

# CORINTHIAN METALWORKING

## AN INLAID FULCRUM PANEL

(PLATES 135 and 136)

IN 1976, excavations at Corinth were conducted in the so-called Roman Cellar Building, which lies south of the south tower of the West Shops and just southwest of the Roman forum proper.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Cellar Building has been convincingly identified as a restaurant or tavern, which was damaged by an earthquake in A.D. 22/23, during the reign of Tiberius. Pottery from a ground-floor pantry bears strong testimony to Corinth's strategic position on the east-west trade routes: besides many locally made wares, there are imports from Etruria or Rome, South Italy and Sicily, southwestern Asia Minor and the islands, and Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Near the pantry, on the tavern's basement stairway, a decorated bronze panel was excavated (Fig. 1, Pl. 135:a).<sup>3</sup> It is shaped like a truncated boomerang; the rounded right end has a nail hole in it; the left end is broken straight across. All but the left end is surrounded by a plain raised border of varying width. The panel is inlaid with two metals in an elaborate floral design; its back is undecorated but preserves traces of the wood to which the panel was nailed.<sup>4</sup> The panel would have been set into the fulcrum, or curved bronze end, of the wooden framework for the headrest or footrest of a dining couch, a *κλινή*. A fulcrum might be further ornamented by a finial or a bust at either end. In fact, the break at the left edge of this piece may be at the point of attachment for such a decoration.

Analysis by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry yielded the information that the back of the bronze panel contains 5 percent tin and 1 percent lead, whereas the front has a slightly higher tin content. The bronze is the base for decorations in three colors, achieved by using three different materials: copper, silver with some lead content, and niello. The niello was applied to the surface, and the technique known as damascene was used to inlay the copper and silver in channels cut in the bronze.<sup>5</sup> That the raised border of the panel is green (malachitic oxide)

<sup>1</sup> See C. K. Williams, II, "Corinth, 1974: Forum Southwest," *Hesperia* 44, 1975 (pp. 1–50), pp. 9–10 and *idem*, "Corinth 1976: Forum Southwest," *Hesperia* 46, 1977 (pp. 40–81), pp. 58–61.

<sup>2</sup> K. S. Wright, "A Tiberian Pottery Deposit from Corinth," *Hesperia* 49, 1980, pp. 135–177.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Charles K. Williams, II for allowing me to publish the object, to Nancy Bookidis for her assistance with my study of it, and to both of them as well as George L. Huxley, Richard S. Mason, and Harriet C. Mattusch for their comments and advice. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 10. Internationale Tagung über Antike Bronzen in Freiburg, 1988.

Other finds from the stairway include 1st-century (after Christ) coins, Megarian bowls, a piece of Arretine pottery, and early Roman red ware (basket no. 164).

<sup>4</sup> Corinth MF 1976-24. H. 0.133 m., max. pres. L. 0.184 m., Th. 0.005 m. Because it was undergoing conservation, the fulcrum was not included in the preliminary excavation reports. The hole at the right end of the piece (Diam. 0.008 m.) held a nail to pin it to the wooden framework, and a more irregular hole at the left end of the piece may have held a second nail.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Jones of the Fitch Laboratory, the British School at Athens, analyzed the metals.

For a description of damascene and its variations, see C. Piccot-Boube, "Les lits de bronze de Maurétanie Tingitane," *BAMaroc* 4, 1960 (pp. 189–271), pp. 235–238, 243–246. Marina Castoldi brought to my attention a cup decorated with the same combination of metal inlays and niello; see M. Castoldi, "Recipienti in



FIG. 1. Corinth MF 1976-24. Computer-generated drawing, based on digitized photo, courtesy of Avrim Katzman.

but the area within it reddish (cupritic oxide) is the result of deeper mechanical cleaning of the latter. This cleaning, which was needed to uncover the inlays, also revealed cuprite in the corrosion products, which is not evident in levels closer to the surface.<sup>6</sup>

The plain outer border is defined along its inner edge by a thin inlaid copper strip enclosing the richly ornamented floral panel.<sup>7</sup> In the central angle of the panel are two U-shaped pairs of silver acanthus buds, the beginning of an elaborate design that swirls outwards in both directions, making a design the two parts of which are mirror images. From each pair of silver buds emerges a silver calyx, which produces silver tendrils that curl outwards in opposite directions, forming three volutes that in turn encircle flowers. The outermost flower on each side has a silver center and four broad, roughly triangular copper petals

bronzo d'età romana in Lombardia: La coppa ageminata di Muralto," *Rivista archeologica dell'antica provincia e diocesi di Como* 161, 1979, pp. 57-65, pls. VI-VIII: 2nd to 1st centuries B.C.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Stella Bouzaki for describing to me her conservation of the piece and for sharing with me these observations about the metal oxides.

