A ROMAN SILVER RELIEF
THE INDIAN TRIUMPH OF DIONYSOS

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This silver crescent was the ear, or handle, of a shallow dish. Such another dish was once found in the harbor at Bizerta in Tunisia, during dredging operations; it is circular, with two crescent handles, weighs nearly ten pounds, and is about a yard across, over all. If the dish to which our handle belonged was of the same pattern, its span was 21 1/2 inches. The handle is a thick piece of solid silver, and the ends, now broken off, were probably animal heads whose tapering muzzles, or flowing beards, if they were goats, formed the points of the crescent and merged into the outline of the platter. The two curving slits engaged suitable projections on the rim of the dish and, with solder, held the ear in place. The singular construction of the relief itself will be described below.

The subject is the Indian Triumph of Dionysos. The god, driving a chariot drawn by a pair of lionesses from his stable, wears a tunic and flying mantle, with the mask of his panther skin held tight at his waist by a girdle; he has a wreath in his hair and carries a thyrsos. A young satyr with a crooked stick, or pedum, is leading the docile pair by their harness. An old seilenos walks beside with a three-twigged plant; perhaps it is a strange plant from India. Behind is Pan with a syrinx. A bearded satyr dressed in a fawnskin, staggering under the weight of a pair of elephant tusks, brings up the rear. Those tusks are the spoils of India, and there is more booty. In the lower register of the relief are captured helmets, swords with their baldric, and pairs of greaves, one of each pair shown inside out. There are two trophies, each made of a helmet, shields, and cuirass, erected on a frame. Seated back to back at the foot of each trophy were two captives. These four figures are mostly missing, but the edges of the cavities that held them are preserved, and so is one of the actual figures, from the waist down. He must have had his arms bound high up on his back, like the prisoner on the Gemma Augustea in Vienna. In the middle, between the curved slits, is a pair of cymbals for Bacchic celebration, one of these also inside out.

The Indian Triumph of Dionysos was a mythic analogy of Alexander’s actual expedition to the Indus in 327–326 B.C. Dionysos was already known as a subduer of Asiatic regions (Euripides, Bacchae, ll. 13 ff.), and the story grew that he, like his conspicuous follower the Macedonian king, had invaded India after his own fashion, with satyrs, maenads, and Pans, and hosts levied from all the regions where he was reverenced, opposing the thyrsos to the spear, and, with howling and the sound of syrinx and cymbals as martial music, forced a happy peace on the dwellers in far places and left them the vine and its blessings (Nonnos, Dionysiaca, books xII ff.). The theme of the home-coming divinity, covered with glory and laden with strange spoils, was a topical one in imperial Rome, and the Indian Triumph of the wine god appears in Roman art, notably in the sarcophagi of the middle and later empire. From the style, including that of the faces, this relief looks to be Antonine or Aurelian, and the silversmith drew his inspiration from the same public mood as the sculptors of the sarcophagi.

The handle is said, with probability, to be from Iran. When acquired it had a thick incrustation, greenish on the low parts of the relief and blackish on the higher portions. This was broken near the tusk-bearer’s waist, exposing bright metal, by a blow from a tool—presumably the excavator’s pick, a corresponding bulge appearing on the back. So the piece seems to be a recent find. The technique employed in making this relief requires some description. It has no exact parallel, so far as I know, though the piecing out of hammered reliefs in silver was not
Silver handle of a dish. The relief represents Dionysos, with Pan and satyrs, returning victorious from his conquest of India. The highest parts of the relief were cast separately and inserted. Traces of gilding are preserved. Roman, 11th century A.D. Reproduced almost actual size. Rogers Fund, 1954
uncommon, and instances are given below, in the notes. Here the initial method was casting, and the raised figures, or rather those parts of them that project the most, together with some of the adjacent background, were cast separately in a different alloy, as small plaques, and fitted into cells in the main casting. The main casting contains eight or ten percent of copper, giving strength and durability, whereas the inserts show only a trace of it and were therefore readily malleable. They were, in fact, extensively re-modeled with tools after casting. It is to be supposed that the whole crescent, with its design, was first modeled in wax, with a minimum
thickness of about 1.5 millimeters. Then the higher reliefs were cut out and laid aside, and the remainder of the crescent was backed with a plain sheet of wax to bring the thickness to about 5 millimeters. The crescent would then appear with shallow cells to fit the cut-out pieces. Next, all parts were cast separately, and the small pieces inserted. At the ends of the crescent, where it bent and broke in antiquity, the figures of the captives fell out and left the cells exposed, as far as they are preserved. The floor of the cell is roughened with a punch, and the edges undercut so that the insert could be spread in and the lip of the cell hammered down. The join thus formed was very secure, and in parts of the relief it is still hard to find. In the sketch on this page the outlines of the inserts are indicated by unbroken lines. Grass, plants, baldrics, etc., were drawn in with a tool. The chariot wheel, now lost, was made separately and attached, as were also parts of the pedum and the stalk of the thyrsos. Gold leaf, some of which remains, was burnished on and pressed down round the edges with a sharp tool that has left a dotted line in the silver. These dotted lines appear on the sketch below. The gilding was used somewhat like the highlights of a picture. For instance, in the skirts of Dionysos parts of two folds were gilt, and of the folds that fly upwards from his left arm the middle one was gilt; one elephant tusk was, the other has no trace; the gilding points up the picture, as on the head of the thyrsos, the flowers of the old satyr’s plant, and the costly harness of the lionesses.

The width of the relief (acc. no. 54.II.8) is 8 15/16 inches, the thickness 3/16 inch. The dish from Bizerta is published by P. Gaukler in Monuments Plot, II (1895), pp. 77 ff., pls. viii, x; a handle of similar shape in this Museum is published in the Bulletin, II (1907), p. 122, fig. 5; for another, in the Louvre, see P. Gusman, L’Art décoratif de Rome, III (1912), pl. 67; others are listed by T. Schreiber in Alexandrínische Toreutik (1894), pp. 329 ff. On the technique of the splicing of silverware by inserted pieces see the article “Caelatura” by E. Saglio, in Daremberg et Saglio, Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines, I, 2, p. 801, and the instances there given in note 227; and A. Adriani, Le Gobelet en argent, Société royale d’archéologie d’Alexandrie, Cahier no. 1, 1939, pp. 17 ff. (I owe the latter reference to Mme L. Ghali.) The estimate of copper content in the two alloys was made by W. J. Young of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.