

ZOOMORPHIC VASES OF THE FOURTH–SIXTH CENTURIES FROM THE NORTH OF PALESTINE

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Vessels modeled as various animals were made since the dawn of history. During the Byzantine period zoomorphic vessels made of terracotta were found in several sites on the north coast of Israel, in the Beth Shean Valley and in Galilee. Further vessels come from museum collections and unknown sources. These vessels are made in various techniques and styles. Most of the vessels that originated in controlled excavations come from burials. Two of the vessels are decorated with crosses, and according to their distribution, it is likely that they were employed by Christians in northern Palestine. This paper aims at studying the typology, origin, usage and meaning of these vessels.

TYPOLOGY OF THE ZOOMORPHIC VESSELS

The zoomorphic vessels of the 4th–6th centuries CE from northern Israel can be divided into three groups according to stylistic and technical criteria. The first group is generally composed of ram-shaped vessels made in two molds, which were most likely made of terracotta. After attaching both parts of the vase, the artisan added a basket handle and a rim on the back of the animal, and created a spout on the animal's head. The modeling of the fleece and the details of the head were mold-made, and some details were retouched with a pointed tool. The details of the body and head are stylized. One vase depicting a standing ram was uncovered in a tomb at Shiqmona, dated to the 4th century CE (Fig. 1;¹ Elgavish 1994: 138, 157, Fig. 144; Zemer 2009: 143, No. 152). Another similar vase of unknown origin is in the National Maritime Museum at Haifa (Fig. 2; Zemer 2009: 144, No. 153).² It portrays a crouching ram, with the owner's name scratched in Greek on its base under the left side of the ram: ΘΑΛΙΤΟΣ, most probably the genitive form of a personal name Thales.³ The two vessels resemble a ram vase from Tel Dor and

other vases dated by the excavators to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE (Fig. 3; Goz-Zilberstein 1989).

The second group is composed of vessels that were shaped in a more schematic way and their decoration is linear and stylized, resulting from their production in stone molds rather than terracotta molds. Production in soft limestone molds is common in Palestinian oil lamps and figurines from the 4th century CE and later. Stone molds for oil lamps as well as lamps and figurines were found in two cisterns at Beit Nattif in the Judean foothills, dated to the late 3rd–early 4th centuries CE (Baramki 1936). Stone molds for both oil lamps and figurines dated to the 4th–5th centuries CE were found also at Caesarea (Fig. 4; Sussman 1980; Holum *et alii* 1988: 192–193; Patrìch and Pinkas 2008). The Caesarea molds, portraying horses, horsemen and camels, could have been used for the production of zoomorphic vases. A further stone mold for an oil lamp of the Late Roman–Byzantine period was uncovered at Sepphoris (Adan-Bayewitz 1995). Two stone molds for ampullae for pilgrims were reportedly found in the Jerusalem area (Piccirillo 1994).

The production process of stone molds is more complex than terracotta or plaster molds, and requires professional craftsmanship and a lot of experience. Production in terracotta molds involves a fully modeled archetype or a ready-made object on which layers of clay are set (Uhlenbrock 1990), whereas preparing a stone mold involves the free carving of a pattern into the soft stone. Any fault in the carving of the mold would have damaged it in a way it could not be used and had to be discarded. The usage of stone molds for lamps with little decoration is self-explanatory, since lamps are round and symmetric, and carving the mold can be assisted by ruler and compass. Unlike lamps, figurines and plastic vases which require a more plastic and three dimensional modeling were nor-



Fig. 1. Ram shaped vase from Shiqmona, 19.8 cm high (courtesy of the National Maritime Museum at Haifa).

Fig. 2. Ram shaped vase from the National Maritime Museum at Haifa, 9 cm high (courtesy of the National Maritime Museum at Haifa).

Fig. 3. Ram shaped vase from Tel Dor (courtesy of E. Stern, Tel Dor project; after Stern 2000: Pl. V).

Fig. 4. Stone molds from Caesarea (courtesy of K. Holum and A. Levin; after Holum *et alii* 1988: 192-193).



