

The Production and Iconography of Luxury Tableware in Roman Jerusalem

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The conquest and destruction of Jewish Jerusalem in 70 AD at the hands of the Romans resulted in the presence of the Tenth Legion in the city for more than 200 years. It was only transferred to Aila on the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba towards the end of the 3rd century. In terms of material culture, the requirements of the Roman military and administration led to a profound change in the repertoire of ceramic tableware, ritual vessels, and construction accessories. The local manufacture of clay vessels, roof-tiles, bricks and pipes took place at an industrial site located 2 km to the west of the city on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus-Nicopolis. The choice of the site was determined by the existence of Jewish kiln works in operation from the middle of the 2nd century BC onwards. About 3 km further to the west, the Romans established a colony at Biblical Moza, with the Arabic Qalunyah preserving the Latin term *colonia*.¹ The kiln site received its necessary raw material from this area. Petrographic analyses indicated the extensive use of the clay and marls of the Moza soil in the workshops, which the Roman military operated.

In the local manufacture of tableware, outstanding examples are chalices and cups² that copy forms and decoration common on Italian-type *sigillata* and metal vessels. The fragment of a drinking vessel (fig. 1) depicts a male youth carrying an amphora on his shoulder.³ Holding one handle with his left hand, he pours water or wine into a vessel set on a table or altar. In his right hand he holds a wand, possibly a thyrsus. The figure is identified as part of a libation ritual⁴ and cultic scene,⁵ but is more likely to represent a member of Dionysos' retinue (e.g. a young satyr).⁶ Figured mould-made handle shafts and application-decorated escutcheons are characteristic of closed vessels,⁷ which most likely derive from Campanian bronze wine jugs and table amphorae found at Pompeii⁸ and elsewhere. A few vessels with barbotine decoration were also produced at the Jerusalem kiln site, although the technique does not seem to have been popular.⁹ Jugs, beakers, and bowls were decorated with ivy tendrils of leaves and corymbs, made in a free style with undulating stalks and leaves, clusters of berries, and rows of dots filling the surface; some vessels also have rouletting.

Of particular interest is a complete vessel adorned with images of Hermes and other figures, objects, and animals that are all applied in application technique.¹⁰ On the basis of visual inspection it was manufactured in the legionary kiln works and is to be attributed to the wide-spread category of kraters for sacrificial libation, probably of wine mixed with water, performed in a nearby Mithraeum¹¹ or Serapeum.¹² The four serpents, drinking out of little wells, are part of the pictorial language on ritual vessels related to the veneration of terrestrial deities, especially Mithras. The cults of Mithras and Serapis were popular with the Roman military.



Fig. 1: Fragment of a mould-made drinking vessel.

In conclusion, it can be said that the local production of ceramic tableware underwent changes with the arrival of the Romans. These are characterised by innovations in the repertoire of shapes (drinking vessels, decorated clay jugs and bowls), surface treatment, as well as decorative techniques and designs (mould-made and application-decorated pottery). It was made for use by the Roman military and administrative personnel stationed in Jerusalem after 70 AD. Elsewhere in the Roman world, such vessels occur at both civilian and military sites from Augustan times onwards. In Jerusalem, consumers relied on tableware and utilitarian pottery of local manufacture. Apart from a fair amount of ESA tableware, some Pompeian Red Ware, a few lamps and transport amphoras, no imports were recorded, with red-gloss tableware copied extensively.¹³

Notes

¹ Tsafir et al. 1994, 105

² Magness 2005, 70–72; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 23–26.

³ Hershkovitz 2005, 294 figs. 11, 8, 14; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 25 fig. 3.

⁴ Hershkovitz 2005, 294.

⁵ Magness 2005, 72, n. 20.

⁶ Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 25. For comparison, see Oliver 1977, 116f. no. 76.

⁷ Magness 78–79; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 26–30.

⁸ Tassinari 1993, *passim*.

⁹ Magness 2005, 75–77; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 31f.

¹⁰ Magness 2003; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2015, 611f. The vessel and fragments of a second krater were unearthed by C. Clermont-Ganneau in 1874 in a rock-cut chamber close to the northern *decumanus* in Jerusalem. Another fragment came to light in the Upper City of Jerusalem, Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2015, fig. 1b.

¹¹ Magness 2003.

¹² Gibson 2011, 29, n. 36.

¹³ Magness 2005, 69–74. The evidence from the legionary kiln works indicates the dominance of locally manufactured red-gloss tableware, while the habitation debris retrieved from the Roman dump on the eastern *cardo* contained ESA tableware and Pompeian Red Ware pans/dishes and lids, Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 23; 2019, 7–11. 16–18.47–48. To date, Western relief-decorated tableware is rare, for South Gaulish sigillata see Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2017, 30f. fig. 12; Wild 2017.

Image Credit

Fig. 1: Courtesy of Israel Antiquities Authority; Photo Clara Amit.

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