THE IMPERIAL ROMAN WORLD – VESSELS AND THEIR PATTERNS OF USE

ANOMALIES AMONGST EARLY ROMAN MOULD-BLOWN GLASS VESSELS

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Ancient mould-blown glass vessels are generally regarded as forming a distinct and fairly well-defined group. Not only do they provide the names of individual craftsmen, but they are also decorated with distinctive designs that can often be related to each other. In addition, production of multiple copies allows for a close study of types, their development, and even their patterns of distribution. Much effort has been devoted to classifying the various groups, especially amongst the very numerous small bottles, jugs and amphe
tici of the 1st century AD. This paper, drawing principally on examples in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, presents some examples that may be regarded as not conforming to the normal pattern. It also raises the question of whether the production of mould-blown vessels was distinct from that of free-blown glass. Evidence will be presented to show that mould blowing was at least partially integrated with the free-blowing industry.

Of particular interest are two mould-blown bottles (FIGS 1–2) that were acquired as part of the J.F. Morgan gift bequest in 1917. They previously belonged to the Griau Collection, which was published along with superb watercolour engravings 100 years ago (Francois 1903, 162 nos 1172–3, pl. ccxvi.2–3). The two bottles have no provenance and, despite the fact that they appear to have been made in the same mould, there is no way of telling if they were found together. They belong to the class of small hexagonal bottles, blown into a multi-part mould and decorated in high relief around the sides. Such bottles have in recent years been the subject of intensive study. Numerous examples are now known through publication from archaeological contexts and museum collections, and sadly too from sales catalogues. Excavated examples are listed by Stern (1995, 115, 130, 136, 143, with refs in footnotes), to which may be added examples in museums and collections (see Ancient Glass 2001, 103, no. 146; Arts 2000, 55, 102–3, no. 40; Kunina 1997, 277–9, nos 131–6; Stern 2001, 1–2, 114–16 nos 44–6, 122, no. 51; Whitehouse 2001, 36–42, nos 506–11; for examples currently on the market, see Christie’s 2003, 123 lots 180–1). Indeed, such vessels were clearly intended to be mass-produced, since the moulds could be used repeatedly, and new moulds could be easily created from an existing vessel.

Scholars have, therefore, been able to construct whole typologies and sequences of mould series. The detailed classification of “hexagonal vessels with high relief” is set out most clearly and exhaustively in the introduction to Marianne Stern’s catalogue of Roman Mold-blow Glass in the Toledo Museum of Art (Stern 1995, 74–86). However, the different categories of such bottles were first outlined many years ago, primarily by Gustav Eisen (Eisen 1927, 1, 233–4, 247–53, pls 50–2). Essentially there are five types, distinguished by the relief designs set in the panels around the body: Vessels (also called the ‘Temple’ series by Eisen), Masks, Fruit, Mixed Symbols (or ‘Athletic Symbols’), and Birds. Stern presented a plausible explanation for the development and relationship of the various types in the Toledo catalogue. It does not, however, represent the only plausible reconstruction, and it does not cover certain anomalies.

The two vessels in the Metropolitan Museum provide a case in point, for they do not fit into any of Stern’s categories of types by decoration or mould construction. They are what might be considered ‘hybrids’—that is, the six central panels do not conform to a single known type but include vessels (on four of the panels) and fruit (on the remaining two panels). Between the panels are well-delineated columns with capitals and bases, while on the shoulder there are six arches, each containing an ovoid object. These features link the type closely to the main Vessels type. However, the actual vessels depicted on the two bottles are unusual. There are four different shapes: 1) a large, deep bowl, 2) a vessel containing fruit, 3) a footed vessel with long curving handles, and 4) another footed vessel with a conical lid. Tall spouted pitchers or jugs are not represented, whereas they are normally found on the Vessels type. Instead, there is a fiddled vessel, which finds no parallel amongst the Vessels or any other type. Moreover, around the bottom in place of the usual decoration of hanging fillets and bunches of fruit, there is a pattern of upturned tongues. This element is only found on Stern’s Series C of the Vessels type, although it also occurs on later generations of the Fruit type and other categories of hexagonal bottles.
The mould construction type (Stern’s MCT) is also unusual. The Vessels type employs only MCT II or IVA. The bases of the two bottles do not belong to either of these categories. Indeed, they do not fit precisely into any of the MCT groups as tabulated by Stern (Stern 1995: 28, fig. 15). Rather, their MCT is a mixture of Stern’s categories I and V, making the bottles more closely related to hexagonal jugs with Dionysiac Symbols (Stern 1995: 160–6, nos 71–4). Finally, whereas most hexagonal bottles are strongly coloured (that is, they are made in either opaque or deeply coloured translucent glass), these two examples are in a naturally coloured blue green and pale green. So they may be taken as evidence for the fact that interrelations between groups are more complex than Stern envisaged. New discoveries may add yet further types and series in due course.