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mally not produced in stone molds. Nevertheless, the figurine molds from Caesarea prove that such technique was in use in the Byzantine period, despite of the complex carving of the negative.

The zoomorphic vessels of the second group resemble in some cases terracotta figurines, and probably belong to the same workshops. Some of these figurines seem to have been made in stone molds while others with more detailed decorations were probably made in terracotta molds. Some figurines and vases were published by Reifenberg (1927: 112-113), and include representations of birds, cocks, horses and horned animals, however with no given provenance. Further specimens come from museum collections in Israel, such as an ibex



Fig. 5. Horned animal shaped vase from the National Maritime Museum at Haifa, 10 cm high (courtesy of the National Maritime Museum at Haifa).

vase from the National Maritime Museum in Haifa (Fig. 5; Zemer 2009: 139), another vase from the Flagellation Museum in Jerusalem, shaped as an horned animal and said to come from Gadara (Fig. 6; unpublished),⁴ and a cock-shaped vase from the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv (unpublished, inv. no. MHP 21962).⁵ They have schematically shaped bodies and their legs are either missing, cast in the mold, or added after casting, like those coming from the molds with no legs from Caesarea (Fig. 6;

Sussman 1980: 78, note 10, Pl. XVI). The animals are stylized and are sometimes hard to identify. They were decorated with geometric designs of bands, curves, zigzags, circles and dots, similar to decorations on small jugs and lamps of the early Byzantine period. Some have decorated saddles, and a few carry riders. In some cases the decoration is incised on the surface rather than molded. Their style probably derives from their special technique, resulting from the production in stone molds.

The vessels of the second group that have a clear context derive from various burials dated to the 4th-6th centuries CE. A complete ram vase was found in a Byzantine tomb at Beth Shean (Rowe 1930: 40). It shows the main features of this group:



Fig. 6. Horned animal shaped vase from Gadara (courtesy of the Flagellation Museum in Jerusalem).

the animal is disproportionately modeled and is portrayed without legs, perhaps crouching; the neck of the vessel is on its back; a small handle is set on the center of the back; a round spout is incised on the animal's head; and linear mold-made geometrical patterns decorate the body.

Similar vessels were unearthed in tombs in the cemetery at Castra on the coast of the Carmel (unpublished; Yeivin and Finkielsztejn 1999: 26).⁶ Fragments of two identical zoomorphic vases were

found at Castra, one coming from a burial cave, Cave 10 (Fig. 7), the other from the same area but outside the cave. This burial cave is dated to the 4th-6th centuries CE. The vessels portray an unidentified animal, possibly a horse, as attested by the mane depicted between the ears and the decorated saddle. These vessels were made in a mold similar to the molds found at Caesarea, with the legs attached to the vase after they were cast in the mold. Their modeling is similar to other vessels of this group, with an disproportional head, schematic and awkwardly modeled body, stylized features of the head and linear geometric decorations. Two more



Fig. 7. Zoomorphic shaped vase from Castra, 11.2 cm high (courtesy of the IAA).

vessels from Castra come also from Cave 10 (Fig. 8). They have the modeling and decorations typical of this group. A further vase from the same tomb is dove-shaped (Fig. 9). It resembles bird figurines of the Beit Nattif workshop (Baramki 1936: Pl. VII, No. 3; Ziffer 1998: 6, 6*), but unlike the Beit Nattif figurines, the bird from Castra is shaped as a vessel with a rim on its tail and a spout on its head. A small handle made for hanging was not essential, since the vase is stable enough to stand on a flat surface.

Three zoomorphic vases and one figurine were unearthed in the central chamber of Cave 10, and one comes from a burial trough. The tomb con-



Fig. 9. Dove shaped vase from Castra, 7 cm high (courtesy of the IAA).



