

# Eighteen new pieces from the late Roman silver treasure of Kaiseraugst: first notice

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From January 23 to March 7, 1999, a remarkable group of 18 Roman silver plates — all of them unrestored, some badly damaged — was placed on exhibition at the Art Gallery (Aargauer Kunsthau) at Aarau, Switzerland. The items had never been on show before. It was only in the summer of 1995 that they had been handed over to the Archaeological Service of the Kanton Aargau as being part of the famous late Roman silver treasure from Kaiseraugst. The purpose was to show the public what this totally unexpected new group looks like before any restoration or scholarly work was begun. As extensive publicity was not possible during the exhibition, this preliminary report is intended to present the new material to a wider section of the scholarly public without anticipating the results of any research to be undertaken in the near future.<sup>1</sup> One very promising source of information, for example, are the countless graffiti on the new plates, which will be dealt with by specialists.

At a moment hopefully not too distant, both the old and the new parts of the Kaiseraugst treasure will be on display in the Römermuseum Augst.

## Brief history of the discovery in 1961/62

On December 27, 1961, a bulldozer working on a muddy area within the Roman *Castrum Rau-racense* at Kaiseraugst (c.10 km east of Basel) unearthed one of the biggest late Roman silver treasures to have been discovered in modern times. The discovery itself over the winter of 1961/62 was a kind of detective story — to be continued, as it turns out, 35 years later. What is true for many extraordinary finds is even more true for the Kaiseraugst treasure: the “story is a complex and obscure one”.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is unfortunate that many questions concerning the concealment of the treasure in antiquity and its rediscovery in modern times will remain unanswered.

The operator of the bulldozer must have struck the cache of silver tableware and other valuable objects, which had probably been stored away in a wooden crate. Not realising what was happening, he scattered most of the objects, all covered by mud and earth, in an area of c.200 square meters. A few items had already been carried to a dump some kilometers away. The actual discovery of the treasure began on February 19, 1962. That was the day on which an alert member of the public from Basel, who had on the day before been for a walk through the *Castrum*, showed the big silver plate (no. 57<sup>3</sup>) which he had found to R. Laur-Belart, then in charge of the excavations at the Roman site of Augusta Raurica. They both went back to the find-spot of the plate, hoping that there might be more around. The owner of the nearby restaurant joined them, bringing 5 more silver plates (nos. 55, 56, 58, 60, 62), which she had picked up and stored away a month before. Gradually more and more items appeared: a schoolboy had taken home the Achilles dish (no. 63); the Ariadne dish (no. 61) was recovered from a rubbish pit; and the dump proved to hold three deep bowls (nos. 41, 51, 52) and a fish plate (no. 53).

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1 My warmest thanks go to Dr E. Bleuer, head of the Archaeological Service of the Kanton Aargau (Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie) at Brugg, who gave permission for this preliminary report to be published, and to K. S. Painter for his helpful comments and for converting my rough draft into correct English.

2 C. Johns, “Research on Roman silver plate,” *JRA* 3 (1990) 33.

3 Object numbers from 1 to 69 refer to the items published 1984 in the monograph (H. A. Cahn and A. Kaufmann-Heinimann [edd.], *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst* [Derendingen 1984]); the items that made their re-appearance in 1995 bear the provisional numbers 101 to 118.



Fig. 1. The Kaiseraugst silver treasure, the group gathered in April 1962 (ingots and coins not shown). Photo: Humbert and Vogt.

