THE LYCURGUS CUP: A UNIQUE GLASS ARTIFACT

The Lycurgus Cup dates from the fourth century AD and was probably made in Rome. This extraordinary cup, 16.5 cm high, is the only complete example of dichroic glass, which changes colour when held up to the light. The opaque green cup turns to a glowing translucent red when light is shone through it. This unusual optical property is due to tiny amounts of colloidal gold and silver in the glass, according to the curators of the British Museum, where the cup resides. Only a handful of ancient glasses showing this effect are known, all of them Roman. The gilded bronze base and rim were added in more recent times. The cup is surrounded by a frieze showing the myth of King Lycurgus, a king of the Thracians (around 800 BC). He is seen being dragged into the underworld by Ambrosius, who has been turned into a vine. In this ‘cage-cup,’ the frieze stands out from the body of the vessel, connected to it only by small shanks or bridges. Adapted from the British Museum website.