Fig. 8. Zoomorphic shaped vase from Castra, 6.4 cm high (courtesy of the IAA).

tained many grave goods of the 4th-6th centuries CE as well as hundreds of skeletons, indicating a long span of burial in this cave. Among the rich finds there is a figurine of a horse and rider (Haifa Museum, The National Maritime Museum 1999: 57). The horse is made in a similar technique, whereas the rider is hand-made and modeled in a peculiar style.⁷

The terracotta vessels and figurines of the 4th-6th centuries originating from the burials of Castra seem to continue a Roman funerary practice at this site. Terracotta figurines dated to the 2nd century CE were deposited as funerary offerings in some tombs, among which are an Aphrodite, a youth bust, masks and other figurines (Haifa Museum, The National Maritime Museum 1999: 4, 26, 27,

56). In both cases, figurines and vessels, these terracottas testify to a funerary practice used in these tombs.

A third group of zoomorphic vessels is close to the second group, but varies in its technology and decorations. The vases in this group depict bulls or draft animals, and unlike some of the animals of the former group which are shown crouching, they are represented standing. Despite their naïve



Fig. 10. Horned animal shaped vase from Kibbutz Ha-goshrim (courtesy of the IAA).

modeling they have good proportions and are plastically rendered as compared to the flat and linear vases of the second group. The vessels were generally cast in molds, but could be also wheel-made. The mold-made vessels are decorated with what seems to be some sort of harness or saddle in relief on their back as well as on the neck and the front of the head. The wheel-made vessels are decorated with incisions and puncture marks. Some of these vessels are said to come from Byzantine tombs.

A most interesting and intriguing variation of this group are two vases, the one of which was unearthed with some fragments of other vessels of this type in a burial cave at Kibbutz Ha-goshrim in northern Israel, close to the sources of the River Jordan (Fig. 10; Foerster 1965; Bagatti 2001: 199-

202, Fig. 115). The second vessel which is an exact parallel to the vessel from Kibbutz Ha-goshrim is presently in a private collection and derives from an unknown provenance, and it is suggested by its publisher that it came from the “syrisch-palaestinenischen Raum” (Fig. 11; Wamser and Zahlhaus 1998: 150, No. 168). These vessels are probably mold-made and shaped as a quadruped defined as a bull particularly since its head is decorated in the fashion in which the head of the Apis-bull is usually ornamented, but in place of the sun-disk the animal wears a halo representing a wreath enclosing a well-executed cross in relief. These two unusual vessels, it goes without saying, carry an obvious Christian meaning and are a symbol of Christ. The identification of our vases with an ox or a bull is possible since this animal has a clear Christian significance symbolizing Christ because of its force and power, and is possibly represented here as a sacrificial animal. The “harness” or “saddle” should be interpreted as ornaments that adorned the animals before being sacrificed as can be seen represented on some Roman reliefs (Bagatti 2001: 201). This is however a rather unusual use of an ox or bull representation in symbolizing Christ. Since the identifying elements of our quadruped-shaped vessels are not unambiguous, we prefer to identify them as meant to represent a lamb, as suggested already by Bagatti (2001: 201-202). The lamb, as a symbol of Christ, is one of the favorite, and most frequently used, symbols of all periods of Christian art (Ferguson 1961: 20). In the words of John’s Gospel (1:29): “Behold the lamb of God; behold Him who takes away the sins of the world.” The halo with the Cross crowning the head of our lamb can be compared to numerous representations of the lamb adorned with the haloed cross in Christian art. The two unusual vessels represented here, which are dated to the 5th-6th centuries, are a most convincing proof to the religious beliefs of the people buried in these tombs.

Another vessel of this group was found at Shiqmona (Fig. 12; Elgavish 1994: 136-137, 142, Fig. 121). It is mold-made and decorated with a few bands and dots. The bull has a small hump on its back. This vessel comes from the Byzantine levels of the city, though its precise context was not specified. It resembles the quadruped from Kibbutz Ha-



Fig. 11. Horned animal shaped vase from a private collection (after Wamser and Zahlhaus 1998: 150, Nr. 168).