#### Contents of the treasure in 1962

News about the treasure spread rapidly, of course, and on several occasions the authorities appealed to the local population of the two adjacent villages and of Basel to hand back any item found during the winter months of 1961/62 within the walls of the late Roman fortress that might belong to this hoard. Even so, what could finally be gathered together by April 1962 was extraordinary enough: a silver hoard nearly 37 kilograms in weight, consisting of a luxurious table service, 3 ingots and 186 coins and medallions (fig. 1). In terms of function, there was, as is the case with late-Roman table services, a little silver used for drinking (cups nos. 43-46), a fairly wide range of cutlery (spoons nos. 1-35 and multi-functional utensils nos. 36-40), and a great variety of plates used for serving food: small and deep bowls (nos. 47-52), fish plates (nos. 53 and 54), big plain and decorated dishes (nos. 56-60), and three large prestige dishes decorated with gilding and niello or with relief (Ariadne dish no. 61, sea-city dish no. 62, Achilles dish no. 63). A washing-bowl (no. 41), a *candelabrum*, also decorated with gilding and niello (no. 42), and a statuette of Venus (no. 64) completed the service. Many of the spoons and some of the plates bear inscriptions indicating the weight, the owner's or the manufacturer's names. Thus, one of the shallow dishes with chased decoration (no. 60) was signed by a certain Euticius from Naissus (Niš) and the Achilles dish (no. 63) has the name of Pausilypos from Thessalonike on the inner foot rim (fig. 2).

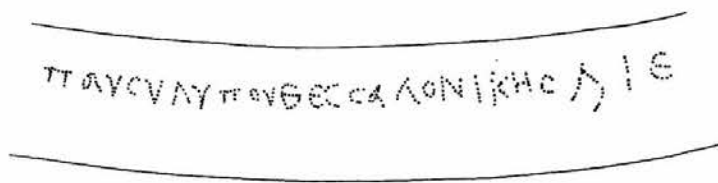


Fig. 2. Dotted inscription on the inner foot ring of the Achilles dish (no. 63): 'of Pausilypos from Thessalonike, 15 pounds'. Drawing: R. Baur.



### Historical context

The treasure was exceptional — and is even more so today — not only for the number, variety and quality of the objects but just as much for its very narrow chronological span provided by the evidence of the coins and the ingots. Most of the coins were issued by the three sons of Constantine the Great — Constantine II (337-340), Constantius II (337-361) and Constans (337-350) (fig. 3) — but none can be dated later than 349/early 350, whereas the three ingots bear the portrait of the usurper Magnentius (350-353) who must have issued them as *donativa* just after his successful uprising against Constans, emperor of the western half, at the beginning of 350. This shows that the treasure was deposited later than this date. Magnentius' coins occur frequently in Gaul and Germany, so their absence from the treasure may mean that the treasure was deposited no later than 350 or 351. What we do not know (and probably never shall) are the reasons for the burial of this group of valuable objects.



Fig. 3. Silver coin from Trier, minted in 343 (M 143). Obv. Constans; Rev. SIC X/SIC XX. Photo: E. Schulz.

### Missing items?

J. Ewald, the author who in the 1984 monograph dealt with the events of 1961/62, on the one hand put together all the accounts of people involved and, on the other, very carefully examined the objects themselves from the point of view of possible marks left by the pressure of the bulldozer.<sup>4</sup> His aim was to reconstruct the way in which the objects had originally been packed

4 J. Ewald, "Fundgeschichte und Restaurierung" in Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann *ibid.* 31-46.



Fig. 4. The Kaiseraugst silver treasure, the group recovered in July 1995. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright

Key:	114	116	113	
	117	115	118	112
		103 106	108	111
	101 102	104 105	107	109 110

within the presumed wooden crate and to answer the question whether what had finally been assembled in April 1962 was the whole group as buried around the middle of the 4th c. What seemed obvious was that, to judge from modern fractures, at least two fragments of plates were missing: one of the big plates with beaded edge (no. 58) consisted of the rim only (fig. 5a), and of another big plate just a small fragment (no. 59) survived (fig. 6b). By further taking into account all the witnesses' evidence, Ewald concluded that, apart from the possible loss of small objects like spoons or cups, it was probable that only two to three big plates were missing.

#### The 18 items recovered in 1995

In the light of all this information, it will be obvious to readers of this journal that the news in the summer of 1995 of the re-appearance of 18 plates belonging to the treasure and weighing about 22 kg (fig. 4), came as a total surprise.<sup>5</sup> Through the services of a lawyer and under condit-

<sup>5</sup> *Basler Zeitung* August 31, 1995.

