

# A NOTE ON THE RESEARCH ON THE EWER WITH ENAMEL PLAQUES OF ST. MAURICE D'AGAUNE

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There are very few objects equally well-known in the early medieval archaeology and art history of Western Europe, Byzantium, Sassanian Iran, early Islam and the Avars, and one of them is the ewer from the monastery of St. Maurice d'Agaune. It has not been doubted for long now that the ewer itself is a ninth-century Carolingian goldwork. What are debated and uncertain, however, are the dating (6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century) and origin of the decorative enamel plaques. Views differ significantly especially regarding the latter (Iran, Byzantium, the Abbasid Caliphate, Avars, the Carolingian Empire, medieval Venice), in 1946 M. Aga-Oglu counted 13 (!) versions,<sup>1</sup> not including the theory of Avar origin, which was put forward only after the publication of the Turkish scholar's article.<sup>2</sup> Although I will not be able to provide here an answer either, I hope to contribute to research by eliminating two candidates from the list of the most probable places of origin.

The article by A. Alföldi was well received both by scholars involved in the research on the origin of cloisonné and by Hungarian archaeologists. The latter is easy to explain: for them the notion of Avar connections was simply attractive.<sup>3</sup> With regard to international research, the reason of the positive reaction could have been that they hoped to receive guidance regarding the cultural affiliation of an object and representational type unknown to them, but apparently of oriental origin. Since none of the possibilities taken into account till then had been convincing based on the available data, it was understandable that the idea of origin from a new region, a new culture, was engaging. We have to note, however, that none of the scholars who accepted A. Alföldi's views were well-trained in – or even superficially informed about – the archaeology of the Avars and the early medieval Carpathian Basin. As a consequence, they could not realize the insurmountable distance between the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune and the Avar material, and the unrealism of the reconstruction as a sceptre.

In the interpretation of international research, A. Alföldi proposed that the enamel plaques of the jar had come from the treasury of the Avar Khaganate, more precisely from a hypothetical Avar royal sceptre. In fact, he did not suggest that the plaques themselves were Avar products, only that the sceptre they decorated had been in Avar possession. According to Alföldi, the plaques were manufactured 'zweifellos in einem der großen Kunstzentren des frühislamischen Nahen Ostens'.

<sup>1</sup> Research on the jar has a 150 years long history. For a list of interpretations see AGA-ÖGLU 1946, 160–161. For a full literature see G. DE FRANCOVICH: Persia, Siria, Bisanzio e il Medioevo artistico europeo. *Nuovo Medioevo* 25. Napoli 1984, 139–189; THURRE 1996. For a detailed analysis of the enamel plaques see HASELOFF 1990, 25–31.

<sup>2</sup> ALFÖLDI 1949.

<sup>3</sup> See CS. BÁLINT: On "oriental preference" in the archaeology of Avars, Protobulgars and ancient Hungarians. In: J. Henning (ed.): *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement: Europe and Byzantium*. Berlin–New York (in press).



Fig. 1. Enamel plaques from the monastery of St. Maurice d'Agaune. 1–2: View of the plaques (after Haseloff); 3: cross-section of the plaque (reconstr. by Zs. Réti)

Before accepting the reconstruction as a sceptre, it would be advisable to verify whether the Avar Khagan had – or could have had – a sceptre, and what data are available regarding sceptres in the archaeology of the Eurasian steppe. The basis for A. Alföldi's concept was provided by an article by Gy. László, in which he reviewed the steppe connections of the Hungarian coronation sceptre.<sup>4</sup> (It is worth mentioning here that Gy. László made his doctoral dissertation<sup>5</sup> under the guidance of A. Alföldi.) Gy. László was the first to compare

<sup>4</sup> GY. LÁSZLÓ: Adatok a koronázási jogar régészeti megvilágításához [Contributions to the archaeological approach of the Hungarian coronation sceptre]. In: J. Serédi (ed.) *Szent István Emlékkönyv* [Memorial volume of King Stephen the Saint] III. Budapest 1938, 517–558.

<sup>5</sup> GY. LÁSZLÓ: Adatok az avarkori műipar ó-keresztény kapcsolataihoz [Data to the early Christian connections of the industrial art in the Avar Period]. Budapest 1935.

