GLASS VESSEL FINDS FROM A POSSIBLE EARLY FOURTH-CENTURY CE CHURCH AT AILA (AQABA), JORDAN

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Excavations at Roman Aila (Aqaba) under the direction of Professor S. Thomas Parker have uncovered the remains of a monumental mud-brick structure dating to the end of the 3rd century or to the beginning of the 4th century CE. Based on the eastward orientation of the building, its monumentality, plan, details of construction, and the associated artefactual finds, the excavators propose that this structure was a purpose-built Christian church, possibly the earliest such structure yet identified (Parker 2000, 390). A bishop of Aila is attested at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, indicating a sizeable Christian community at Aila by early in the 4th century (ibid. 2000, 386).

This structure has produced over 650 diagnostic glass vessel fragments (of 1650 total fragments), attributable largely to vessel types dated to the 4th century CE. The rare fragments of much earlier date, such as a cast plate with an overhung rim and a ribbed bowl, appear to be heirlooms. Some fragments, such as stemmed lamp fragments, represent types with a long period of production. The corpus includes a significant number of fragments from cut and cast glass vessels including four fragments from a cage cup. At least 166 fragments can be attributed to open shapes (bowls, beakers, lamps and plates) and at least 30 to closed shapes (bottles and jars). The rest are decorated body fragments or handles and bases that are not attributable with certainty. In addition to vessel fragments, the structure produced c. 15 fragments of bracelets, one bead or counter, one pendant, and eight window pane fragments.

CAST OR MOULDED VESSELS (FIG. 1.1 and 2)

The structure produced 13 of a site total of 49 fragments of heavy cast or moulded colourless beakers, bowls, and plates including six of a site total of 18 fragments of colourless base-rings (FIG. 1.2) that were either cast of one piece with the vessel or applied to blown vessels. The most exceptional of the cast fragments from the structure were three fragments of an elegant cast and lathe-cut colourless plate or bowl (FIG. 1.1) with an overhung rim similar to examples from Quseir al-Qadim (Meyer 1992, 19–20, nos 28–51).

Glass luxury tablewares such as these are known from throughout the Roman world in the early empire and were manufactured in various workshops in the late 1st and early
2nd century CE. The Aila examples were most likely of Egyptian manufacture. Such vessels were clearly exported from the more southerly Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE (Meyer 1992, 11–13), but were never present at Aila in quantity. It is probable that the vessels at Aila were imported from Egypt for local consumption. These vessels were heavy, durable luxury goods and, thus, the plate from this structure is likely to be an heirloom.

**Blown Vessels**

The vast majority of fragments found in the structure, and from Aila as a whole, come from blown vessels with cut, moulded, tooled or no decoration. There is a significant number of fragments from carefully crafted luxury vessels or lamps, but a majority are rims and bases from utilitarian types of tableware (63 simple straight or folded rims from open shapes, 28 simple straight or folded rims from closed shapes, 8 neck fragments from closed shapes, 27 concave or kicked bases, 23 pushed-in bases or tubular base-rings, 6 coil bases, 7 coil handles, and 4 ribbon handles). There are no waste fragments, as yet, or any other evidence of glassworking at Roman Aila.

**Lamps/Bowls (Fig. 1.3–5)**

The largest group of glass fragments recovered comes from lamp or beaker (bowl) types most commonly dated to the 4th century CE. These finds include 38 cracked-off rims (several with signs of burning), 13 conical bases, and 15 fragments decorated with blue blob decoration. These fragments constitute a majority of the total of 65 cracked-off rims, 15 conical bases, and 23 blue blob decorated fragments unearthed by the project as a whole.

These lamps or beakers – there is evidence for use as both (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 89–91) – are distinctive in shape and decoration. They are commonly thick-walled, conical or hemispherical, and decorated with wheel-cut grooves and applied blue blobs. The wheel-cut decoration ranges from well defined polished grooves to simple unpolished incised or abraded lines. The bases are usually elongate ovals ranging in length from less than 5mm to greater than 20mm; the smaller blobs are often arranged in triangular or diamond-shaped patterns. Examples without blue blob decoration are common.

Lamps and beakers of this sort were widely distributed throughout the Roman world. Examples from the eastern empire, like those at Aila, tend to be thick-walled and light green or colourless. They are well attested in Egypt, particularly at Karanis (Harden 1936, 155–66), and in Syria-Palestine where colourless or pale green conical examples with blue blobs are known to have been manufactured at Jalame for a generation from 511–383 CE (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 89–91).

Finds from the Aila structure include both straight and everted cracked-off rim fragments in addition to the conical bases and body fragments with blue blob and cut decoration. Eleven of the cracked-off rims from the structure are thinner-walled everted rims. Such rims are known on lamps (Whitehouse 1997, 250, no. 427), globular bowls (ibid., 258, no. 449), and goblets (ibid., 216–17, no. 373) of similar date to the heavier lamps.