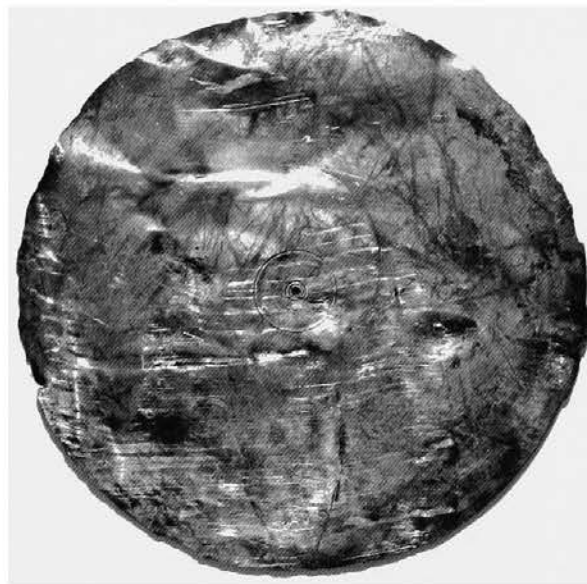
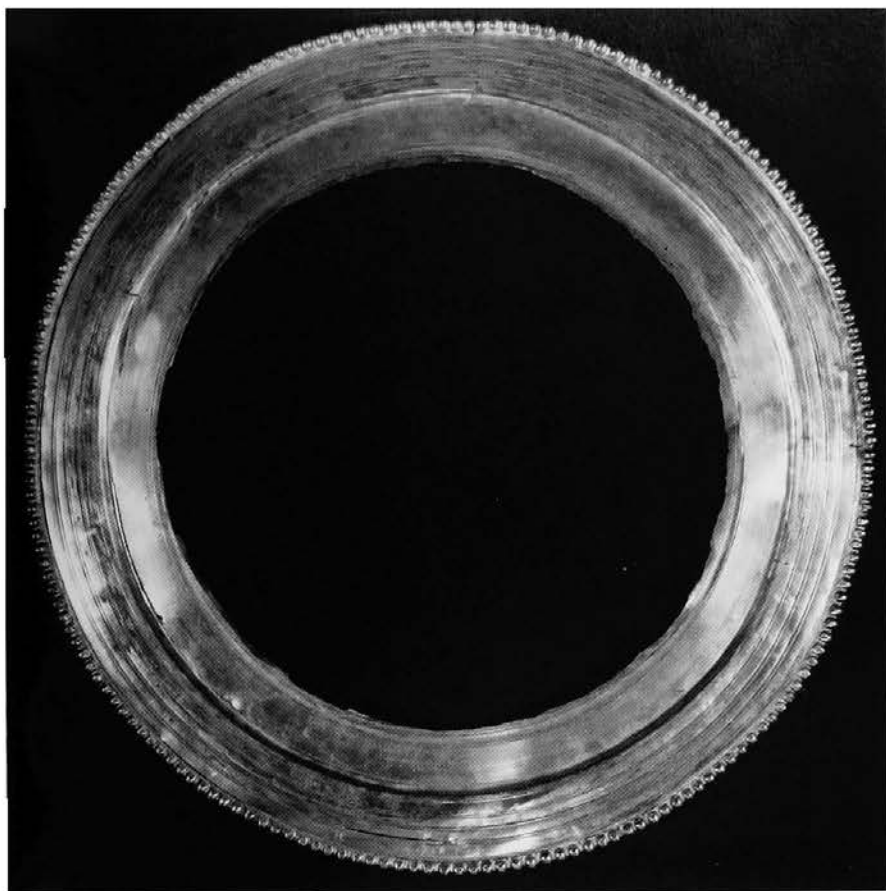


Fig. 5. a) Beaded rim no. 58 (left); b) inner part no. 115. Photo: G. Fittschen-Badura (no. 58); Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright (no. 115).

ions of total anonymity, the items were restored to their legal owner, the Kanton Aargau as represented by the Archaeological Service. We can only assume that between December 27, 1961 and February 19, 1962, one or more persons misappropriated the items lying around either on the building ground or at the dump and kept them secret for more than 30 years. It should be noted that (probably unconsciously) the finder(s) selected historically important items, not the most beautiful ones (if there was a choice to be made at all).

The first task was to verify whether the new items really belonged to the treasure discovered in 1961/62. This was fairly easy because, to mention only the clearest evidence, the group included not only the inner part (no. 115) belonging to the isolated rim (no. 58) (fig. 5a-b) but also a dish (no. 114) of which just one small fragment was missing (it being no. 59 in the earlier group) (fig. 6a-b).