Avar Period bone whip-ends to a sceptre. (Their function – in lack of other evidence – is generally accepted.<sup>6</sup>) Their interpretation as sceptres, however, is supported neither by their size (3–5 cm in diam.), nor their position in graves. Two staff-ends, more or less similar to the Avar ones, are known from the Eurasian steppe, but neither their size, nor their globular ends resemble the sceptre reconstructed from the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune. The more important one is the gold-sheet staff-end from the seventh-century find of Mala Pereščepino (diam.: 3.3 cm),<sup>7</sup> since it most certainly comes from a ruler's (an Onogur Khagan? a Byzantine patrikios?) grave (*fig. 2.2*).<sup>8</sup> It is possible that it was a royal insignia, but it cannot be compared to a 'sceptre' reconstructed from, or in any way based on, the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune. Another, eighth-century bone whip-end, similar to the ones from the Avar Period, was found in the symbolic grave 58. D.14 of the Kök-Türk cemetery of Mongun-Tayga (Tuva) (diam.: 5 cm, *fig. 2.3*).<sup>9</sup> (The other grave-goods of this burial suggest in no way that this was the burial of a high-ranking person.) These data and articles were published after A. Alföldi's article, and at the time of writing he had no opportunity to examine the Avar Period staff-ends in person (and previously he had not engaged in the study of either the period or its objects). The significant discrepancy between the width of the reconstructed sceptre and the diameter of Avar Period staff-ends (3–5 cm and min. 7 cm see p.e. *fig. 2.1*) catches the eye immediately, and a sceptre made up of two rather flat hemispheres would be typologically unparalleled, unreasonable, and aesthetically unacceptable. There are other elements contradicting the sceptre-theory.

The first sceptres or staffs designating some kind of power were known in Han Period China and, according to recent observations and finds, in Sassanian Iran, from where they did reach early medieval Central Asia,<sup>10</sup> but their size or shape do not resemble the one reconstructed from the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune. Based on the Asian finds we may establish that early medieval leaders there did not use such insignia.<sup>11</sup> On a purely theoretical basis, however, we are not obliged to exclude the possibility that we may find such an object among the remains of the Avars, who lived in the heart of Europe for a long period and had good connections with Byzantium, Italy and Western Europe, since their western and south-western neighbours did know and use sceptres,<sup>12</sup> but the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune can simply not be used for such a reconstruction. Based on the photographs it is also evident that in the reconstruction A. Alföldi misrepresented the enamel plaques as closer to a semi-sphere. In fact it is doubtful whether A. Alföldi did study the ewer and enamel plaques in detail during his historical, art historian work (e.g. he does not mention sizes). In fact, the enamel plaques arch very slightly, excluding all kinds of spherical reconstructions. Their form, size and cross-section (*fig. 1.3*) do not give any reason to seek for a use other than having been made for the future ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune.

When assessing the assumed Avar connections of the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a huge distance between the latter and the Avar material, regarding both technique and representations. This seems to me to be insurmountable, since there are not even signs of goldwork that could be placed between the technical level of St. Maurice d'Agaune and that of the Avar finds. Among the more ambitious techniques, Avar goldsmiths used only granulation and paste inlay. For example, it has never even been suggested that the large buckle and the dress mountings decorated by niello and stone inlays from Kunbábony<sup>13</sup> were the products of an Avar workshop. It is also remarkable that the probably Indian almandines of the shirt-neck fitting from Kiskőrös-Vágóhíd<sup>14</sup> (probably of great value in those times<sup>15</sup>) were in a simple socket of rather

<sup>6</sup> For a review see É. GARAM: Avar kori csont ostor vagy kor-  
bácsvégek és ostorbuzogányok (Awarenzeitliche Knochenpeitschen-  
oder Korbatschenenden und Peitschenkeulen). *CommArchHung*  
1998, 109–121.

<sup>7</sup> A. I. SEMENOV: Pereščepinskij posoch, quoted by V. N.  
ZALESSKAJA–Z. A. L'VOVA–B. I. MARSÁK–I. V. SOKOLOVA–N. A.  
FONJAKOVA: Sokrovišča chana Kubrata. Pereščepinskij klad. Sankt-  
Peterburg 1997, 214–218.

<sup>8</sup> J. WERNER: Der Grabfund von Malaja Pereščepina und Kuvrat,  
Kagan der Bulgaren. Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften  
Phil.-Hist. Kl. Abhandlungen Neue Folge 91. München 1984.

<sup>9</sup> A. D. GRAC: Archeologičeskie issledovanija v Kara-chole i  
Mongun-tajge. In: Trudy Tuvinskoj kompleksnoj Archeologo-  
Ėtnografičeskoj Ėkspedicii I. Moskva–Leningrad 1960, 138, ris. 86.

<sup>10</sup> B. OVERLAET: Sasanian Bronze Sculptures in the Werner

Abegg Collection. In: K. Otavsky (ed.): Entlang der Seidenstrasse.  
Frühmittelalterliche Kunst zwischen Persien und China in der  
Abegg-Stiftung. Riggisberger Berichte 6. Riggisberg 1998, 247–265.

<sup>11</sup> A. Alföldi did acknowledge that this cannot be an Asian heri-  
tage of the Avars, but must be of East European origin.

<sup>12</sup> P. E. SCHRAMM: Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik.  
Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica I–III, 13/1–3. Stutt-  
gart 1954.

<sup>13</sup> E. H. TÓTH–A. HORVÁTH: Kunbábony. Das Grab eines Awa-  
renkhagans. Kecskemét 1992, colour plate 1, colour plate 2 (middle).

<sup>14</sup> A. MEIER-ARENDET (ed.): Awaren in Europa. Schätze eines  
asiatischen Reitervolkes 6.–8. Jh. Frankfurt am Main 1985, 54, fig.  
46.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with N. Adams, who examined the  
object in person.

poor craftsmanship. Finally, it should be noted that there is no enamel on the vessels of the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós<sup>16</sup> – which I consider the peak of Avar goldwork<sup>17</sup> – only glass plaque and paste inlays. It is out of question to connect the technique of the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune with Avar goldwork. It is also noteworthy – even alarming – that A. Alföldi, once a great expert of the archaeological material of the Avar Period,<sup>18</sup> did not use the finds of the Carpathian Basin, but historical assumptions, to support his hypothesis. Such a method in connection with an object is not only surprising, but also questionable, and the suggestion of the presence of 'Persian groups' among the Avars<sup>19</sup> is by all means unfounded. All in all, the emigrant Hungarian scholar should have known exactly that the Avar connection of the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune cannot be demonstrated based on the Avar archaeological material.<sup>20</sup>

During the half century since the publication of A. Alföldi's article, the amount of Avar Period archaeological material has multiplied, still there is no sign of the use of sceptres among the Avars, or of the Avar connections of the enamel plaques of the ewer from Switzerland. The theory of Sassanian origin has been refuted for just as long,<sup>21</sup> and objects recently delivered to museums and collections do not support this view either. Great progress has been made by making Caucasian enamels available for research in much greater number and on high-quality photographs.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, research on European and Byzantine enamel has gone through significant changes as well: most recently it has become clear that not a single one of the latter could be dated to the Pre-Iconoclastic Period.<sup>23</sup> A series of symposiums on Byzantine and European enamel-work was organized by the British Museum in the 80s, as a result of which it became evident that a complete revision is needed regarding questions of chronology, origin and distribution,<sup>24</sup> and the role of Western Europe in the latter<sup>25</sup> must be reconsidered as well. Perhaps the most important specific new result concerned St. Radegunda's (518–587) reliquary<sup>26</sup> from Poitiers.<sup>27</sup> Until recently, it was considered to be of Byzantine origin and was dated unequivocally, and in accordance with historical tradition, to the reign of Justin II (565–578).<sup>28</sup> By now, however, both the origin and the dating have been proved to be false: it has been demonstrated that the reliquary is a ninth-century (if not later, eleventh-century) Carolingian product.<sup>29</sup> This has serious consequences for the assessment of the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune as well, which is closely connected to it through its enamels. A realistic assessment of the current state of research was given by R. Cormack: 'The idea that the medium of enamel might 'document' a 'continuity' between the pre-iconoclastic period and the ninth and tenth century period of so-called 'Renaissance' must be abandoned too. And the notion of Byzantine exclusiveness and superiority in all the arts of the early Middle Ages is eroded.<sup>30</sup> The most recent sensational find is an enamelled fibula from Enger (Westphalia), found

<sup>16</sup> A. Alföldi followed here a remark by Mavrodinov: N. MAVRODINOV: *Le trésor protobulgare de Nagyszentmiklós*. ArchHung 29. Budapest 1943, 177.

<sup>17</sup> BÁLINT 2004.

<sup>18</sup> It is usually ignored by archaeological research that it was A. Alföldi, who first defined, and distinguished between, early and late Avar material: A. ALFÖLDI: *Der Untergang der Römerherrschaft in Pannonien*. Ungarische Bibliothek 10. Budapest–Leipzig 1924.

<sup>19</sup> ALFÖLDI 1949, 21.

<sup>20</sup> His error might have had a psychological explanation (as well). A. Alföldi left Hungary in 1946 for personal (and not political) reasons, and sought to find a job in Switzerland. This article was his first work written in emigration. It is clear from the article that by 1948 he had settled in Switzerland so well that he managed to get permission not only to examine the ewer, but also – for the first time ever! – to take it apart under the guidance of a restorer. After swift integration and being granted permission for research just as fast, he might have felt the need to produce scientific results as soon as possible – spectacularly achieved by demonstrating the connections of an object from a Swiss cloister with material from Hungary.

<sup>21</sup> AGA-ÖGLU 1946.

<sup>22</sup> CH. AMIRANACHVILI: *Les émaux de Géorgie*. Paris 1962; L. CHUSKIVADZE: *Medieval Cloisonné Enamels at Georgian State*

*Museum of Fine Arts*. Tbilisi 1984; JAVAKHISHVILI–ABRAMISHVILI 1986.

<sup>23</sup> D. BUCKTON: *Byzantine enamel and the West*. *Byzantinische Forschungen* 13 (1988) 241–242.

<sup>24</sup> For further literature see CORMACK 1994, 68, note 1.

<sup>25</sup> See. J. D. HOWARD-JOHNSTONE (ed.): *Byzantium and the West*. Amsterdam 1988.

<sup>26</sup> M. CONWAY: *St. Radegund's reliquary at Poitiers*. *AntJ* 3 (1923) 1–12.

<sup>27</sup> On a more personal note: I had the opportunity (in 1966, as a student) to have a look at the object long before I knew about the controversy surrounding it.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. K. WESSEL: *Byzantine Enamels*. Shannon 1969, 8; G. LACAM: *Civilisation et monnaies byzantines*. Paris 1974, 294, pl. LXXXVIII; HASELOFF 1990, 20 could not reach any conclusions regarding it. In his opinion, there are no analogous pieces either before or after the second half of the sixth century, and a later dating is impossible, since the enamel is thick, which does not occur in subsequent periods.

<sup>29</sup> D. Buckton's unpublished talk (1984), quoted by LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1993, 62, note 7; CORMACK 1994, 68–69.

<sup>30</sup> CORMACK 1994, 71.

in a pit firmly dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> Since a connection between Byzantium and this region can be assumed only through a long series of hypothetical links, this find confirms the need for further research on the West European origin of enamel.

Another noteworthy development of research is the emergence of an old-new theory emphasizing the leading role of the Caucasus region in goldwork. According to the most recent view, the enamels of the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune originate from Georgia.<sup>32</sup> Since recently I studied the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, I consider it important to discuss this in more detail, because the question of the origin of the enamels of the Swiss ewer has a bearing on the origin of the motifs of ewer No. 2 from Nagyszentmiklós as well. Are we witnessing the verification of a commonplace in the research on the treasure that suggests its connection with 'Caucasian goldwork' – always brought up but never supported by any finds?<sup>33</sup>