<sup>7</sup> Width of bronze rim 0.003-0.013 m., width of copper inlay 0.001 m., depth of channel for inlay 0.001 m.

with silver borders. Black strips of niello mark the separation between petals. The second flower is a multicolored daisy with a silver center and twelve petals alternating from copper to silver to niello. The flower closest to the angle of the panel is a large heartshaped copper bud with a large, roughly round-to-oval silver center. Most of the bud on the right is preserved, but only a little of the silver center of the matching bud on the left is still in place. Traces of other silver tendrils and copper leaves and buds remain in the field.

The decorative motif used on this panel is both versatile and adaptable, and it is often seen. It developed from a widespread and long-lived tradition which is traceable in various forms and in various media from the 5th century B.C. onwards. The motif recalls the decoration of the akroteria of the Parthenon, as well as the usual ornament on Corinthian capitals. One-half of the design fills the narrow triangular space between the marble coffers of the tholos at Epidauros. Another version of the motif, not unlike the one on the Corinth panel, can be seen in the border of the famous stag-hunt mosaic in Pella and in the lowest panel on the large gold larnax from Tomb II at Vergina. In Early Imperial Rome, the lower panels of reliefs on the Ara Pacis provide the best-known and some of the most luxuriant examples of the symmetrical version of the design.<sup>8</sup>

The acanthus, tendril, and flower motif is well suited to the shape of a fulcrum panel, and the one from Corinth is by no means the only example. A complete and well-preserved fulcrum from a couch found in the House of Menander at Pompeii has essentially the same panel decoration: acanthus buds, tendrils, and volutes encircle flowers; these acanthus buds are opening, and the flowers all have more or less the same six-petaled design (Pl. 136:a). The details are rendered with more precision than on the Corinth panel, and the inlay appears to consist of silver alone.<sup>9</sup> Another fulcrum, in a European private collection, has the same panel design, though perhaps more delicate, but is evidently inlaid with copper and silver (Pl. 136:b).<sup>10</sup> A third, in the Conservatori Museum in Rome, has more ornate buds and flowers and has inlays which are uniformly coppery in color (Pl. 135:b).<sup>11</sup>

Of the many ancient authors who refer to the high quality of the bronze that was once produced in Corinth, it is Pliny who has the most to say. He actually begins his book on bronzes by saying that Corinthian bronze is more valuable than silver and almost more so than gold. His sources may not be quite accurate in suggesting that the Corinthian alloy was first mixed by chance when the city was burned by Mummius in 146 B.C., but he is surely on firmer ground when he says that Corinthian bronze is the most highly praised bronze

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the motif in Roman wall painting, see Yves Perrin, "Un motif décoratif exceptionnel dans le IV<sup>e</sup> style: le bandeau à rinceaux," *RA* 1985, pp. 205–230.

<sup>9</sup> Naples, Archaeological Museum, inv. 78614. See A. Maiuri, *La Casa del Menandro e il suo tesoro di argenteria*, Rome 1932, pp. 423–427; G. M. A. Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans*, London 1966, figs. 532–534; *Il bronzo dei Romani: Arredo e Suppellettile*, L. P. B. Stefanelli, ed., Rome 1990, no. 34, p. 264, and fig. 142, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> See A. Greifenhagen, "Bronzekline im Pariser Kunsthandel," *RM* 45, 1930, pp. 137–165, pl. 39 and B. Barr-Sharrar, *The Hellenistic and Early Imperial Decorative Bust*, Mainz 1987, no. C 20, pl. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Rome Conservatori Museum, inv. 1075. See *A Catalogue of the Ancient Sculptures Preserved in the Municipal Collections of Rome: The Sculptures of the Palazzo dei Conservatori*, H. Stuart Jones, ed., Oxford 1926, no. 12, pp. 178–179, pls. 64–66; Greifenhagen, *op. cit.*, no. 24, p. 144, pl. 49; Stefanelli (footnote 9 above), no. 32, pp. 263–264 and fig. 247, p. 263. John Camp took photographs of this fulcrum for me in 1987 and shared with me his comments about it.