The following list is based on the provisional inventory drawn up by F. Maier of the Archaeological Service of the Kanton Aargau, Brugg, in the summer of 1995. First readings of some of the inscriptions (made from photographs of the items only) have been made by R. Wachter (Seminar für Klassische Philologie, Universität Basel), but it has not been possible to publish them in this note.

**101. Platter with beaded rim.**

Diam. max. 16.0 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 5.0-5.15 cm, weight c.343 g. Several graffiti on the back.

**102. Platter with beaded rim.**

Diam. max. 16.3-16.4 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 5.1 cm, weight c.356 g. Several graffiti on the back.

**103. Platter with straight rim.**

Diam. max. 14.95 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 4.0-4.1 cm, weight c.235 g.

**104. Platter with straight rim.**

Diam. max. 14.95 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 3.9-4.0 cm, weight c.237 g.





Fig. 6. a) Dish no. 114; b) fragment no. 59. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright (no. 114); R. Humbert (no. 59).

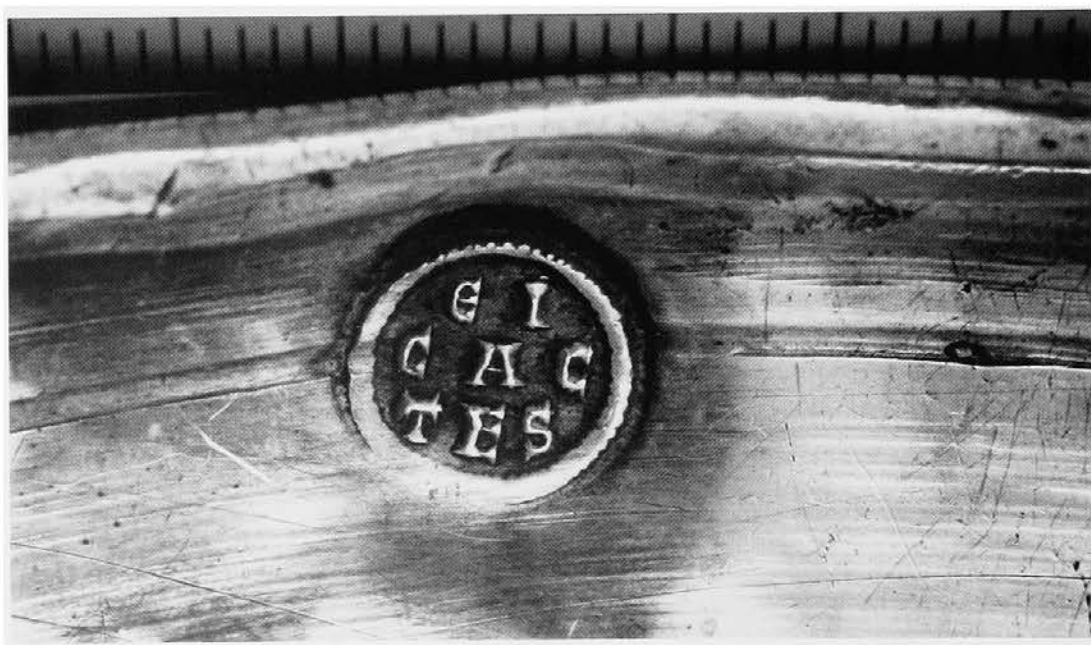


Fig. 7. Stamp on the inside of bowl no. 108: 'Eisas (from) T(h)es(salonica)'. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright.