Fig. 12. Bull shaped vase from Shiqmona (courtesy of the National Maritime Museum at Haifa).

goshrim, both having a cylindrical body, schematic head with round incised eyes, short horns and squat legs. Unlike the vessels of the second group, they have no handles. Another head of a bull-shaped vessel was unearthed at Shiqmona, but it is modeled in another style and resembles the vases of the second group (Elgavish 1994: 143, Fig. 122). The two vessels from Shiqmona are from the town and their context is not known.

A further vessel attributed by us to this group is composed of twin attached bulls, with two necks and spouts, and four handles on the back of the animals. It was found in the southern part of the cemetery at Beth Shean, near the 6th-century monastery known as “Kyra Maria” (Fig. 13; Tsori 1966). The vessel is wheel-made, and the handles, joining parts, legs and heads are hand-made. The heads are turned up, with spouts in the animals’ heads. The round eyes are incised. The twin bodies are covered with roulette and other geometrical patterns incised all over. This vessel is unique with its double containers, which could operate each solely or both simultaneously. This vase resembles Late Byzantine or Early Islamic zoomorphic vessels, also wheel-made, that are common in Palestine (e.g. ‘Ein Hanniya, Baramki 1934; Khirbet ‘Asida, Baramki and Avi-Yonah 1934). Vessels of this type, dated to the Early Islamic period, were unearthed elsewhere at Beth Shean (Fitzgerald 1931: Pl. XXIX, No. 4; Tsafir and Foerster 1994: 111). Despite the resemblance of the twin-bull vase to Early Islamic vases, it is more likely to belong to our third group of vessels, as these share similar proportions of the body parts and handles, and were found in a funerary context.

In addition to the vases discussed above, some zoomorphic vessels were discovered in Caesarea. These are in the form of sheep or rams, and cocks (Patrich and Abu Shaneb 2008: 314, 328). It is not clear whether they belong to any of the groups discussed above, as their technology is not described. Nos. 312 and 314 seem to be mold-made, while Nos. 313 and 315 look wheel-made and incised. Unfortunately, apart for No. 312 that comes from a context dated to the 4th-6th centuries CE (Patrich and Abu Shaneb 2008: 317), all the rest come from fills with no clear context. These can be joined to the molds found in Caesarea (Sussman 1980).



Fig. 13. Zoomorphic shaped vase from Beth Shean, 14 cm high (courtesy of the IAA).

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ZOOMORPHIC VESSELS

The zoomorphic vases dealt with here have forerunners dating to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. A group of plastic vases and rhyta that were unearthed at Maresha are dated to the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE (Erlich and Kloner 2007; 2008: 65-78). One of them is an imported lion-shaped vessel of the Magenta ware group,⁸ which has local imitations at Maresha (Erlich and Kloner 2007: Pl. 39:213). Zoomorphic vessels of Early Roman date and probably belonging also to the Magenta ware group were found at Petra (Horsefield and Horsefield 1942: Pl. XII:51) and 'Akko (Messika 1997: 124-125, No. 13, Fig. 3:13).⁹ Three zoomorphic vessels in the shape of a camel, a cock and a ram were found in Gerasa in a workshop for lamps and figurines, dated to the 1st-2nd century CE (Illife 1944: Pl. VI, Nos. 88-90). One of the Magenta ware vases in the British museum, modeled as a crouching ram, is said to come from Syria (Higgins 1976: 8, No. 23, Cat. No. 35).

A further group of zoomorphic vases, dated to the late 2nd-early 3rd centuries CE, comes from the coast of Israel, and is considered to be of a Cnidian origin (Goz-Zilberstein 1989). Some zoomorphic vessels were excavated at Ashkelon, generally dated Roman to Late Roman. Two vases portray a camel and a bull (Johnson 2008: 133-135).¹⁰ A fragment of a vase depicting a dog's or lion's head was found in Caesarea (Patrich and Abu Shaneb 2008: 313,

