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Pots and People from East to West: a Rare Early Islamic Glazed Lidded Bowl from a Monastic Site near Jericho, and Its Cultural and Historical Context

The study of Early Islamic glazed tableware in the Levant and the Near East in general has undergone considerable development during the past few decades. Regarding Early Islamic Palestine and the neighbouring regions, recent research has been especially successful in establishing a relatively concrete chrono-typological categorization of glazed pottery, identifying technological characteristics, reconstructing manufacturing processes, and identifying both inter- and intra-regional commercial and social patterns related to these wares¹. Despite this, an unusual artefact that has the potential to shed new light on these aspects of ancient ceramics has often been overlooked. This is a glazed bowl with a matching lid that was found in the 1930s during the excavation of an Early Islamic monastic site near Jericho and which is unique to the Palestinian and even Levantine ceramic repertoire. Not only can this lidded bowl be considered one of the earliest glazed vessels ever published from Early Islamic Palestine, it also represents a rare example of a direct link between people and objects belonging to the same cultural world, both of which are archaeologically attested far from their place of origin. This article aims to discuss the Jericho glazed lidded bowl in detail, within the framework of its cultural and historical context, and to provide a possible explanation of the circumstances under which it arrived at its specific place of discovery.

The study of the Jericho glazed lidded bowl was made possible by courtesy of Fawzi Ibrahim and Alegre Savariego, curators of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, who permitted its short-term loan from January to February 2013. To both I owe thanks. All dates in this article refer to A.D. unless otherwise indicated.

1 For general discussions of these subjects, see Northedge 2001, 207–214; Mason 2004; Walmsley 2007, 49–59. For Early Islamic ceramics in key Palestinian and neighbouring sites, see Whitcomb 1988; Whitcomb 1991; Avissar 1996; Stacey 2004; Arnon 2008; Prag 2008; Tal – Taxel 2008; Cytryn–Silverman 2010; Waksman 2011. For representative socio-economic case studies, see Magness 2010; Taxel 2014.

2 Baramki – Stephan 1935. Historical Palestine was controlled by a British Mandate from 1918 to 1948 and the Mandatory Department of Antiquities was founded in 1920. Among its main objectives were the protection and documentation of known archaeological sites and antique monuments, and the execution of salvage excavations at sites under threat of destruction. See Gibson 1999, 129–131.

3 For the recent excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar, with references to earlier studies, see Whitcomb – Taha 2013.

Archaeological Context

In February 1933, a salvage excavation was carried out by the Department of Antiquities of Palestine's British Mandatory government, following the discovery of a mosaic floor next to the road leading from Jericho to the east, roughly halfway (ca. 4 km) between the modern town (and the area where the Byzantine and Early Islamic settlement were located) and the Jordan River (New Israel Grid 247258/641396)². This nameless site is also not far from the well-known Early Islamic palatial estate of Khirbet al-Mafjar (Hisham's palace), ca. 4.3 km to the northwest (fig. 1)³. The excavation revealed the poorly-preserved remains of a small structure (ca. 10.5 m × 9.6 m, maximum length and width; fig. 2) made of plastered mudbricks – a building material typical of this region. The structure was composed of two units connected by a doorway, the northern of which was identified as »dwelling chamber«, and the southern of which as a chapel. The »dwelling chamber« (internal dimensions ca. 4 m × 7.5 m), in whose northern wall the structure's entrance was located, was a large rectangular room with a floor paved with fieldstones, in the middle of which was a cross composed of coarsely-dressed stone slabs. On both sides of the doorway leading to the chapel were rectangular recesses in the floor, which

