ISLAMIC GLASS FINDS OF THE THIRTEENTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURY FROM JERUSALEM – PRELIMINARY REPORT

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In the course of excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem conducted in the 1970s by the late Professor N. Avigad, under the auspices of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, large quantities of Islamic glass fragments were uncovered in the upper stratum. The upper levels of the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem were mainly built up from the Crusader period – the 12th century – and remains of Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman structures are intermingled there. Remains of material culture of the Mamluk period (13th century–early 16th century) predominated and were uncovered in almost all areas of the Jewish Quarter (Avigad 1983, 247–57; Geva 2000, 27). Of these, only one marvered Islamic-period glass bowl has been published so far (Avigad 1983, pl. 302). The work on the final publication of the finds from this enormous undertaking has only recently begun.

The present paper focuses on a group of glass finds uncovered in a dump over an unused cistern, in Area T (locus 2155) near the Nea Church, at the southern end of the Cardo in the Jewish Quarter. The dump most probably served as a trash place for broken glass vessels. Of the approximately 140 fragmentary vessels in the group, the shapes of about 125 (some 90%) could be reconstructed – some almost in their entirety.

Unfortunately, this dump could not be precisely dated on stratigraphic grounds, but compared with known parallel material, the vessels under discussion here appear to be from the Mamluk period, principally from the late 13th to the 15th century. The shapes of these vessels and the decorative techniques are similar to those of glass vessels dating from the same period that were found elsewhere in the Middle East: e.g., in the excavations at Hama (Riis 1957, 30–69), Heshbon (Goldstein 1976), Fustat (Scanlon and Pinder-Wilson 2001; Shindo 1992), Quseir al-Qadim (Whitcomb 1983; Meyer 1992, 75–96) and el-Tur (Shindo 1993). While most of the vessels in our group resemble typical Mamluk vessels in shape and decorative style, some of them reflect innovations that suggest a production line specific to local Jerusalem workshops. The conjectured existence of such workshops is strengthened by the resemblance of many of the fragments in the group to contemporary glass vessels found in other areas of Jerusalem. The group is quite homogeneous in the glass fabrics and similarities among the vessel shapes, which suggests that the objects were all manufactured in one locality (Hasson 1983; Engle 1984; Gorin-Rosen forthcoming).

Colourless glass seems to have been the most popular type of glass of this group (70 vessels); most are of a yellowish tinge and fewer with a greenish tinge. The next most prevalent colour (47 vessels) is purple, which was popular in the 13th–15th century in the region of Syria. Eleven vessels in bright turquoise were also found, along with three vessels in cobalt blue, two honey-coloured vessels, and a few greenish vessels.

Although the glass has many bubbles and impurities, the variety of decorative techniques attests to great technical and artistic proficiencies. More than half of the vessels are ornamented. The most prevalent decorative technique in this group was trail-marvering, in which white opaque threads were pressed into a transparent matrix in various patterns, mainly on purple glass (44 vessels), but also on turquoise (2 vessels) and one blue glass. The technique was used in a wide variety of vessels, including beakers, lids, bottles, jars and kohl bottles, but especially in basket vessels (8), bowls (8) and sprinklers (8) (FIG. 1). These vessels display several important characteristics. Most of the purple glass is translucent purple and not dark purple as it appears in much other marvered glass (Carboni 2001a, 309). The white trail is usually thin, and sometimes the trails are carelessly applied and protrude from the surface. The ornamentation usually begins at the base and continues to the rim of the vessel. The bowl rims are almost always decorated with a thicker white or pale-blue trail, beneath which several coils are placed closely together. The most common pattern, found mainly on the bowls, jars and the basket vessels is of a spirally wound white trail. About half of the bowls were blown in ribbed moulds; the wavy

FIG. 1 Jar, sprinkler and bowl: purple with white trail marvered decoration; scale 1:2
e.g. the Temple Mount (Engle 1984, 67, 88, figs. 36, 54.a, c), the Damascus Gate (Neuburg 1949, 40; Wightman 1989, 98, nos 31, 36), Armenian Garden (Allan 1995, 14) and in the excavations at Herod’s Gate (Gorin-Rosen, forthcoming). Industrial waste of marvered vessels was also found among the group of glass fragments from the Jewish Quarter acquired and published in the 1980s by the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem (Hasson 1983, 109).

