

# A bronze mirror with Aphrodite and Eros from Nicomedia in Bithynia (northwestern Turkey)

## *Un espejo de bronce con Afrodita y Eros de Nicomedia en Bitinia (noroeste de Turquía)*

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**Abstract:** The Archeological and Ethnographical Museum of Kocaeli has in its collection a small, disc-shaped bronze mirror decorated with a relief scene, whose protagonist is the goddess Aphrodite. The scene shows Aphrodite seated left of centre on a rock. She is accompanied by two figures, a female who stands on a pedestal in front of her and her young son, Eros, who is behind her. This formerly unpublished object was found in Nicomedia in Bithynia, and has been dated to the fourth century BC. This paper will give a detailed presentation of the mirror relief scene, focus on its art-historical contextualisation and argue a first century BC. date for this object.

**Keywords:** Bronze mirror, Aphrodite, Eros, Late Hellenistic period, Nicomedia, Bithynia, Asia Minor.

**Resumen:** El Museo Arqueológico y Etnográfico de Kocaeli posee un pequeño espejo de bronce en forma de disco decorado con una escena en relieve, cuyo protagonista es la diosa Afrodita. La escena muestra a Afrodita sentada a la izquierda, centro sobre una roca. La acompañan dos figuras, una mujer con un pedestal frente a ella y su hijo pequeño, Eros, que está detrás de ella. El objeto fue encontrado en Nicomedia en Bitinia, y ha sido fechado en el siglo IV a. C. Este artículo ofrecerá una presentación detallada

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de la escena en relieve del espejo, se centrará en su contextualización histórico-artística y defenderá una datación del siglo I a. C. para el objeto.

**Palabras Clave:** Espejo de bronce, Afrodita, Eros, Período helenístico tardío, Nicomedia, Bitinia, Asia Menor.

**T**HE mirrors in the ancient Greek and Roman Asia Minor consisted almost invariably of small circular discs of metal, which could be placed upright on a table or held in the hand.<sup>1</sup> Functioning much like the modern day equivalent, the most frequent type of Hellenistic and Roman mirrors was hinged mirror, *i.e.* *Klappspiegel* in German. The usual material for the mirrors was bronze, but some made of silver have also come down to us. Typologically the disc-mirrors have one side, usually slightly convex, left plain and polished for reflection. Roughly half of the mirrors known to us are decorated either with engravings or moulded reliefs on their reverse. Typical decorative scenes derive from representations of Greek or Roman myths. These reliefs usually consist of subjects relating to the cycle of Aphrodite and Dionysos.



Figure 1

Places in Asia Minor and elsewhere referred to in the text (by S. Pataci, 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for general description of fabric and technique of Roman mirrors: Schwarzmaier, 1997.

This article focuses on a single mirror found in Nicomedia in Bithynia (figure 1) and now kept in the Archeological and Ethnographical Museum of Kocaeli (figures 2a-b). This formerly unpublished object is made of a single piece of bronze of uniform thickness. It consists of a slightly convex disc which is slightly damaged with an ornamental plaque. The mirror was cast and then hammered using the techniques of repoussé, relief and chasing. The surface of the metal is well preserved on both sides; however, delamination of the corroded layers are present. It is also broken and cracked diagonally in its middle part and has areas of loss. It should be conserved to fill losses and to reinforce the reverse for structural support. Its acc. no. is 1599. Its disc is perfectly round with a diam. of 120 mm.<sup>2</sup> According to the inventory book, the exact find-spot of the mirror remains unknown, as it is only recorded as 'Nicomedia'. It is a bronze medallion decorated with a figurative relief scene, which due to its overall shape, probably originally formed the outer part of a pocket mirror that could be held in the hand or carried in a pocket. To view your reflection, you simply had to turn the object around. As is usual for ancient mirrors, the concave exterior is decorated with pictures and the actual mirror surface appears on the slightly convex inner surface. The centre of the relief scene is occupied by a female figure, depicted sitting on an irregular rock,<sup>3</sup>



*Figures 2a-b*

A bronze mirror with the reliefs of Aphrodite and Eros.  
Archeological and Ethnographical Museum of Kocaeli, acc. no. 1599 (by E. Laflı, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Other measurements are as follows: h. of Aphrodite 75 mm, h. of female in front of Aphrodite (without base) 38 mm. and h. of Eros without the basket 23 mm.