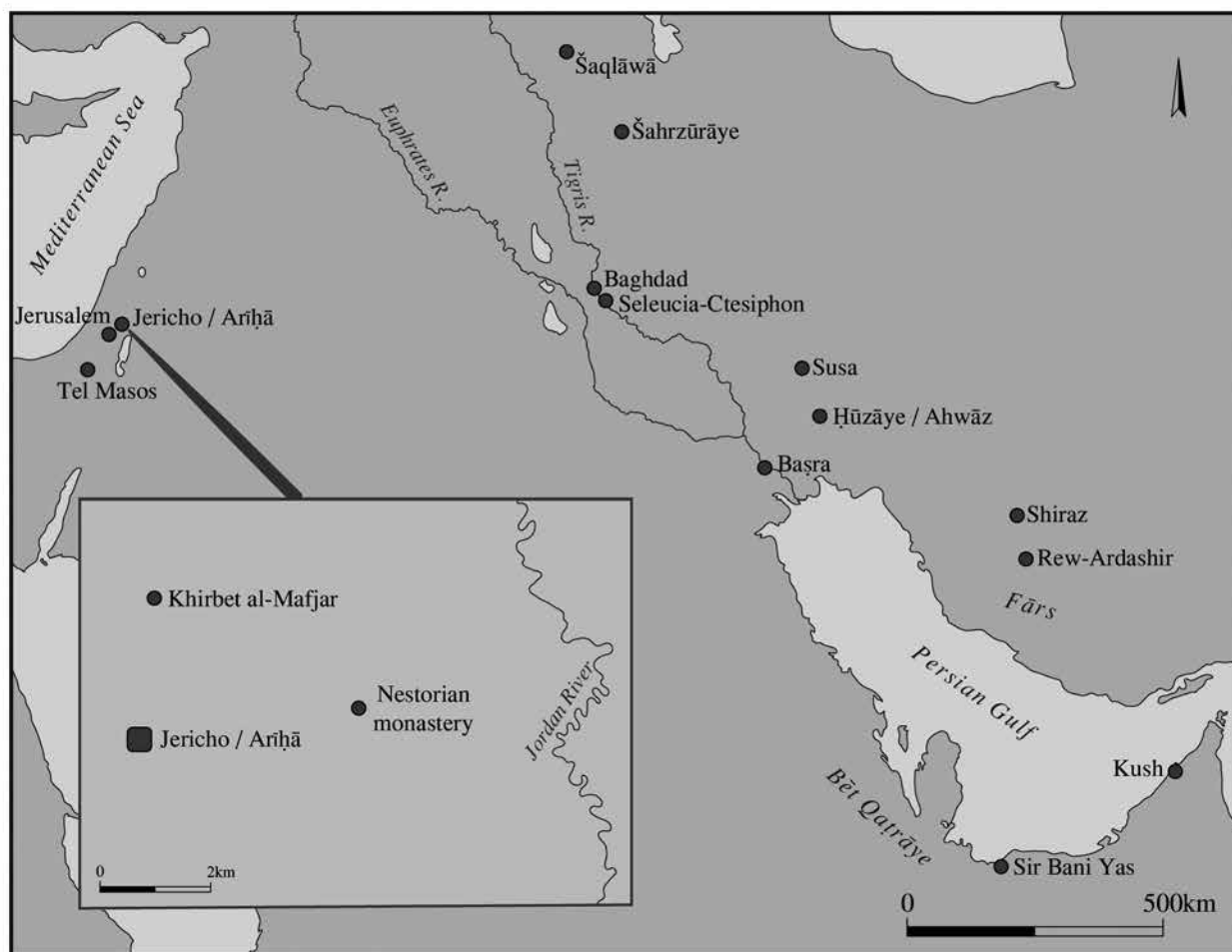


Fig. 1 Map of the area between the Persian Gulf region and Palestine showing main sites and locations mentioned in the article (scale 1 : 15 000 000)

according to the excavators, indicate the former location of benches or tables. Another noteworthy architectural feature preserved in this unit is a deep rectangular niche (ca. 0.5 m × 1.3 m) protruding from the room's western wall. This niche contained most of the artefacts found in the excavation, including the glazed lidded bowl on which this study is focused (below)⁴.

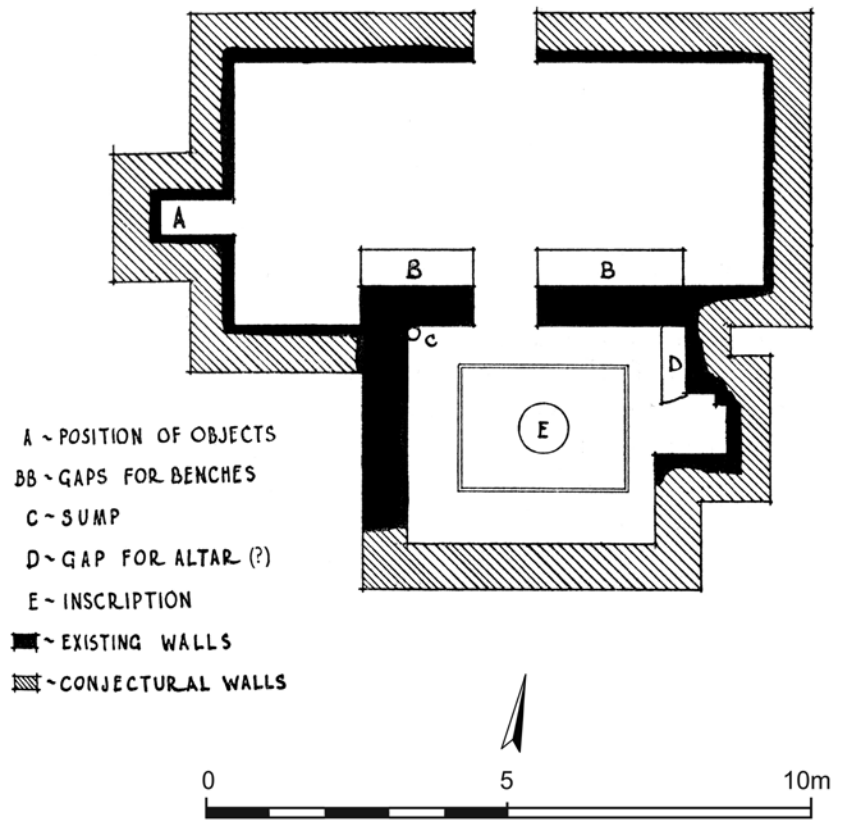
The second, smaller unit was, according to the excavators, a rectangular chapel (internal dimensions ca. 3.6 m × 4.2 m) with a rectangular, protruding apse; a recess in the floor north of the apse was identified as having been the location of the altar. The chapel's floor was made of a crude white mosaic, in which were embedded simple black and coloured geometric motifs (mainly small squares, some of which were arranged to form a cross). In the centre of the floor, within a circle, was a Syriac inscription containing eight lines, with small crosses placed at the beginning of the first line and on both sides of the last word (fig. 3)⁵. The inscription reads as follows:

+ This monastery was built
in the days of D-
aniel bar [of] Hūzāye, Yōḥannān
bar Parsāye [of Persia/the Persian], Iṣō'dād
bar [of] Qaṭrāye, and Bu'ya bar [of] Šahrzūrāye.
May the Lord have mercy on them
On the Day of
+ Judgment +⁶

4 Baramki – Stephan 1935, 81–83 pl. 53, 1.

5 Baramki – Stephan 1935, 82 f. pls. 52, 54, 2.

6 Based on Baramki – Stephan 1935, 83, with slight modifications according to the more recent reading by Fiey 1983, 37.



Jericho, