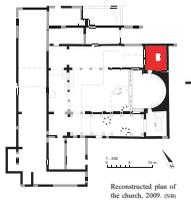


Making a Table

A Case Study of Provincial Late Antique Craftsmanship

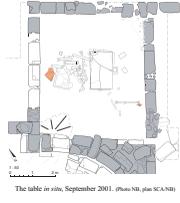


Exavation in a church at Ras el Bassit, on the North Syrian coast, yielded in 2001 the assemblage of a table and its unrobbed reliquary, found *in situ* in a room adjoining the apse to the North. While most of the marbles of the sanctuary and of the South adjoining room were robbed, the table had remained sealed with early seventh-century finds and only part of its tabletop was missing (Beaudry 2005a).



The table was composed of a tabletop, five column-shaped legs and a framed base slab. The base slab was pierced with a funnel leading into the sealed compartment of a reliquary, which drained into a second, deeper compartment that remained accessible. The sealed compartment contained two metal containers and a casket, all containing bone relics, as well as a glass flask. A liquid, probably olive oil, was meant to be poured into the funnel, sanctified by contact with the relics, and collected in the outer compartment. While the table itself belongs to a type widely distributed and copied across the Mediterranean in the sixth and seventh centuries, the association of relics with an altar remains unknown in the Syrian provinces and this full oil circulation system in a table base is unparalleled in the Levant (Beaudry 2005a, forth.).

Following a restoration attempted by the Museum of Lattakia, an assessment of the condition of the components of the table was carried in 2008 and its legs were cleaned by a professional conservator (Grammatikaki 2009). This allowed a detailed re-examination of one of the few complete, excavated specimens of such tables, and of the materials, tool marks, assembly marks, monograms and other evidence of the work of the craftsmen who made it. This poster is intended as a follow-up of a preliminary publication focused on typological and liturgical issues (Beaudry 2005b).



2. Craftsmanship

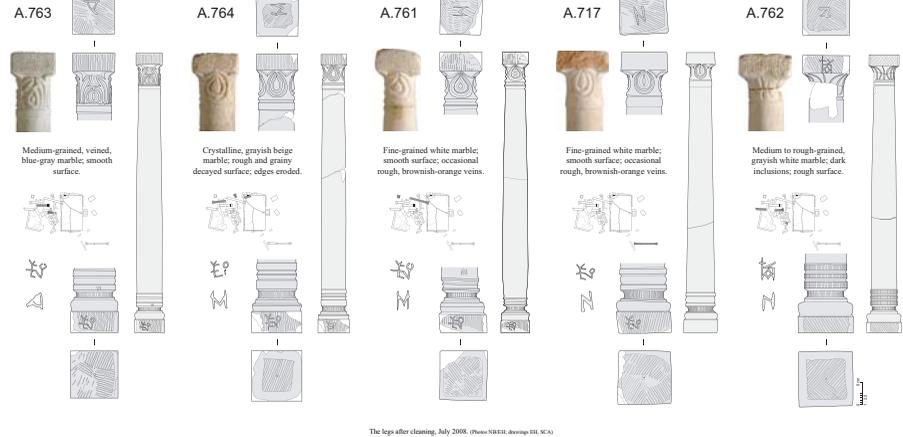
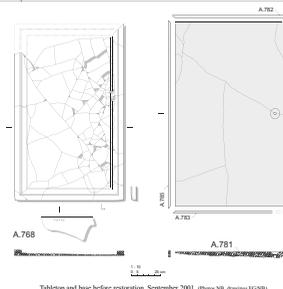
Four of the legs bear on their plinths a monogram that may be interpreted as a shop or craftsman's mark. Despite differences in materials, proportions and capital design, they belong to a same model and probably originate from a same shop that thus worked materials of different origins. Leg A.762 bears a different monogram on its abacus and belongs to a different series. However, all were made with the same techniques and tools. They were cut from irregular quadrangular blocks shaped with a toothed chisel; tool marks remain as the texture of the abacuses and plinths, and traces remain on a base (A.763) and a drum (A.761). Guide holes on their upper and lower faces allowed them to be set on a lathe, but actual turning played little or no part in their shaping, as their irregular profiles show. A texture cut with a pointed tool in a gorge of the bases echoes that of the plinths; other visible surfaces were polished. This interest for surface finish and visual effect and relative lack of interest in regularity and proportions is a characteristic of early Byzantine craftsmanship.

The tabletop was also inscribed on its lower surface before it was assembled, but this inscription has more the character of a *graffito* than that of a maker's mark. Guidelines on the upper surface of the reliquary have also been observed and photographed but they remain to be recorded and studied in detail.

1. Materials

Parts of such tables were widely distributed from the quarries of the Eastern Mediterranean. The tabletop being the most visible and most noble part of the assemblage, it was the most likely to be imported. The specimen of Bassit is made of fine white marble and belongs to the most common type, characterized by the thick profile of its rim (Chalkia 1991, type F). At a smaller scale, it is similar in material and profile to the main altar; both were probably imported together from an Aegean or Constantinopolitan quarry.

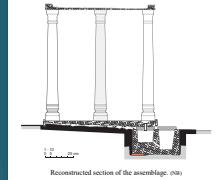
Less visible parts of the assemblage were more likely to be made locally from local materials or *spolia*. The base and its frame are made of a fine, blue-gray veined marble widely used in the plated decor of the sanctuary. The legs were made of four different materials, including blue-gray veined marble (A.763) and a poor-quality, crystalline white marble (A.764). The reliquary was carved from a damaged fence post in the same blue-gray marble and its cover plates were cut from a Roman frieze.



3. Assembly

Assembly marks on the upper surfaces of the legs include two M's, two N's, and an A identifying the central leg A.763. Its acanthus capital is the most elaborate and its dimensions are the most regular but it is color, rather than the quality of workmanship, that determined the repartition of the legs.

Legs of this type were normally set into the floor or into the sockets of a base, often bonded with mortar and sometimes with metal pins. The base of the table of Bassit is a large, flat slab and no evidence was found of mortared joints. Its frame is made of long, rounded-edged strips similar to the plinths and frames used in the wall plating of the sanctuary. The framed marble surface of the base took part in the staging of the relics, but the frame would only have marginally contributed to abut the sides of the corner legs, the weight of the tabletop offering the only significant resistance to lateral forces. This technique borrowed to the crafts of pavement and plating seems particularly inappropriate for this purpose, given the seismic activity of coastal North Syria in the sixth century. The limestone fence of the sanctuary and the limestone parapet of the gallery also relied entirely on gravity. Thus, while the design of the table base may have been motivated in part by the colors and surface of materials, it may also have reflected the limits of the technical repertoire of the craftsmen of Bassit at the end of Antiquity.



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