No. 298, 325:298). A vase figuring a wild boar was unearthed together with finds dated to the 2nd century CE (Haiman 2009: Fig. 5) in a mausoleum near Binyamina. A vase representing a crouching ram was found in an Early Roman house at Apollonia within debris of pottery dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries CE (Roll and Ayalon 1989: 43-46, Fig. 22; Roll and Tal 2008: 146). Two further zoomorphic vessels and a 'negroid' cup were unearthed at Tel Dor (Goz-Zilberstein 1989, back cover; Stern 2000: 302-304, Color Pl. V). The Roman vessels from Tel Dor and Apollonia shaped as a ram resemble the Shiqmona ram of group 1. Goz-Zilberstein (1989: 40) noticed the popularity of ram-shaped vessels in Roman Palestine, as in Tel Dor, Apollonia, Gerasa, and a ram-shaped vessel from Syria in the British Museum. The ram-shaped vases of the Roman period seem to be the predecessors of the Byzantine ram-shaped vessels of the first group discussed above.

A chronological overview is incomplete without mentioning the Beit Nattif figurines (Baramki 1936). This assemblage is an important turning point in the history of the development of zoomorphic vessels. Unlike the sites discussed above, which are from the north of Israel, the coast and Transjordan, Beit Nattif is a workshop in Judaea, dated to the late 3rd-early 4th centuries CE. The figurines created there are far from the naturalistic shaped vases mentioned above. Their schematic and stylized rendering probably results from their being cast in stone molds.¹¹ In this regard the

Beit Nattif figurines are the forerunners for later figurines and vases to be produced in stone molds, such as the Caesarea workshop and the zoomorphic vessels of the second group discussed here.

The history of the vessels demonstrates the development of the tradition of zoomorphic vases production from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period in Palestine. The majority of the creatures portrayed are rams, bulls, horses, camels, lions, as well as doves and cocks. The different types of zoomorphic vases of the 4th-6th centuries derive, it seems, from different traditions: The rams of the first group are reminiscent of the naturalistic Magenta Ware and 'Cnidian' imports, and they might be relatively early in the Byzantine period, perhaps of the 4th century. Conversely, the vases of the second group shaped as rams, horses and birds, follow a local tradition of stylized modeling, and are cast in stone molds, similarly to the Beit Nattif production. In their technique and decoration they resemble juglets or feeders dated to the 4th-5th centuries (Bagatti 1969: Figs. 220-221; Mevorah and Israeli 2000: 208). The vessels of group 3 are perhaps slightly later in the Byzantine period, possibly 5th-7th centuries, and are followed by similar vessels of the Early Islamic period.

CONTEXT, FUNCTION AND MEANING

The vessels we are dealing with here were used in a funerary context. In this regard they differ from the Hellenistic and Roman vases, which originate from their workshops (Gerasa and Beit Nattif) and dwellings or urban areas (Maresha, Tel Dor, Apollonia), while only one vase is known to have come from a burial site (a mausoleum in Binyamina). Most of the zoomorphic vases of the Byzantine period (4th-6th centuries CE) originate from tombs – four vessels from Castra (with a few figurines), two from Beth Shean, one from Shiqmona, and some vessels from Ha'goshrim, all in all about ten vessels deriving from four different burial sites in northern Palestine. Generally speaking, Hellenistic terracottas from Palestine are rarely found in burial contexts (Erlich 2009: 59-60), and

this seems to be the case also in Roman burials. Terracotta figurines of cocks that were probably serving as toys were found in children's graves (Zias 1980: 64, Fig. 5; Porath and Levy 1993: 34*-36*). The use of the zoomorphic vases in funerary contexts hints it seems, to a particular use in Christian burial practices.

As we mentioned above, three vessels out of the four that were found in a Byzantine tomb at Castra were unearthed in the center of the burial cave. The vessels may have been used during the funeral ceremonies or for preparing the deceased for the burial. The shape and size of the vessels indicate that these may have contained some liquid that served for ointments, perfumes or libations of some kind. These vessels might have been used also as lamp fillers. Small lamp fillers of this period are sometimes made in a mold technique and with decorations similar to group 2 (Bagatti 1969: 277-279, Figs. 220-221; Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 168, No. 694; Haifa Museum, The National Maritime Museum 1999: 24). The tombs discussed here yielded also other finds, including numerous lamps. The zoomorphic vessels might have been used also in the domain of the living and not only in the tombs. Their recurring use context in funerary context and their good state of preservation in museum collections, imply that they were primarily used in tombs and were part of the funerary equipment.