<sup>3</sup> Aphrodite sitting on a rock and resting on her left hand behind her body is a type known from Greek vase painting as early as the turn of the fifth and fourth century BC. The theme was not transferred into larger-scale sculpture until the Late Hellenistic period; see examples Delivorrias, Berger-Doer and Kossatz-Deissmann 1984: 94, cat. nos. 880-890.

as are some of the Muses in other scenes<sup>4</sup> (figure 3). Her youth and beauty are depicted by her naked body, only covered by a robe from her hips down: this plastic figure is the goddess Aphrodite. The figural decoration in relief is very elaborate and its quality is quite high. The quality of the art is high and the anatomy of the figures is perfect.



*Figure 3*

The Archelaos relief in the British Museum, acc. no. 1819.8-12.1. C. 225-200 B.C. (by E. Laflı, 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. some Muses on the marble relief signed by Archelaos/The Apotheosis of Homer, found in Bovillae, Italy, in the British Museum, acc. no. 1819,0812.1, dated to the end of the third century/first half of the second century BC.



Figures 4a-b

A terracotta statuette of Aphrodite with snakes entwined around her left arm and left leg, from the *Tumulus* of Dardanos.

The Archaeological Museum of Çanakkale. Second century BC. (by E. Laflı, 2018)



Figure 5

A gold bracelet from the nearby of Pompeii (by E. Laflı, 2018)

This Aphrodite wears jewellery on both wrists in the form of snake-shaped bracelets. In antiquity, snakes were positive symbols of protection for the family and fertility. Snake bracelets were particularly popular and were worn in pairs on the wrists (*perikárpia*, *armillae*, *spatalia*) or the upper arms (*spinter/dextrocherium*, *brachiale*). These can be observed in numerous representations of Aphrodite, for example, on a terracotta figurine from the Troad<sup>5</sup> (figures 4a-b), which dates from the first half of the second century BC., or even on Hellenistic terracotta figures of Eros from Myrina, who instead wears them on his upper legs.<sup>6</sup> Corresponding pieces of actual jewellery made of gold and silver have been found in Pompeii, Italy<sup>7</sup> (figure 5). One Pompeian hairpin even has the shape of an arm that wears a snake bangle.<sup>8</sup> These bracelets have the snakes scales indicated through the first loops behind the heads and again at the terminal loops also set with stones.

The posture of the Aphrodite figure is relaxed and recalls the iconography of the Muses. While her left arm rests on the rock, her right arm is stretched out and directed towards a kind of bowl (towel or leaf, because of the zig-zag-edges?), which is being offered to her by a small figure on a pedestal. Although this figure is depicted diagonally from the back, she can be recognised as a female goddess who is clothed in a long garment and has long hair in corkscrew curls that fall forward. Her rigid body posture probably derives from an archaic image of the same goddess. The short veil is also indicative of Aphrodite.

<sup>5</sup> The Archaeological Museum of Çanakkale, acc. no. 2123; Zimmer 2014: 199–200, 'AvK-ts 56', pl. 16, figure 72; as well as pl. 17, figures 73–75.

<sup>6</sup> Eros from Myrina: Zimmer 2014, pl. 35, figure 159 (Eros from Myrina, Louvre, acc. no. Myr 60); and figure 160 (Eros from Myrina, Louvre, acc. no. Myr. 61).

<sup>7</sup> Athens, Collection of Héléne Stathatos, without acc. no.: Zimmer 2014, figure 163.

<sup>8</sup> Pompeii, acc. no. 13288; Berg 2002: 40, figure 6.

Aphrodite's gaze, however, does not focus on what she is doing; instead, she turns her head in the other direction and gazes out of the picture into the void. The winsome sweetness of expression, the suggestion of a smile, the ease and grace of motion seem to point to the goddess who was the ideal of all womanly beauty and charm. Next to her on the right-hand side, an Eros figure stands on a wide, slightly sloping rocky step.<sup>9</sup> He is characterized by his thick legs and narrower upper body, typical signs of his infancy. With both hands raised, he lifts up a reversed basket, either emptying it out or putting it on like a sun hat in a playful way. In a wall painting from the Pompeian 'House of the Ephebe' (1,7,11), the gods Aphrodite/Venus and Ares/Mars sit close together and Eros holds an umbrella over both of them in a similar manner (figure 6). However, it is more probable that the object is a basket, as Cupids use vessels and baskets for all types of work; see, *e.g.*, a glass gem with Cupids making perfume from the first century AD in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (figure 7).<sup>10</sup>



Figure 6

Fresco with Eros holding an umbrella over Aphrodite and Ares. House of the Ephebe in Pompeii (by E. Laflı, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Probably the earliest union of the two is found on mirrors. In an example in the British Museum, of the last half of the sixth century BC., the figure of Aphrodite forms the stand, while from the mirror hang two winged boys, Erotes: Walters 1899: 24, pl. 4, no. 241. Cf. also no. 242 and an Etruscan mirror, no. 543.