In addition to the lamps with cracked-off rims, the structure also produced three small fragments from stemmed lamps out of a site total of five. Such lamps were made for use in polychrome and range in date from the 3rd century to early Islamic (Hadad 1998, 69, type 3). There are examples similar to the Aila fragments from church contexts at Jerash dated from the 4th to 5th century CE (Baur 1938, 534, no. 237) and the 7th century (Meyer 1987, 203, fig. 11, h–i).

The type of lamp that dominates the corpus, the heavy conical or bowl-shaped type with cracked-off rim, is the predominant lamp type of the 4th century. It is superseded in the region by the tumbler lamp, a beaker-shaped vessel with heavy out-folded rim and three handles common to the many slightly later late Byzantine churches of the late 5th to 6th century CE in the region, and found in distinctively thick deposits at el-Lajjun (Jones 1987, 627–8, no. 73), Jerash (Meyer 1987, 184, 210, fig. 12 P, 212), Khirbet al-Karak (Delougaz and Haines 1960, 49), and Humeima (currently under study by the author). No tumbler-type lamp fragments were found in the structure. The stemmed lamp, of which two possible fragments were recovered from the structure, is a long-lived type. Thus the lamp fragments from the Aila structure and from the slightly later churches nearby fall on opposite sides of a significant shift in lamp types.

**Vessels with cut decoration (Fig. 2.1–8)**

The structure produced 30 fragments with engraved decoration ranging from the few abraded lines or wheel-cut grooves often seen on lamps, to facet-cut and complex geometric cut designs. The majority of the fragments from the structure with cut decoration have the simple linear cut decoration typical of nicer bowls, beakers, lamps and bottles. The examples illustrated here are the more complex examples with geometric patterns and facet-cut designs. These fragments are, as a rule, too small to allow reconstruction of the entire vessel profile.

A thin, flat fragment (Fig. 2.1) exhibits a simple pattern of abraded criss-cross lines that is common in cut designs of the 4th century, for example on a series of globular bottles with Greek letters (Whitehouse 1997, 266, no. 454) and on fragments of similar date from Jalame (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 101–2) and Dura-Europos (Clairmont 1963, 72–4, no. 273).

A larger fragment with lightly abraded decoration (Fig. 2.2) consists of a pair of lines following the rounded contour of the vessel, a series of elongate abraded ovals on either side of the lines, two larger ovals above, at an interval of five of the smaller ovals, and linear elements extending from these larger ovals toward the break. This design can be compared to a similar section of decoration on a bowl from a tomb group at Al Bassa dated by Harden to the second half of the 4th century CE (Harden 1949, 156–8; Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 101–2, and note 225).

A more complicated design occurs on a thick fragment (Fig. 2.3) on which four pairs of lines intersect each other to create a star or cross-shaped pattern; ovals are cut into the angles between pairs of lines. The orientation of this
The most deeply cut and most carefully worked of the cut fragments from the Aila structure is a nearly flat fragment (FIG. 2.8) with an elaborate design around two major elements: 1) a large, deeply incised circle with a raised centre, and 2) a cross-hatched diamond within a rectilinear frame. Again, exact parallels are elusive. There are many examples of vessels with a continuous motif of cross-hatched diamonds or squares that date to around the beginning of the 3rd century CE (Clairmont 1963, 73, n. 187) and Corning has two examples of a cup with a frieze consisting of cross-hatched diamonds alternating with diamonds with an abraded circle in the centre dating to the 3rd to 4th century CE (Whitehouse 1997, 262–4, nos 447, 451). The design on these cups, although related in conceptions to those on the Aila fragments, does not match it for depth of carving or quality of workmanship.

**Sprinkler bottles (FIG. 3.1)**

The structure produced diaphragms from two sprinkler bottles. Sprinklers, distinguished by a narrow diaphragm at the neck that was probably intended to slow evaporation, are thought to have functioned as storage and dispensing vessels for ungents and perfumes. These vessels came in various shapes and decorations, but the Aila examples are known only by their diaphragms. Sprinklers are generally dated to the 3rd–4th century CE, but later examples are known (Stern 1995, 187).

**Vessels with mould-blown decoration (FIG. 3.2)**

Two mould-blown fragments from the structure are decorated with a sunken relief pattern of dots or, possibly, expanded mould-blown hexagons. Production of vessels with sunken relief seems to have begun in the 4th century CE and lasted into the 7th century CE (Stern 1995, 247–8, 251). The vessels that have decoration most similar to the Aila fragments are two inverted conical jugs in Toledo with patterns of slightly expanded mould-blown hexagons (ibid., 264–5, nos 187–8).

**Bowl with scalloped edge**

The structure produced one small fragment from a distinctive deep bowl with a rim that has been pulled with pincers to create a scalloped effect. Excavated examples are known from Karanis (Harden 1936, 97, 111–12, nos 257, 259) dated to the 4th to 5th century CE.

**Vessel with pinched decoration**

One fragment of a vessel with pinched decoration in the wall was found. This decorative scheme is common on small jars such as the intact example from a church context at Jerash (Baur 1938, 536, no. 244) dated to the 4th to 5th century CE and on fragments from Jalame (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 82, nos 178, 370, 371) dated to the second half of the 4th century CE.