White or turquoise trails were also applied to many vessels around their rims, indicating that this was probably a common practice in local workshops. Sometimes the trail was wide and covered both sides of the vessel’s rim; in other cases, the thread decorated only the outside or only the inside.

The second decorative technique found among the dump group is that of moulded glass. Nineteen such vessels were found, in a variety of colours: colourless glass, purple, turquoise, amber and greenish; and in a variety of shapes: oil lamps, bowls, pots, sprinklers, bottles, jugs and beakers (Fig. 2). The most common ornamental pattern was vertical ribbing, used to decorate vessels either vertically or diagonally. Other patterns include roundish indentations and diamonds. Moulded decoration was used in the glasswork of Egyptian and Syrian areas from the late 12th to the 14th century, but moulded sprinklers, like our examples, are rare (Carboni 2001a, 224).

Vessels whose entire surface was painted in red are a new find in Islamic glass research (Brosh 2004). The group includes eleven fragments made from greenish colourless glass painted in red enamel from which three small vessels – a bowl, a jar and a bottle – can be reconstructed. All these vessels are painted on the inside in sealing-wax red. The red enamel coloration is not applied evenly, and the clear glass can always be seen through small holes or bubbles in the paint. As opaque red glass was expensive, this practice may represent a cheap imitation of it. Fragments of such vessels are also kept today in the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem (Hasson 1983, 110), and in the excavations at Herod’s Gate in Jerusalem, at Kaakul (north eastern Jerusalem – Gorin-Rosen forthcoming) and at Beit She’an (Y. Gorin-Rosen pers. comm.).

Another type of glass unique to the Jerusalem workshops is represented by three turquoise glass vessels decorated with vertical pinched decoration – a bottle and two sprinklers (Fig. 3). This decorative technique is not known elsewhere in this period. Pinched decoration was prevalent in the Early Islamic period in the eastern Mediterranean and is not known in the later period.

The Jewish Quarter dump group is thus not only remarkable in its decorative techniques but also in the great variation of vessel types. The dump yielded about 14 different types representing approximately 50 assorted shapes. The predominant types are bottles, lamps, sprinklers, bowls, beakers, jars, kohl bottles and pots. These vessels can be divided into three main groups according to their functions: bottles, juglets and sprinklers for oils and perfumes; oil lamps, bowls and beakers – all used as lighting fixtures; and regular household vessels such as kohl bottles and pots. Most of the vessels in the group are bottles of various types, made of colourless glass with a yellowish
or greenish tinge. They are almost identical in size (150mm high) with only slight variations in shapes. All the bottles have globular bodies and concave bases with long cylindrical necks. Some have bulges on the neck close to the rim or the body, and some have handles.

A previously unknown type of oil bottle is basically a juglet (Fig. 4) of which four examples were found. Flasks with spouts are very rare in Early Islamic glass, but are quite common in later periods. Conceivably, this shape first appeared in the 14th century in the glassmaking workshops of the Jerusalem area. Such flasks have been manufactured to this day in the workshops of Hebron.

The type of vessel most identified with the Mamluk period is the sprinkler, characterized by a long narrow neck and globular body flattened on two sides, and a concave base with a kick. Sometimes such sprinklers, known as omom or qumqum, have snake-shaped handles. The 20 sprinklers found in this group comprise an assortment of glass colours (colourless glass, purple, turquoise, amber and greenish), range in size from 62mm high and 35mm wide to 170mm high and 100mm wide, and are decorated in various techniques: trail-marvering, pinched decoration and mould blowing.