<sup>10</sup> Kondoleon, Segal and Karageorghis (eds.) 2011: 103, figure 197 (in colour), cat. no. 66.



Figure 7

Glass-paste *intaglio* with cupids making perfume. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acc. no. 98.746. First century AD (by E. Laflı, 2018)

The entire scene takes place against a smooth background. The rock formation serves as the ground for Aphrodite, upon which she places her feet, and also as a means of ascent for the small Eros figure, it is also decorated in some places with fine detail in the forms of flowers and plants. The mirror is captivating in that it is in a state of excellent preservation; it seems to have only one serious fault line that runs from the top right behind the head of the Aphrodite, over her shoulder to the upside-down basket or umbrella of the Eros and then follows the mirror's outer contours. Minor surface damage is observed on the right upper arm of Aphrodite and on the hairline directly above her forehead.

The Aphrodite theme is particularly suitable as a representation on a mirror,<sup>11</sup> as the goal of the female owner of such an object was to precisely imitate the goddess and compete with her in terms of beauty and love. The scenery on the outside of the mirror from Nicomedia can be closely compared with an antique plaster cast of a bowl from 'Mit-Rahîne'/Memphis in Egypt, from the late third century BC., which is kept in Hildesheim.<sup>12</sup> This cast has a similar pattern, in that Aphrodite is depicted in a rural sanctuary, pouring a sacrifice in a bowl held by an archaic Aphrodite statue that stands on a pedestal. Two Eros figures are present. While one Eros is sitting close to the rock, the second Eros flies towards Aphrodite to honour her with a ribbon and a wreath. The most striking difference between the relief scenes depicted on the object in Hildesheim and the bronze mirror from Nicomedia is that, in the former scene, the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kondoleon, Segal and Karageorghis (eds.), 2011: 198.

<sup>12</sup> Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, acc. no. 1128; Reinsberg 1980: 129–30 and 319, figure 84, no. 53; and also Delivorrias, Berger-Doer and Kossatz-Deissmann 1984: 94, pl. 88, no. 886.

goddess focuses her gaze upon her action, whereas she tilts her head away and makes the offering without paying attention to it in the latter scene. A second big difference is the presence of an Eros flying toward Aphrodite and, thus, refers to her in the relief scene on the object in Hildesheim. In the scene on the object from Nicomedia, however, the playful Eros on the bronze mirror does not appear to interact directly with Aphrodite. Even though Aphrodite's pose appears to be quite similar in both works, the Aphrodite on the relief scene on the object in Hildesheim displays more bodily tension than the Aphrodite on the bronze mirror from Nicomedia.

The Hildesheim medallion has always been interpreted as being very similar to a gold-plated, silver medallion of Aphrodite from Taranto, now in the British Museum,<sup>13</sup> (figure 8) dated to the first century BC.<sup>14</sup> It also serves as a comparison with



*Figure 8*

Gilded silver medallion showing a reclining Aphrodite, waited on by a girl and a playful Eros, from Taranto, Italy. The British Museum, acc. no. 1853.0314.1. 300-200 BC (by E. Laflı, 2018)

<sup>13</sup> The British Museum, acc. no. 1853,0314.1; diam. 93 mm: Delivorrias, Berger-Doer and Kossatz-Deissmann 1984: 94, no. 887; Leitmeir 2017: 224, figure 2.

<sup>14</sup> Zahlhaas 1975: 39; Reinsberg 1980: 261; and Leitmeir 2017: 222, N. 19.



the mirror relief from Nicomedia. The scene on the Taranto relief has been correctly interpreted as Aphrodite offering a sacrifice in front of a cult image of herself in a sacred grove. This interpretation may also be adopted for the relief mirror in Nicomedia. In both, the statues of the goddess stand on pedestals. Through the interaction of worshippers with the statue of a deity, the statue of a deity can become a currently present 'deity'.<sup>15</sup> The figures were hammered from behind using the repoussé technique. The ornaments that appear in the background and along the lower margin are engraved and, in part, particularly emphasised with additional gold paint. On the left side, next to Aphrodite on the floor, there is a small, ivy – leaf – shaped fan, which is well-known from Tanagra terracotta figures,<sup>16</sup> of the fourth and third century BC. We can see a butterfly, flowers, musical instruments and a cicada in the background and hammered along the lower margin, which are to be understood as the premises of Hellenistic music.<sup>17</sup> The elusive sounds produced by these insects known for their musical voices are transformed and captured through their depictions. These sounds can be recalled by looking at their depictions. There are differences in how these insects produce sounds.<sup>18</sup> Both the musically able insects who represent music and Aphrodite have effective powers over people.<sup>19</sup> Similar flowers and engraved decorations can also be found on the relief in Nicomedia, especially when looking at the floor area of the scene.