D. Thurre reviewed in full detail the history of the research on the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune, its way to the treasury of the abbey, and seems to be very well informed about general research on enamel-work. He quotes in abundance the available literature on Georgian enamel-work, emphasizes the significance of leucolour, indicating the use of manganese, but ignores exactly the most important point: archaeological finds and remains in museums and collections known so far do not support in any way the popular belief that the know-how of enamel-work was transmitted to Byzantium from there. When he finally commits himself for the eastern, more specifically Georgian, origin of enamel, we cannot decide whether he does that because he does not know well enough the archaeological literature he quotes, or because he handles the data arbitrarily. For example, the enamelled cuffs from Thessaloniki are not bracelets, and, more importantly, they are not 'vraisemblablemant' from the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but – according to the generally accepted view – from the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>34</sup> D. Thurre should have listed the fibula of Risano<sup>35</sup> (today: Risan, Serbia and Montenegro) among his arguments with more precaution – if at all – since it is usually placed – as he mentions as well – between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, an irrelevantly long time-span. (I see no weighty arguments for an early dating.) Due to the small number of finds it is often treated together with the Campana medallion, which shows a lower technological level than the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune, and has recently been dated conditionally to the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>36</sup> It also would have been important to touch upon the enamelled reliquary of the former Morgan collection, guarding a piece of the Holy Cross. (Among the series of extreme dates proposed for the latter [E. Lucchesi-Palli: 7<sup>th</sup> c., A. Frolov: 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> c.], the suggestion of 8<sup>th</sup>-century manufacture in Syria and/or Palestine is an important argument for Byzantine origin.) To continue the series of finds quoted by D. Thurre: the diadem of Preslav is dated unequivocally to the decades preceding its burial around 972, and not to the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century, as he writes.<sup>37</sup> The author made a fundamental mistake in connection with the diadem: he connected its *senmurv* with the *griffins* of St. Maurice d'Agaune. These two fantastic creatures, however, are very far apart both typologically and religiously. Furthermore, he obviously does not know about the best parallel of the griffin of St. Maurice d'Agaune from Nor-Bayazet, which – considering how classic Ya. I. Smirnov's work is – raises doubts about the author's general knowledge of early medieval eastern metallurgy. (Incidentally, he could have tried to use this Armenian

<sup>31</sup> G. ISENBERG: Ein Land im Wandel. Archäologie in Deutschland 1999/1, 32 (top).

<sup>32</sup> THURRE 1996.

<sup>33</sup> BÁLINT 2004, 242–243.

<sup>34</sup> S. PELEKANÍDES: Ta chrysa byzantina chormemates Thessalikis. Deltion tes Christianikes archaiologikes Hetaireias 1 (1959) 55–77; O. GRABAR: Deux manchettes émaillées byzantines. CArch 13 (1962) 293–296; L'art byzantin – art européen. Athènes 1964, No. 463; J. BECKWITH: Early Christian and Byzantine Art. London 1970, pl. 168. K. Wessel, representing the traditional point of view regarding the chronology of European enamel, and, following him, J. Lafontaine-Dosogne lean towards a dating in the 9<sup>th</sup> century: K. WESSEL: Die Kultur von Byzanz. Frankfurt/Main 1970, pl. I; *Idem*: Die byzantinische Emailkunst vom 5. bis 13. Jahrhundert. Beiträge zur Kunst des christlichen Ostens 4. Recklinghausen 1967, 10, 36,

64, No. 14; LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1993, 63. G. Haseloff is the only one, who dates it to a rather early period, the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries: HASELOFF 1990, 33.

<sup>35</sup> ROSENBERG (1921) 29, fig. 49–50; HASELOFF (1990) 49, fig. 25; A. MACGREGOR: A Summary Catalogue of the Continental Archaeological Collections (Roman Iron Age, Migration Period, Early Medieval). BAR IntSer 674. Oxford 1997, 227–228.

<sup>36</sup> ROSENBERG 1921, 30, fig. 51–52; Byzance. L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises. Paris 1992, 185–186. It also has to be noted that this griffin is not similar to the griffins of Nagyszentmiklós or St. Maurice d'Agaune, either regarding the ornamental details, or the representational type (shaping of the head and the neck, leaning on both forelegs).

<sup>37</sup> T. TOTEV: The Preslav Gold Treasure. Sofia 1982; LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1993, 64.



Fig. 2. 1: Whip-end of bone from Wien-St. Veit (Reitervölker aus dem Osten. Ausstellungskatalog, Eisenstadt 1996); 2: Golden staff-end from Mala Pereščepino (after Zalesskaja *et al.*); 3: Whip-end of bone from Mongun-Tayga (after Grač)

find as ‘evidence’ for his theory of the Georgian origin of enamel, although falsely, since it is an original Sasanian product.) We could easily forgive his oversight of the griffin of Nagyszentmiklós (cup No. 20), quite similar to that of St. Maurice d’Agaune, had he not tried – following A. Alföldi – to emphasize the Avar connections of the ewer of St. Maurice d’Agaune. D. Thurre, however, followed neither this possibility, nor the problems of the treasure (chronology, ethnic-cultural affiliation, glass inlays).