known from earlier times, for he can easily cite individuals who coveted it (*NH* 34.1, 34.6–8, 34.48). Pliny even lists three separate Corinthian alloys which were used specifically for utensils or vessels: one is white, with a brilliance close to silver, and he believes that it contains much silver; the second is tawny like gold; and he thinks that the third must contain an equal mixture of both these metals (*NH* 34.8).<sup>12</sup>

Pliny (*NH* 34.14) and Livy (39.6.7) date the introduction of dining couches decorated with bronze to 187 B.C., when the Roman army returned home from Asia. Elsewhere (*NH* 34.9), Pliny states that it was on Delos that bronze was first used for the feet and fulcra of couches. Ancient couches and chairs might be sheathed and inlaid with glass, ivory, bone, tortoise shell, or even with gold or silver, the last exemplified in the pieces of an inscribed couch now in the Antikenmuseum in Basel.<sup>13</sup> It is not certain whether the sheathing and inlays were necessarily of such fine metals as are often reported, or whether some of them just looked like those metals and were actually imitations in less expensive materials, such as bronze, copper, tin, and brass.

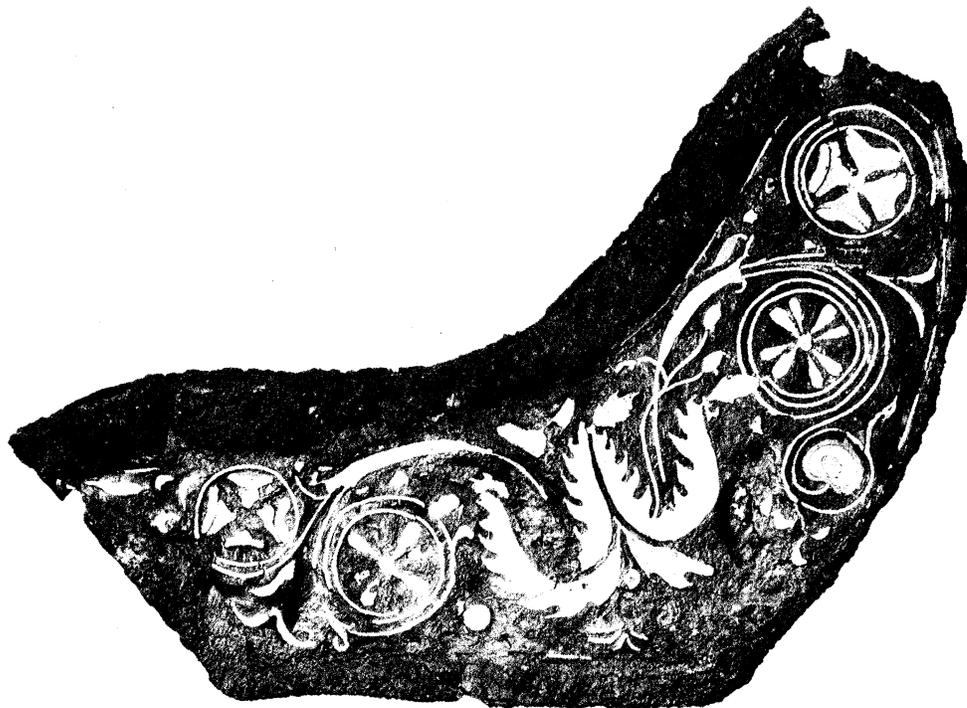
The inlaid panel from Corinth is clearly not of the first quality, and it would certainly not have been ranked with the highly regarded metal vases produced in Corinth. Nor does this panel help to elucidate the difficult question of the composition of the widely renowned Corinthian alloys. It is probably safe, however, to assume that a couch installed in a tavern in Corinth was locally produced. Although this inlaid fulcrum panel does not substantiate Pliny's claim that Corinthian bronze might be alloyed with gold or silver, it certainly testifies to the high degree of technical competence enjoyed by Corinthian metalworkers and introduces us to the sophisticated production that was standard fare in the workshops of one of Corinth's major industries.