Northern Palestine and its coast were predominantly settled by Christian communities in the period we are dealing with (4th-6th centuries CE).¹² The zoomorphic vases found mainly in the burial compounds of the area dealt with in the present paper represent some of the most profound symbolism in Christian art, as the ram-shaped vessels decorated with the haloed cross on their head. Other vessels depict rams, bulls, horses, doves and cocks all of which may have contained some Christian significance and symbolism. These vessels are part of the material culture of the Christian society in northern Israel during the Byzantine period, and reflect some of the funerary practices of these communities.

NOTES

1. The figures were prepared for publication by Silvia Kra-piwko.
2. We would like to thank Avshalom Zemer, the curator of the National Maritime Museum in Haifa, for allowing us to produce vases from the museum's collection.
3. The following note was added by Dr. Leah Di Segni, to whom we are thankful: I think we can assume that Thalitos is just the genitive of Thales, written with iota-cism – quite normal, when we deal with inscriptions of the Roman or Byzantine period. I see that some put the accent (acutus) on the *alpha*, but most put the accent (circumflex) on the *eta*, making the nominative Thalês (circumflex on *eta*). Here are some examples: Thaletos (with *eta*) as genitive of Thales: SEG XXX: No. 306, 39 (Thrace, 3rd-2nd ca. BCE) – stamped handle; SB 1: Nos. 1291, 3616 Alexandria (Egypt) – same; SB 1: No. 1686 (278/7 BCE); SEG XXXIII: No. 158 (Athens, 3rd ca. CE); XXXIV: No. 135 (Athens, 3rd ca. CE); XLI: No. 147 (Athens, 3rd ca. CE); XLII: No. 1269; XLIII: No. 893; IG II (2nd ed.): Nos. 2208 (several of this name), 2223 (Athens, 3rd ca. CE); IG IX, 1: No. 65 (Phocis); TAM II: No. 23 (Telmessos, Lycia), Roman period.
4. We would like to thank Fr. Eugenio Alliata for supplying the photo and permission to publish it here.
5. We are grateful to Irit Ziffer of the Eretz Israel Museum for this information.
6. The excavations at Castra were conducted by Gerald Finkiel-sztejn and Ze'ev Yeivin on behalf of the IAA. The terracotta figurines and plastic vases from Castra were studied by Adi Erlich. We would like to thank Gerald Finkielsztejn for his permission to publish these vessels.
7. The rider is modeled in a style resembling very old Cypriote traditions, but another fragment of a similar rider from Caesarea attests to its Byzantine date (Patrich and Abu Shaneb 2008: 320, No. 288).
8. The Magenta ware vessels are Late Hellenistic and Early Roman plastic vases in various figurative shapes, which served for oil or wine. For their date, origin and distribution see Higgins 1976; Sguaitamatti 1981; Szilágyi 1983; Michaelides 1997.
9. Messika (1997: Note 6) relates the fragment to the Cnidian products as the Tel Dor vessels (see below), but according to the date of the locus and the description of the fabric the fragment could be a Magenta ware specimen or its imitation.
10. Both vases were found together in Grid 38, Phase 3, M, which is generally dated to the 5th-6th centuries CE (Johnson 2008: 220, Fig. 4). In the typological discussion there is no reference to this dating, and it is said that all the plastic bottles are Roman to Late Roman (Johnson 2008: 133).
11. Only stone molds for lamps were published from the site (Baramki 1936: Pl. XII).
12. For the borders between Jews, pagans, Christians and others, see Aviam 2004. Aviam (2004: 18-20, Fig. 1.10) mentions 76 sites of 140 Byzantine sites in his survey, with clear Christian presence. Archaeological evidence shows that the Carmel coast sites dealt with here (Shiqmona, Castra) were also Christian.

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