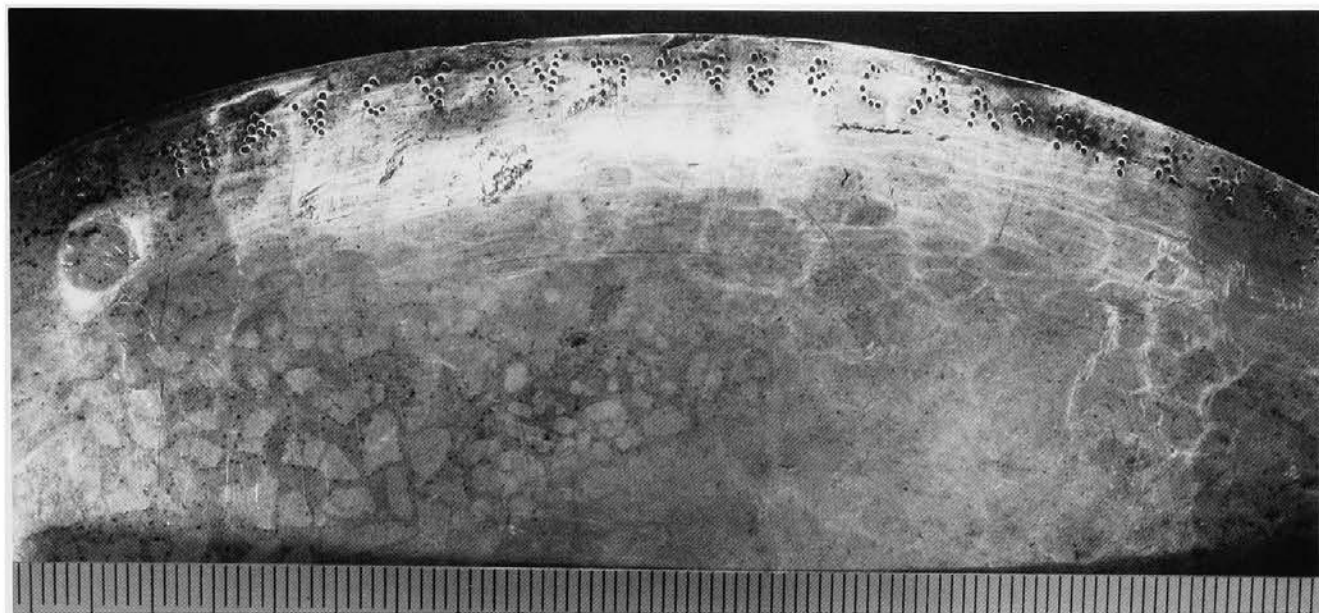


Fig. 8. Dotted inscription on the outside of bowl no. 110: 'of Pausilypos from Thes(s)alonike, 1 pound'. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright.

**105. Platter with straight rim.**

Diam. max. 15 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 4.1-4.2 cm, weight c.227 g.

**106. Platter with straight rim.**

Diam. max. 14.85-14.9 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 3.95-4.1 cm, weight c.240 g. On the back, impressions of two foot-rings.

**107. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. 19.2-19.4 cm, height c.3.5 cm, weight c.335 g. Below the rim on the outside, dotted inscription in Latin; two graffiti in the centre of the back.

**108. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. 20.1-20.35 cm, height c.3.5 cm, weight c.336 g. Below the rim on the inside, stamp of 3 lines in Greek and Latin (fig. 7); on the outside, dotted inscription in Greek.

**109. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. 20.3-20.45 cm, height c.3.4 cm, weight c.340 g. Below the rim on the inside, stamp of 3 lines in Latin; on the outside, dotted inscription in Greek.

**110. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. 20.65-20.7 cm, height c.3.5-3.6 cm, weight c.342 g. Below the rim on the inside, stamp of 3 lines in Latin; on the outside, dotted inscription in Greek (fig. 8).

**111. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. 21.4-21.8 cm, height c.3.8-3.9 cm, weight c.332 g. Below the rim on the inside, stamp of 3 lines in Greek and Latin; on the outside, dotted inscription in Greek.

**112. Hemispherical bowl.**

Diam. c.23.65 cm, height c.5.5-5.7 cm, weight c.930 g. On the outside below the rim, stamp of 3 lines in Latin; in the centre, dotted inscription in Greek(?).

**113. Plain dish.**

Diam. max. c.66.5-66.7 cm, diam. of the foot-ring c.39.5 cm, weight c.7100 g.

