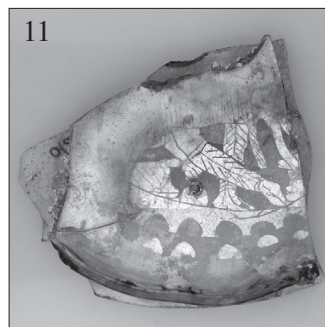
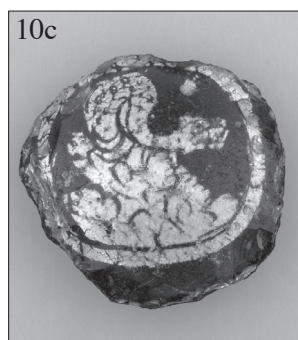
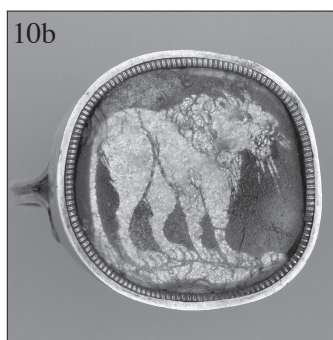
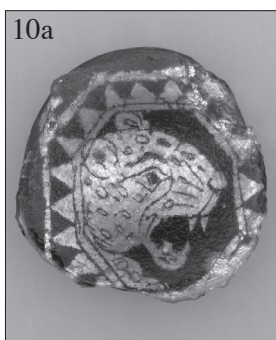
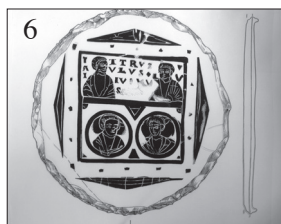
Christ enthroned between Saints Peter and presumably Paul, and beneath them a conclave of Saints identified as Timothy, Sixtus, Simon and Florus.

Another piece (Figs 8-9; MOREY 379; AN 2007.26) shows a man and a woman praying, with a chi-rho symbol above their heads, and a book scroll in the field between them. The woman has curly hair visible beneath a bonnet, and wears a jewelled collar or necklace above a tunic and embroidered palla. The man wears a dalmatic, a reminder that some liturgical garments were inspired by the formal dress of a Roman gentleman of the third or fourth century. Mr Wilshere was perhaps aware of this detail on one of his gold-glass fragments.

There is another category of gold-glass: small roundels that were set like jewels in the walls of bowls, and there are several interesting examples. One shows an angry leopard (Fig. 10a; MOREY No. 368; AN 2007.29), another an even angrier lion, set in a 19th century ring (Fig. 10b; MOREY No. 382; AN 2007.15). Others have a snake on a rock (Fig. 10c; MOREY No. 371; AN 2007.18), a mythical scene: Heracles and the stag of Cerynitis (Fig. 10d; MOREY No. 369; AN 2007.16), and a figure of Christ, short-haired and beardless, in a tunic (Fig. 10e; MOREY No. 375; AN 2007.22).

There are more than thirty fragments in the Wilshere collection. As such it constitutes the third largest assemblage in the world, after the collections in the Vatican and the British Museum. Until the Ashmolean acquired the Wilshere collection, all it possessed was a single fragment, bequeathed by Edward Oldfield, librarian of Worcester, in 1900. It shows a seated figure, with legs crossed (Fig. 11; MOREY No. 394; AN Oldfield 44). It is very unusual for such an important collection to be made available, and the Ashmolean is very fortunate to have been able to obtain this material that gives us such an intimate glimpse into the lives and tastes of the simple folk who lived – and died – in fourth century Rome.





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SAŽETAK - SUMMARIUM

ZBIRKA WILSHERE STAROKRŠĆANSKIH I ŽIDOVSKIH STARINA MUZEJA ASHMOLEAN, OXFORD

Ashmolean Muzej u Oxfordu nedavno je otkupio od Pusey House u Oxfordu zbirku *starokršćanskih i židovskih starina Wilshere*, koja uključuje i treću najveću zbirku ulomaka pozlaćenog stakla na svijetu. Ulomci, pronađeni u katakombama u predgrađu Rima, ukrašeni su scenama iz Staroga i Novog Zavjeta.

Druga kategorija spomenika su natpisi, većinom iz židovske katakombe na Via Appia. Charles Willes Wilshere bio je izvorni vlasnik zbirke, koja odražava njegova zanimanja. Bio je pobornik Oxfordskog pokreta u Engleskoj Crkvi.