A FOURTH-CENTURY ASSEMBLAGE OF GLASS FROM THE ROMAN VILLA OF CAN PALAU, BARCELONA, SPAIN

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INTRODUCTION

In 1999 the archaeological site of Can Palau (Sentmenat), 24km from Barcelona, was found. This site consists of a mausoleum with a necropolis annex (4th century) and a collection of domestic rubbish pits belonging to a Roman villa found beneath the nearby country house of Can Palau, situated about 100m from the excavated site.

The material originating from the rubbish pits is made up of ceramics of general use, and plates and dishes, amongst which stand out some fine ceramics of African (ARS – African red slip: Hayes 1972) and Gaulish origin (Lucente: Lamboglia 1963). Related to these contexts, 72 Roman coins were recovered, which, together with the ceramics, permit the dating of the rubbish pits to two exact periods, the first datable between AD 330 and 360 and the second between AD 360 and 390–400.

In this paper we present the results of the study of the glass associated with these contexts, and detail the forms and minimum numbers of identified pieces using the Clasina Isings catalogue as a reference (Isings 1957).

Fig. 1 Glass vessels from contexts dated between AD 330 and 360; scale 1:3
FIG. 2 Glass vessels from contexts dated between AD 360 and 390; scale 1:3

CONTEXTS DATED BETWEEN 330 AND 360

The archaeological contexts attributed to this period are formed by eleven rubbish pits with similar vessel glass dated from fine wares (forms Hayes 58B, 59 and 61A) and coins, among which the latest are those of the Constantinian dynasty. In these rubbish pits there is no evidence of any material earlier than AD 330 or later than 360. In total a minimum of 35 vessels (143 fragments) have been documented, all of colourless blown glass, with light tones of green or very diluted blue. The predominant shape is form 106, with a minimum of 26 vases identified, with conical body, bevelled edge and flat base, slightly concave, without any identified decoration. Some of them present an open base-ring where the body and the base are joined (FIG. 1.1–16).

There are a few other types of vessels, identified generally from one or two fragments – three bowls with a tubular rim (FIG. 1.19–21) and one rim from a form 120 bottle (FIG. 1.24). There is also a gaming piece in opaque dark glass (FIG. 1.27) and a black bead with a yellow wavy line and blue drops (FIG. 1.26).

CONTEXTS DATED BETWEEN 360 AND 390–400

These contexts are dated by the fine pottery of African origin, specifically the Hayes (1972) forms 53A, 53B, 58B, 59, 61A, and 70, and by the presence of coin types AE3 and AE4. The absence of fine pottery of Gaulish origin (Derives des sigillées paleochretiennes), generally present in the archaeological sites of Catalonia from the beginning of the 5th century, permits the dating of the later contexts from Can Palau to before the beginning of that century, dating back to Theodosian times.

In total a minimum of 48 vessels (137 fragments) have been documented. The colourless form 106 glass vessels are still the ones most found and are identical to those from
the earlier period, with a minimum of 26 pieces (FIG. 2.1–15). We have documented for the first time the presence of some olive green pieces — there are a pair of two-handled form 127 bottles (FIG. 2.26–7), and three globular form 120 bottles (FIG. 2.23–5). Also present are some fragments of engraved glass, all colourless, with a minimum of five receptacles — a cylindrical form 126 bottle, decorated with abraded ovals and engraved lines (FIG. 2.28), a shapeless fragment of wheel-cut glass, with a grille decoration (FIG. 2.29), a form 96b bowl with wheel-cut decoration in the motif of a palm leaf (FIG. 2.30) and a fragment of a form 103 bottle with wheel-cut concentric circles (FIG. 2.21).

**Engraved Fragment with Applied Gold Leaf**

We have left to the end the study of the cut fragment CP-114-87 (FIG. 3.1–3). This is a fragment of colourless glass, with the outside surface decorated by a wheel-cut engraving. This represents a male bust, freehand engraved, looking to the left, with the hair styled a calotta, beardless, dressed in a tunica and pallium with clavi, framed in an octagonal wheel-cut line. Originally this bowl had an applied gold-leaf finish, possible with painted details most clearly visible on the clavi of the tunica. These had been abraded with less care than the rest of the figure, very probably to receive a glaze, possibly red.

Iconographically, this bust, engraved with a very similar technique to the glyptic, represents a Christian character very probably an apostle or saint, stylistically close to some vases decorated by fondi d’oro originating from Rome (Morey 1959; Zanchi Roppo 1969), though the fragment described here is technically very close to other types of vase with applied gold leaf, like the cup of Köln-Braunsfeld (Harden et al. 1987, 25–7). It is necessary to mention here the recent publication of two fragments of engraved vases with an applied gold leaf, originating from Zaragoza, one of them with zoomorphic motives, engraved freehand, geographically very close to our fragment (Ortiz 2001, 174–5, pl. 34.1).

From the dimensions and the direction of the wheel-cut line, this fragment seems to be attributable to form 96b bowls in which the cut lines, and other framed images with the busts of characters, would form a central figure motif. Parallels to these radial compositions, generally some apostles surrounding Jesus, Saint Peter or Saint Paul are documented in some fondi d’oro published by Morey (1951, particularly nos 36, 52, 104 and 105 from the collections of the Vatican Library and Museo Sacro). At the same time the use of octagonal frames with figured compositions is well documented in diverse fragments conserved in different collections (Morey 1959; Zanchi Roppo 1969). All these elements permit us to attribute the fragment, without too much risk of error, to a workshop linked to the city of Rome, probably active during the second half of the 4th century AD.

Some slightly later villas have also provided examples of cut glass, all datable to the second half of the 4th century AD. Among these may be noted: the bottom of a form 116b plate from the Villa de l’Aiguaquit in Terrassa (Barcelona), with an engraved tree (FIG. 4.1); a form 116b bowl from Poble-Sec (Sant Quirze), attributable to the grupo Saguí (Saguí 1997) with the iconographic motif of a hunting scene (FIG. 4.2); and a form 116b bowl from Can Tarres (La Garriga), decorated with lined motifs. An exceptional form 96b bowl (FIG. 4.3) and a form 116b plate (FIG. 4.4) originating from the urban villa of l’Arxiu Administratiu in the city of Barcelona (Beltrán de Heredia 2001, 156–7) may also be mentioned; both pieces have hunting scene motifs and are attributable to the workshop of maestro Daniel in the city of Rome (Paolucci 2002). All these bowls, chronologically placed during the second half of the 4th century AD, are associated stratigraphically with the construction and reconstruction phases of important villas of rural and urban character. They constitute at present one of the rare archaeological elements to indicate the location and distribution of rural and urban aristocracies of the 4th century AD in the territorium of Barcino.

**Conclusion**

The glass vessels of Can Palau, despite their extreme fragmentation, originate from some well-dated
archaeological contexts permitting the identification of
different types of glass receptacles of everyday use in an
aristocratic villa around Barcino, between the post-
Constantinian and Theodosian periods. Thus Isings forms
106, 120 and 127 are the most usual together with some
engraved glass vases of a more luxurious style. The
fragment of a form 96b bowl with an iconographic motif
of Christian character, a product of a workshop in Rome,
can be interpreted as a present or a purchase of a religious
object, linked to the personality and culture of the owners
of the villa, members of the small rural aristocracy.

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