

A bronze bell inscribed with the Ave Maria
Austria
c. 1500



43 cm (height) x 34.3 cm (diam.); bronze, with an iron clapper pin. Knocks to the lip. One canon missing.

Provenance

By repute, unearthed near the Neusiedlersee, south-east of Vienna;
 Private collection

This slender bell was likely cast in a Viennese foundry at some point in the late fifteenth century. It is delicately ornamented with a group of three parallel moulding wires encircling the top and bottom of the soundbow, the convex section above the lip of the bell that creates the depth and resonance of the struck sound. Through a thickening of the metal at this point, it also adds strength against the force of the clapper as it hits the walls of the bell, thus safeguarding against cracking. High on its neck are further mouldings of differing gauges, within which a continuous inscription repeating the words of the angelic salutation 'ave maria' several times encircles the bell's circumference. Crowning the bell is a tall loop that would have been used to pass through a suspension pole for hanging. Sprouting from this central loop are five supporting struts which would have been used to secure it in place with metal straps or ropes. These struts are known as canons, and an extremely unusual feature of the ones on our bell is that they are ornamented with long, essentialised human faces, their features consisting of abstracted slits for the eyes and mouth, and an almost pyramidal nose that gives each figure a striking silhouette. It is exceptionally rare to find such ornament on surviving medieval bells.

There are few sounds that we associate with the past. In the popular consciousness, the Middle Ages has become synonymous with the steady drone of plainsong and Gregorian chant, but in reality, it was the ringing of bells more than any other sound, that permeated the consciousness of the medieval populace. Free of the ever-present hum that engines and electricity have brought us in the modern age, the medieval world resounded strongly with the ringing of bells. They were used to mark time, occasion, and collective processes of celebration and mourning. They were active contributors to communities, and they were story tellers. They were even believed to sing to God, as is demonstrated by the inclusion of biblical excerpts, prayers, or verses on their bodies – like the angelic salutation on our example.¹ As a result, bells held enormous religious, social, and cultural significance in Medieval Europe, and many individual examples were associated with miracles and Godly intervention, not to mention the marking of various key moments in the liturgical calendar and the celebration of daily Mass. Jacobus de Voragine records in *The Golden Legend* how the bells of a certain church in France rang of their own accord at the rediscovery of the relics of Saints Vitus and Modestus, while in times of bad weather, bells were rung both to ‘cease the moving of the tempests’ and to calm the local populace.² The first ringing of a bell, known as its ‘baptism’ has historically been a moment of celebration and ceremony, and it was widely believed that bells baptised in a certain city would remain sonorous and pleasing only if kept in the location of this first striking. For example, when King Clothaire II had the bells of Saint Stephen’s church, Sens, moved to Paris, the displeasure of the good bishop Saint Loup caused them to lose their ‘sweet tone’, and their sound only recovered upon their return to the city.³ The shape of the present bell, which conforms perfectly to what we would recognise in the West as something of a standard type, owes its form to Theophilus, a twelfth-century German Benedictine monk and (it has been argued) a skilled metalworker, who discussed many of the processes and materials needed in the making of bells in his great treatise *De Diversis Artibus*.⁴

The incorporation of bells into surviving ecclesiastical structures is believed to have started in the sixth century, and the towers of Sant’ Apollinaire in Classe and Sant’ Apollinaire Nuovo in Ravenna still retain archaeological evidence of bells from this date. However, it was not until later in the Middle Ages, with the technological advances exerted on the founding process, that bells started to bear decoration over and above simple crosses, lines, or makers’ marks.⁵ In the thirteenth century northern-European founders refining the lost wax casting process began to incorporate textual references and decorative markings around the bells’ shoulders. Early examples of these inscriptions emerge in Eichstatt and Schwabach around 1250, but their letter types are uncial in form, and it is only around 1400 that this script is superseded by the ubiquitous Gothic blackletter or *textura* font visible on our bell.⁶ However, the punctuation marks between phrases, which here consist of stylised cross shapes, are motifs that persist from

¹ Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2016, p. 103.

² The comments of Wynkyn de Wode (1498) on the properties of bells, cited in T. F. Thiselton Dyer, *English Folk-lore*, London, 1878, p. 264

³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, cited in B. Young, ‘A Medieval Bell’, in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 11, No. 10 (Jun., 1953), pp. 293-296, p. 293

⁴ P. Price, *Bells and Man*, Oxford, 1983, p. 94. For a discussion of Theophilus’ identification as Roger of Helmarshausen, an experienced metalworker, see L. Townsend White, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays*, Los Angeles, 1978, pp.94-95

⁵ P. Price, *Bells and Man*, Oxford, 1983, p. xvii

⁶ See S. Thurm, *Deutscher Glockenatlas Mittelfranken*, Berlin, 1973, Cat. 5, 7

the thirteenth century to well beyond the end of the Medieval era. Helpfully, a related bell cast in an Austrian foundry in 1494 and exhibiting a similarly slender profile and high crown, is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (fig. 1). Such comparisons, along with the reputed provenance of our bell, support its localisation to that region. Nevertheless, its ornamentation of human faces, which diverge from most known referents, only serves to highlight the scarcity of dateable fifteenth-century bells with which to compare ours to (both in institutions and in public circulation), and makes it an extremely significant survival.

During the Second World War, many thousands of bells were transported from across the German occupied territories to a foundry set up by the docks of Hamburg, the famous Hamburger Glockenfriedhof, where they were stored for reuse in the war effort (fig. 2). Through the destruction of a large number of these bells by both sides of the war effort (at least three quarters of all confiscated bells according to Dr Matthias Nuding), few now survive, especially in their original locations.



Fig. 1
Bell with running animals
Austria
1494
48.3 x 38.4 cm; bronze
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection, inv. 52.26



Fig. 2

Photograph of a bell cast in 1500 while stored at the Hamburger Glockenfriedhof
Photo; Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Deutsches Glockenarchiv Nr. 7445
(5/10)