The only parallel for the Metropolitan Museum’s vessels is an example that was excavated in a tomb at Kato Paphos on Cyprus in 1988 (Karageorghis 1989a, 59–60, 62, no. 5, fig. 97, 1989b, 846, fig. 140). Not only does this jug have the same arrangement of vessels and fruit around the sides (as well as other identical decorative elements), but it also has the same rather squat body and proportionally taller neck. It, like one of our two bottles, has a handle with a looped, vertical thumb rest. It would appear, therefore, that this type forms a small transitional group not only between types within the standard grouping of hexagonal bottles in high relief, but also between these and the other bottles and jugs whose decoration is more akin to that of mould-blown tablewares.

Another well-known group – namely, vessels belonging to Stern’s ‘Workshop of the Floating Handles’ (Stern 1995, 86–91) – provides further evidence for the complexity of the early mould-blown glass industry. There are five vessels of this group in the Metropolitan Museum. One belongs to the basket amphora type (fig. 3), while another is a rather poorly defined example of the Ajax bottle (fig. 4). Two others are piriform jugs of the so-called ‘Hunt-and-Scroll’ type (fig. 5 and 17.120.243, not illustrated), while the remaining vessel is a free-blown amphora (fig. 6).

Disentangling the web of interrelations between the different types of vessels in the ‘Workshop of the Floating Handles’ group has not been made any easier by errors in some of the publications. These need to be corrected. For example, the intact Ajax flask from Stratonikeia has been described as ‘fragments’ (Stern 1995, 91; contrast Özet 1993; 1998, 47–8, no. 15), and the Hunt-and-Scroll bottle from Zadar is, apparently, not in the Murano Museum (Whitehouse 2001, 53). It has been stated (Whitehouse 2001, 51) that Özet identified one side of the Ajax flask as representing the seventh labour of Hercules. In fact, she correctly identified the figure as Ajax, although the animal the hero is about to slay may more correctly be identified as a sheep rather than a bull (Özet 1993, 143–4). The Metropolitan Museum’s Ajax bottle, in translucent honey yellow with matching handles, has been overlooked in recent publications. It is not listed by Stern (1995, 89, n.155) or Whitehouse (2001, 49), although it was mentioned by Özet (1993, 144–5). Of the ten known examples of this type, six are in opaque white glass, and two are in translucent manganese purple with opaque white handles, while the purple bottle from Stratonikeia is the only other example entirely made of translucent glass. Although the Ajax vessel in the Museo Vetrario di Murano is said to have ‘normal’ handles (Stern 1995, 90, n.150; contrast Ravagnan 1994, 34, no. 28), my research seems to indicate that all of the known Ajax vessels, if they had handles, had ones of the ‘floating’ type, as is clearly indicated on the example in the Metropolitan Museum.