**114. Dish, partially gilded, with niello decoration.**

Diam. max. 54.7-55.6 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 12.6-12.7 cm, weight c.2985 g. Broad flat rim decorated with incised, niello-inlaid patterns and 10 busts of young men placed within circles (fig. 9, and in colour following p. 240). Medallion filled with incised, niello-inlaid rosette-like patterns and surrounded by a niello-inlaid verse inscription in Latin (two hexameters) (fig. 10, and in colour following p. 240):

*Augustus Constans dat laeta decennia victor/spondens om(i)nibus ter tricennalia faustis*

'Augustus Constans, victorious, celebrates ten years of prosperity, promising solemnly, after having had auspicious omens three times, to celebrate his thirty years' jubilee' (transl. R. Wachter).



Fig. 9. Dish no. 114: detail of the niello-inlaid rim. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright. See also colour illustration following p.240.

On the back, inside the foot-ring, dotted inscription in Latin. The missing fragment is present in the first part of the treasure (no. 59).

**115. Central part of a dish.**

Diam. 31.4-31.5 cm, weight c.767 g. On top, impressions of foot-rings; on the back, graffito. The beaded rim with foot-ring is present in the first part of the treasure (no. 58).

**116. Dish with niello-inlaid medallion.**

Diam. max. 54.3-54.5 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 15.1-15.3 cm, weight c.3620 g. Medallion filled with incised, niello-inlaid patterns (intertwined circles), surrounded by a continuous dart pattern. On the back inside the foot-ring, dotted inscription, several graffiti, and dotted animal (goat?).

**117. Dish with beaded rim.**

Diam. max. c.47 cm, diam. of the foot-ring 11.3-11.7 cm, weight c.2510 g. On top, impressions of a rectangular plate; on the back graffito and impression of another beaded rim.

**118. Fluted dish.**

Diam. on top c.35.4 cm, diam. below c.21.3 cm, height c.2.5-3.5 cm, weight c.857 g. Inside, near the centre, laurel wreath with stamp and dotted inscription in Latin.

**New perspectives**

It is already clear, from a first glance at the group photo of the recovered items and the information given by this provisional inventory, that many questions will arise not only for the re-evaluation of the Kaiseraugst treasure but for our knowledge of late Roman silver in general. One of the great surprises is that Pausilypos of Thessalonike who was always considered to be the creator of the Achilles dish — and, as such, one of the very few known (named) craftsmen or artists of late Roman times — seems to have made not only prestigious dishes but simple bowls too (such as no. 110). Or should he now not be considered to have been an artist or craftsman at all, but simply one of the officials whose duties included control of the production of silver? And what about the whole group of hemispherical bowls (nos. 107-12) which remind us so much of the three small *vota* bowls in the Munich treasure?<sup>6</sup>

6 J. Garbsch and B. Overbeck, *Spätantike zwischen Heidentum und Christentum* (Munich 1989) 47-68 (S1-





Fig. 10. Dish no. 114: medallion surrounded by an inscription. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright. See also colour illustration following p. 240.

The most startling object, however, and perhaps the least expected, is the *vota* dish (no. 114) given by the emperor Constans to one of his officers, most probably in 342, when he not only celebrated his *decennalia* but also his victory over the Franks.<sup>7</sup> We all remember the lively discussions about distribution and ownership of late Roman silver published in this journal.<sup>8</sup> For the Kaiseraugst silver treasure, at least, matters seem to have changed rather dramatically: what was known up to 1995 to comprise the Kaiseraugst treasure was not "the entire assets of one or perhaps two ... officers", and, perhaps, the "one or ... two relatively obscure officers" were not as obscure as we thought previously, since the treasure *does* include a plate with a *vota* and *largitio* inscription.<sup>9</sup>

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7 M. Thirion, "Les vota impériaux sur les monnaies entre 337 et 364," *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau* 44 (1965) 5-21; P. Bastien, *Monnaie et donativa au Bas-Empire* (Wetteren 1988) 84-85. The mention of Constans' *tricennalia* (instead of his *vicennalia*) is unique, as far as I know: did he wish to emulate his father, the first one after Augustus to have celebrated his *tricennalia*?