The pedestal and the almost archaistic representation of the statue evoke antiquity, divinity and a sacred environment. An Apulian krater from the fourth century BC. shows an Artemis statuette<sup>20</sup> in a similar way. It is placed on a high pedestal and holds a bowl in its hand. The similarities between the bronze mirror from Nicomedia and the Hellenistic examples mentioned above can be explained by the fact that pattern books or models in plaster were circulating at the time, from which figures and scenes were copied throughout the whole Mediterranean world.<sup>21</sup>

According to the museum's inventory book the mirror has been dated to the fourth century BC., which seems to be a fairly early age for this type of mirror. Mirror reliefs of Aphrodite continued to be produced during the Roman Imperial period, but the narrative plot and the language of the style changed. Several mirror reliefs produced

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<sup>15</sup> Guggisberg 2013: 67–68.

<sup>16</sup> Musée du Louvre, acc. no. CA 3312; Jeammet 2010: 114, cat. no. 84; Musée du Louvre, acc. no. MNB 581; Jeammet 2010: 117, cat. no. 87; Musée du Louvre, acc. no. TC 7674 and St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, acc. no. 435a; Jeammet 2010: 119, cat. nos. 41–42.

<sup>17</sup> Leitmeir 2017: 220 and 224, figure 2.

<sup>18</sup> Leitmeir 2017: 222.

<sup>19</sup> Leitmeir 2017: 225.

<sup>20</sup> Apulian calyx crater of the Dareios painter, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig in Basel: De Cesare 1997: 143, 257 and 356, figure 84, cat. no. 196.

<sup>21</sup> Zahlhaas 1975: 69.

during the Roman Imperial period show the goddess Aphrodite/Venus surrounded by numerous Eros figures, who are playing with the weapons of Ares/Mars<sup>22</sup> or are surrounding the goddess, holding ribbons and honouring her with wreaths. During that period, different Aphrodite myths were depicted than in the Hellenistic period and the reliefs are worked in a much flatter style. Therefore, the bronze mirror in Nicomedia should still be dated to the Late Hellenistic period, *i.e.* first century BC. A further reason for this dating is the appearance of the face of Aphrodite, which clearly resembles Hellenistic sculptures; for example, see a Hellenistic terracotta figurine<sup>23</sup> and a marble head of Isis from Thmuis from the second century BC.<sup>24</sup> The complicated posture of Aphrodite's legs in the figure on the mirror from Nicomedia, which skilfully lends depth to the image, is also in perfect harmony with Late Hellenistic traditions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Antikensammlung in Munich (purchased on the art market): Schulze 2005: 37, figure 1; and pp. 40–42, figures 5–8 (details), dated to the first century BC.; Budin 2010: 108, figure 5, no. 9 (drawing); Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Berlin (from the art market in Beirut, acc. no. Furtwängler 7965, diam. 120 mm). Zahlhaas 1975: 76, pl. 20, cat. no. 20; Zimmer 1987: 41 and 69, pl. 25; Michaelides 2002: 359, figure 8; Prähistorische Staatssammlung in Munich, acc. no. 1974, 5300 (provenance unknown), diam. 112 mm: Zahlhaas 1975: 76, pl. 21, cat. no. 22; Michaelides 2002: 358, figure 7; a mirror from a grave in Paphos on Cyprus acc. no. 2536/88: Michaelides 2002: 353, figure 1 (photo) and figure 2 (drawing), 354–57, figures 3–6 (details).

<sup>23</sup> *E.g.* terracotta figurine in Louvre (330–200 BC.): Jeammet 2010: 205, cat. no. 172.

<sup>24</sup> From the second century BC., from Thmuis in Egypt, today in the Museum of Cairo, acc. no. JE 39518: Smith 1994: 210, figure 251.

<sup>25</sup> *Cf.* Houby–Nielsen 1996.

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