**Handles**

Two curving fragments of a spiral handle or bracelet were found in the structure. As a bracelet, it is paralleled by an unstratified find at Sardis (von Saldern 1980, 33–4, no.
233); as a handle, it is paralleled by a cup in the Newark Museum dated to the 1st century CE (Auth 1976, 87, no. 105). Glass bracelets from the Roman period are rare, but spiral rods are well known throughout the Roman empire (Harden 1936, 286) and generally dated to the 1st through 3rd century CE (Meyer 1987, 188).

Also found was part of a crimped handle such as ones seen on jugs of 4th-century date at Newark (Auth 1976, 109, no. 127) and Berlin (Platz-Horster 1976, 48, no. 179), on a flask from Kerak dated to the second half of the 4th century (Dussart 1998, 155, no. BX632), or on a lentoid flask of similar date in Toronto (Hayes 1975, 81–2, 96, no. 333).

Coil bases

The structure produced eight coil bases, seven of these have a single coil and are small and carefully worked. These are paralleled at Karamis (Harden 1936, 256, 263, no. 792), at Mezad Tamar (Erdmann 1977, 115, no. 52) a site of the 3rd to the 7th century CE, and from 3rd to 4th-century contexts at el-Lejjun (Jones forthcoming, nos 5–7). There is one example of a complex coil base with three revolutions that is paralleled at Karamis (Harden 1936, 217, no. 638) and at Jalame (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 58–9, nos 152–5).

Bowls with a double fold in wall (Fig. 3.3)

The structure produced four of the site total of five examples of a rim from a bowl with a double fold below the rim. These are attested at Jalame (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 53–4, nos 108–17) and appear to be most common as the rims of deep bowls (cf. Hayes 1975, 120, no. 472; Whitehouse 1997, 79, nos 102–3). They are typically dated to the 3rd to 4th century CE.

Triangular rims (Fig. 3.4)

The structure produced three examples of a distinctive triangular plate or bowl rim that is not readily paralleled. The rim is solid and triangular in section. Its closest cousin appears to be a more upright triangular rim from a small bowl known at Jalame (Weinberg and Goldstein 1988, 50–1, nos 83–7). One of the Aila examples displays the wheel polishing that is noted on the Jalame examples.

Cage cup (Fig. 4)

The most notable glass vessel find from the mud-brick structure is a fragmentary cage cup comprising three joining fragments from the rim and upper body of the vessel in colourless glass with blue, green and amber overlays, and one body fragment that appears to preserve part of a strut in colourless glass with a green overlay (Jones 2003). The vessel is unique among known cage cups in having several colours in one horizontal band. The fragments appear to come from a situla or bucket-shaped vessel, most likely from Harden and Toynbee’s Group B (without figured decoration) (Harden and Toynbee 1959, 203). The closest parallel is a bucket cage cup from Soria in the Museo Arqueologico Nacional, Madrid (Harden and Toynbee 1959, 210–11, n. 6, pl. lxxi.d).

![Fig. 4 Fragments from cage cup (after Jones 2003, 181, fig. 1); scale 1:2](image)

Cage cups are presumed to have functioned primarily as suspended lamps (Whitehouse 1997, 285). The situla shape, however, was long associated with religious rites and formed part of the liturgical equipment of an early Christian church, functioning as a ceremonial container for holy water (Michelli 1996). In this context it is interesting to note that the cage cup fragments from the Aila mud-brick structure were found in a part of the building tentatively identified by the excavators as the pastophoron, a chamber used by clergy to store vestments and objects associated with worship in the adjacent chancel. Other vessels from this room include one sprinkler vessel and several fragments of vessels with cut decoration.

Conclusion

The corpus of glass from the monumental mud-brick structure is of particular interest to the excavators for its bearing on the interpretation of the structure. The concentration of fragments from glass vessels of high
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quality in this structure is distinctive at Aila and underscores the prestigious character of a building already set apart by its plan and construction. The relatively large number of fragments with deeply engraved complex patterns or faceted decoration would have been appropriate to the formal tablewares of an elite establishment or household. Stemmed glass lamps in chandeliers and windows would have supplied ample lighting for a venue accustomed to sizable gatherings. Heirloom cast plates and elegant lighting fixtures such as the cage cup would also be appropriate to such a high-status setting. The glass finds alone place the structure out of the run of common buildings.

The glass finds from the mud-brick structure are not inconsistent with an identification of the building as an early Christian church. No securely identified church of this early date has yet been discovered, therefore there is little in the way of material that is directly comparable. However, concentrations of glass lamps have long been a hallmark in the excavation of Byzantine churches. In addition, two vessel types with the potential to serve as liturgical equipment – the sēlula (cage cup) and the sprinkler bottle – add support to evidence already gleaned from other aspects of the building for its interpretation as an early church. The seat of a Christian bishop seems likely to have had the need for high-quality tablewares, lamps, and liturgical furnishings such as those unearthed in the excavation of this monumental mud-brick structure at Aila.

REFERENCES


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