Beside these, the article is not exempt from historical and methodological errors either. What is the reason for elaborating concurrently on the ‘Avar connection’, if in the end the author wants to trace back the origin to Georgia? The assumption of any connection between the Avars and Georgia indicates a complete lack of knowledge on the history and archaeology of the Avars. It seems that with regard to D. Thurre this is indeed the case, otherwise he would not have written down the sentence that in Dalmatia and the Balkans, furthermore in the Caucasus, we may find the archaeological remains of steppe populations that have to be considered when examining the issue in question.<sup>38</sup> Of course, generally we may agree with this (except for Dalmatia, where they did not – for geographical reasons they could not – live), it is certainly curious, how the most well-researched and largest group of early medieval archaeological material, that of the Carpathian Basin, could be omitted from such a list. Although a scholar investigating the origin of European enamel-work usually cannot be blamed for such an

<sup>38</sup> THURRE 1996, 62.

omission, the situation is different, if Avar material culture plays an important role in his theory. It is similarly disturbing that when D. Thurre amplifies on the possibility of a Syrian origin of enamel-work, after mentioning 'Sassanian influences' reaching North Syria and Cilicia (what are these specifically?), he goes on with those from Azerbaijan (it is hard to see what he had in mind beside the few finds of Sassanian origin), all this without the least attempt to bridge the huge geographical and cultural gap between the three regions: the Near East, Anatolia and Transcaucasia. Only a thorough analysis of the representational type would allow invoking in connection with the representations on the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune the lions and griffins flanking the throne of King Solomon (972–932 BC) and the fact that Adarnase IV (AD 888–923), Bagratid king, regarded himself the offspring of Solomon and David. With regard to finds – beside a few metal vessels, a faceted glass cup and numerous drachmas – nothing supports D. Thurre's assumption that during the 4th to 7th centuries Georgia had intensive cultural contacts with Sassanian Iran. Had he realized that the above-listed finds certainly do not reflect 'intensive cultural contacts', furthermore, that written sources indicate political and religious resistance against Persia, this statement could have never been made. Finally, the idea that Georgia had a *direct* effect on Constantinople and the Danube Bulgars is not supported by any objects, ornamental elements or historical data.

His train of thought is not exempt from contradictions either. He himself quotes approvingly the sentence from N. P. Kondakov's work on early medieval enamels, according to which 'la grossièreté de la figure et du dessin témoignent suffisamment d'un travail géorgien'.<sup>39</sup> This statement and the high quality of the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune do not support his hypothesis of the Georgian origin of the latter. The chain of argument he follows is also arbitrary: having played off G. Haseloff (in whose opinion there was no enamel-work in Central Europe before the second half of the 8th century) against D. Buckton (who thinks that the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune are not of Byzantine origin), he reaches the conclusion that in this case the Iconoclastic Period (726–843) must be excluded as the time of manufacture of the plaques in question, just like the 9th century, considering the manufacture of the ewer in the third quarter of the that century (why?). From this follows that the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune were made before 726, or before the last quarter of the 8th century the latest, but D. Thurre goes even further: from all this he draws the conclusion that in the 6th–8th centuries there existed a goldwork tradition, to which only this Swiss ewer pays testimony. This line of thought can most certainly not be followed.

I have shown above the impossibility of the Avar connections of the enamel plaques of the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune. We may also exclude the possibility of Georgian origin; beside the complete lack of relevant finds from there, I would like to quote J. Lafontaine-Dosogne's polite words, according to which the theory of Georgian origin supported by Georgian scholars 'paraît difficilement acceptable'.<sup>40</sup> I consider N. Adams' judgement conclusive, since she is the only non-Georgian scholar, who has examined the relevant Georgian objects in person! According to her work under preparation, only the – very low quality! – enamel of the 3rd–4th century necklace from Aragvispiri<sup>41</sup> is older than the end of the 9th century, the date of the manufacture of the ewer under study here, all the others are later.<sup>42</sup> The – now out-of-date – assumption of Sassanian origin was even more unrealistic, as clearly shown in the light of the increased material. At the same time, the oriental character of the composition on the enamel plaques is obvious, this, however, does not necessarily mean that the objects themselves were made in the east. Students of the ewer usually quote more or less similar motifs from Near Eastern, Sassanian and early Islamic art, but – as far as I know – none of them have confronted the fact that no trace of enamel-work has been found either in the Sassanian, early Islamic or Avar material, not to mention such a high level of it (e.g. the high quality of the shaping of the cells and the unusual size of the enamelled surface), which we find on the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune. Our knowledge on Sassanian, Georgian and Avar gold-work has reached a state where *argumentum ex silentio* is already acceptable. In this light, the place of origin of cloisonné work can only be either Byzantium or – in a politically and culturally wider sense – the Eastern Mediterranean,<sup>43</sup> or Carolingian Europe, probably the latter, according to the current state of research.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> THURRE 1996, 63, note 91.