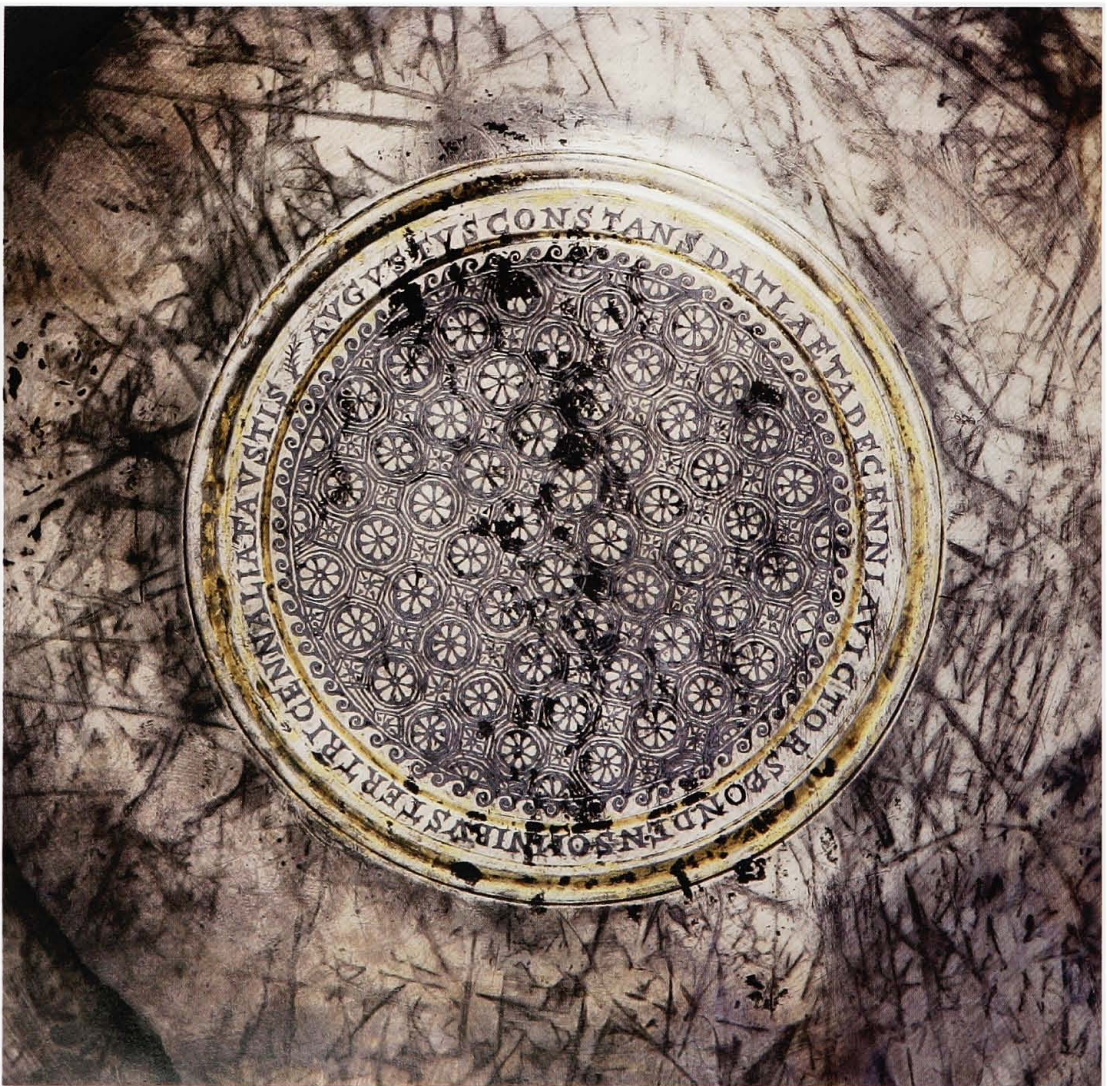
8 A. Cameron, "Observations on the distribution and ownership of late Roman silver plate," *JRA* 5 (1992) 178-85; K. Painter, "Late-Roman silver plate: a reply to Alan Cameron," *JRA* 6 (1993) 109-15.

9 Cameron *ibid.* 184.





Kaufmann-Heinimann fig. 9 in colour. Dish no. 114: detail of the niello-inlaid rim. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright.



Kaufmann-Heinimann fig. 10 in colour. Dish no. 114: medallion surrounded by an inscription. Photo: Aargauische Kantonsarchäologie copyright.