The list of examples of ‘Hunt-and-Scroll’ vessels in the second volume of Roman Glass in the Corning Museum of Glass (Whitehouse 2001, 53, no. 525) includes one of the Metropolitan Museum’s examples (17.194.249), citing a reference in Eisen (Eisen 1927, f. 235, pl. 55a). However, the vessel illustrated in Eisen’s plate does not match with the actual vessel in the Metropolitan Museum, although the latter does tally with Massias’ engraving in the folio illustration to Froehner’s catalogue of the Gréau Collection (Froehner 1903, 157, no. 1133, pl. ccv.4). In fact, it has proved impossible to trace such an amphora in the Museum’s collection. This is indeed a pity, since the vessel in Eisen clearly has ‘normal’, not ‘floating’ handles, making it a singular piece. No other example amongst all the types of mould-blown vessels attributed to the ‘Workshop of the Floating Handles’ has such ‘normal’ handles. It would be a great help if Eisen’s amphora could be traced and thus examined alongside other examples of the Hunt-and-Scroll type.

The final example from the ‘Floating Handles’ group (fig. 6) is one of only two vessels attributed to this workshop that is free-blown, the other being from a grave find at Miletus (Stern 1995, 89–91, fig. 66). Both of these vessels are also unusual because of their size. They are considerably taller than the average mould-blown vessel; for instance, the Metropolitan Museum’s example has a height of 124 mm. It raises the question of whether the larger size of the free-blown pieces showed the use of ‘floating’ handles to be impractical because they were less sturdy than ‘normal’ handles. It may, however, have been merely a matter of technique, for in general ancient glass workers clearly found it easier, regardless of whether they were producing core-formed or blown vessels, to apply the handles to the body and trail them up to the rim.

Certainly the lessons learnt during the Hellenistic period not just in glassworking techniques but also in the mass production of pottery and lamps using moulds were not lost on the craftsmen who established the Roman glass industry. The details of how these craftsmen and their workshops operated remains sketchy, but it would seem that they did not work in isolation. Glass kilns have been found in close proximity to pottery ones (for example, at Lyon: Foy and Nenna 2001, 49–50). Likewise, tomb groups show that core-formed, cast and blown vessels were sometimes deposited together. A good example of a tomb that has yielded cast, free-blown and mould-blown vessels is provided by burial 4466 at Acanthus, Greece (Trakospopoulu 2002, 84–5, figs 12–13; cf. also Ravagnan 1994, pl. xxiv (tomb 1b from the cemetery at Nona), while tombs containing core-formed and blown glass have been noted on Rhodes (Jacopi 1932–3, 533–4, nos 11–14, figs 67, 68–9; tomb 41) as well as in Italy (Ravagnan 1994, 164, no. 320, pl. xxiii: tomb di Salizzolo, Verona). In the last example one may note especially the ‘floating’ appearance of the handle, although the vessel itself is quite unlike the oinochoe in the Royal Ontario Museum that is
FIG. 1 Mould-blown hexagonal juglet; ht. 95mm, no provenance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.229)

FIG. 2 Mould-blown hexagonal bottle; ht. 106mm, no provenance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.250)

FIG. 3 Mould-blown basket flask (amphoriskos); ht. 106mm, no provenance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.222)

FIG. 4 Mould-blown Ajax flask (amphoriskos); ht. 106mm, said to be from Emesa (Homs), Syria. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1946 (46.114.3)

FIG. 5 Mould-blown Hunt-and-Scroll jug; ht. 98mm, said to be from Syria. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.249)

FIG. 6 Free-blown amphoriskos; ht. 124mm, no provenance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.157)
quoted as a parallel (Hayes 1975, 12, 188, no. 22). These
tomb groups, although few in number, at least imply that
in the early to mid-1st century AD glassware made in
a variety of techniques was circulating in the market.

It is to be hoped that further discoveries, especially in the
East, will help clarify the interrelationship between the
various glassworking techniques. Many questions and areas
of uncertainty remain but, as the number of published finds
increases, the corpus of types expands. This, too, means
that examples of deviations from the set pattern will also
become more apparent. The few vessels presented here
serve to illustrate one aspect of the diversity and flexibility
of the Roman glass industry and warn against the over-
classification and compartmentalisation of types.

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