The dump group includes 24 oil lamps representing three main types (Fig. 5): mosque lamps, stemmed oil-lamps and ring loop-handled cups. The familiar vase-shaped mosque lamp with flaring neck, has a globular body on ring base, sometimes with a tube for the wick attached inside. Stemmed oil lamps are small bowls having a tubular stemmed base for insertion in a suspended metal holder. Ring-loop-handled cup oil lamps are of two shapes. One is made from colourless glass with a cylindrical body and with a splayed rim having two small ring-loops on it for hanging. The second is the basket-shaped vessel, whose function is uncertain (Carboni 2001c, 186) but may have been used as a hanging lamp.

Basket vessels were found in Jerusalem (Engle 1984, 88; Allan 1995, 14; R. Hasson pers. comm.) as well as in Syria (Al-'Ush 1964, fig. 50). Ten such basket vessels were found in the dump group, all decorated with a white trail marvered on purple or turquoise glass. The body is piriform, the base flat or concave, and the ledge rim has a single central handle with a vertical pinched loop in the middle.

Most of the 15 bowls, of various sizes (diam. 40–160mm) almost all have the globular body, rounded rim and slightly concave flat base typical of the period. Nonetheless, bowls with a flaring body were also found. Here too, the most common decorative techniques were trail-marvering and blowing in patterned moulds.

The ten fragments of beakers found in the group have cylindrical bodies with incurving flared openings near the rim.

One of the most popular vessels of the period is the kohl bottle (Shindo 1993; Carboni 2001a, 305; Carboni 2001b, 106–7). Eight bottles were found, about half made of purple glass decorated with white marvered trails. They have long, inverted conical bodies truncated at the bottom. The colourless kohl bottles have pointed piriform bodies and elongated cylindrical necks. All the bottles have bulges in the necks.

A new type of vessel, representative of the larger household vessels in the group, is a pot, almost whole, made
of colourless glass with a yellowish tinge and a turquoise handle (Fig. 6). The shape of this vessel is reminiscent of ceramic pots popular in the Mamluk period and found in many excavations in Israel. They are generally considered to be chamber pots or potties for children, and this glass pot may have served the same function. This was confirmed by one of the older glass craftsmen in Hebron, Abed Natche, who reported that at the beginning of the 20th century, his father and grandfather had manufactured glass chamber pots in their workshop and had even exported them to Egypt.

Examination of the diverse types of vessels in the dump group sheds new light on the nature of the glass industry in Jerusalem. Most of the vessels found in this dump were used for oils and perfumes, or for lighting fixtures. This may be the reason why these workshops were established in Jerusalem and Hebron in the 14th century. Two explanations may be presented.

The first is related to the conquest of the eastern Mediterranean countries by the Mamluks in 1260. The conquerors destroyed the coastal cities, wiping out the glassmaking centres there that had been in operation for hundreds of years. The second reason is to do with the Mamluks' policy of emphasizing the Islamic religious character of Palestine. They built many religious establishments and institutions in the Jerusalem area, necessitating the setting up of glassworking centres, close to where the products were needed. Thousands of lamps and lanterns were used to light up the various religious buildings. In addition, the number of pilgrims, Moslems, Jews and Christians, visiting the religious holy places steadily increased. These pilgrims needed bottles and sprinklers to hold the oils and perfumes they used in their religious ceremonies and rituals.

The Jerusalem Old City Jewish Quarter dump finds attest to the distinctiveness of the vessels manufactured in Jerusalem and Hebron workshops and the skill of the glass craftsmen there; but it is not less important that they indicate a connection to the Hebron glass workshops of our day. Not only the vessel types, as discussed above, recall the ancient glassmaking industry in Hebron and Jerusalem, but also the colours of the glass. Purple, blue and honey colours, and in particular turquoise, have characterized the products of the industry up to the present. Indeed, turquoise is the pride of these artisans because to this very day they claim to produce this colour in the same way their forefathers did over 500 years ago.

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