<sup>40</sup> LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1993, 63.

<sup>41</sup> JAVAKHISHVILI-ABRAMISHVILI 1986, fig. 77: medallion.

<sup>42</sup> Personal communication with N. Adams.

<sup>43</sup> C. JÄGGI: Vom römischen Pantheon zur christlichen Kirche. In: A. Furger *et al.*: Die Schweiz zwischen Antike und Mittelalter. Zürich 1996, 90.

<sup>44</sup> See notes 23–24.

What about the oriental character of the enamels of St. Maurice d'Agaune? Unfortunately, for a long time research tried to provide only ethnic explanations, e.g. assuming the presence of 'Persian' groups among the Avars (A. Alföldi). The hypothesis about the 'oriental' character of the pottery from Preslav, according to which 'Mesopotamian' (?) potters were working among the Danube Bulgars (J. Strzykowski, A. Grabar), was similar.<sup>45</sup> These are historically and archaeologically completely unfounded ideas, not supported by any other significant data; the appearance of a certain ornamental element should not be explained by the presence of a specific ethnic group. There is no need for such an explanation, since it is well known how many elements 9<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine art adopted from the East. Fortunately, there is a convincing art historical discovery, which could provide a better explanation for the oriental features on the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune. It has become clear that, beside the well-known 9<sup>th</sup>-century Macedonian Renaissance,<sup>46</sup> there is another trend in Byzantine art, manifesting itself through the imitation of 8<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic court art – itself consciously reaching back to Iranian roots – and expressing monarchic propaganda and rivalry. Examples include representations of animals in the medallions of textiles, a ruler contemplating dancers, the ascension of Alexander the Great, the decoration of the glazed floor tiles in the royal palace in Byzantium, and the use of floral ornaments of Near Eastern origin.<sup>47</sup> In my opinion, this is how we should evaluate the decoration of the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune as well. In my work devoted to the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, I pointed out that two motifs on the enamel plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune have their parallels on two of its vessels: the first is the griffin on one of the spherical segment shaped enamel plaques, whose composition and shaping resembles that on cup No. 20 of Nagyszentmiklós; the second is the 'tree of life' motif on the small rectangular plaques attached to the neck of the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune,<sup>48</sup> which – as observed already by A. Alföldi – shows similarity with the representation between the medallions of ewer No. 2 of Nagyszentmiklós. The appearance of griffins on the plaques of St. Maurice d'Agaune should have made the supporters of its oriental, Sassanian origin wonder, since this fantastic creature – regarding typology, but mainly its distribution – is unequivocally considered to be a Byzantine, and not an (original) oriental, Sassanian, motif. Similarly, parallels of the 'tree of life' on the rectangular plaques are found without exception on objects reflecting Byzantine influences, and never on Asian or Caucasian gold-work. The composition and type (the representation of lions or fantastic creatures flanking the Tree of Life, and the 'Tree of Life' itself) go back ultimately to the ancient Near East,<sup>49</sup> which means that their origin is irrelevant for the research on the enamel plaques of the ewer of St. Maurice d'Agaune. All the rest was added by the gold-smith, who drew on his knowledge and experience of Byzantine culture.

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<sup>45</sup> ALFÖLDI 1949, 19. It is easy to follow in Alföldi's sketchy history of research, how scholars changed their opinion according to newly emerging points of view, while everyone considered only ethnic approaches conceivable.

<sup>46</sup> K. WEITZMANN: *Geistige Grundlagen und Wesen der Makedo-*

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<sup>47</sup> GRABAR 1963.

<sup>48</sup> GRABAR 1963, pl. 4:6, 8.

<sup>49</sup> AGA-OGLU 1946, 165.

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