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<sup>12</sup> For numerous analyses of alloys, see Paul T. Craddock, "The Composition of the Copper Alloys used by the Greek, Etruscan and Roman Civilizations, 3. The Origins and Early Use of Brass," *JAS* 5, 1978, pp. 1–16 and *idem*, "Gold in Antique Copper Alloys," *Gold Bulletin* 15, 1982, pp. 69–72. For a recent discussion of the literary testimonia, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Corinthian Bronze," *RBibl* 90, 1983, pp. 80–93. However we interpret Pliny's passage, it is clear that, as we might suspect, craftsmen deliberately chose their alloys.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Homer, *Odyssey* 19.56 (ivory and silver); Lucian, *Asin.* 621 (tortoise shell and gold); Martial, 14.87 (tortoise shell); Pliny, *NH* 33.144 (silver). For references to further ancient sources, see C. L. Ransom, *Couches and Beds of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans*, Chicago 1905, pp. 54–61. I am grateful to Joan Mertens for bringing to my attention the unpublished pieces in Basel. Currently on loan to the Antikenmuseum, the five pieces of silver plating for a couch are thought to be from northern Asia Minor and are dated in the inscription to 107/106 B.C. The inscription also names two donors, Aphrodisios and Protion, the craftsman who produced the couch, Pausanias, and lists the cost as 628 drachmai.



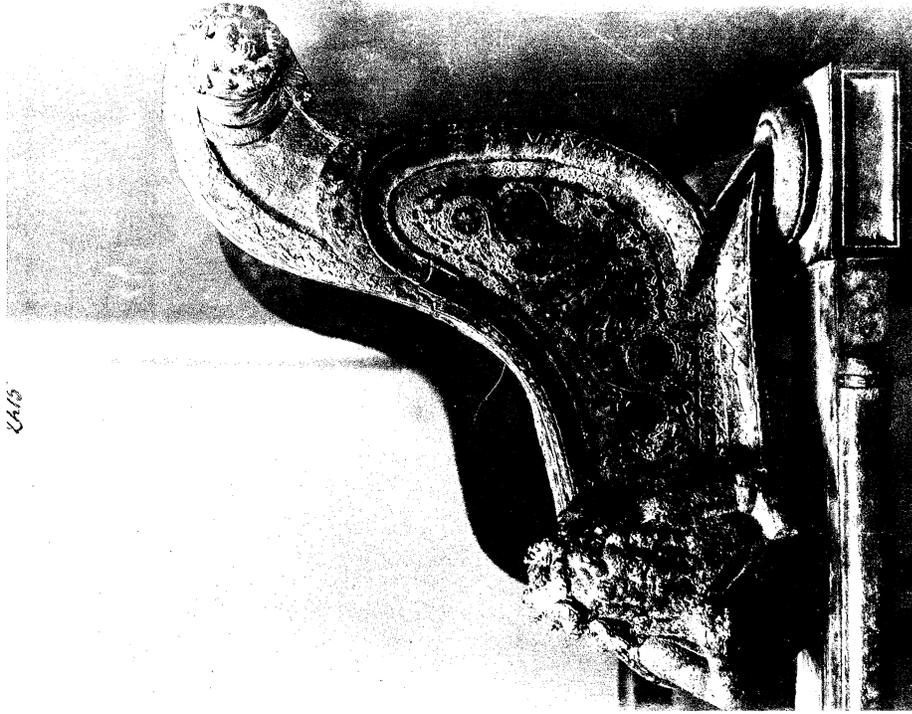
a. Corinth MF 1976-24



b. Rome, Conservatori (photograph, John Camp II)



a. Naples, Museo Nazionale 78614 (photograph, Soprintendenza Archeologica delle Province di Napoli e Caserta)



b. Private collection (photograph, D.A.I. Rome, neg. no. 59648)

CAROL C. MATTUSCH: CORINTHIAN METALWORKING: AN INLAID FULCRUM PANEL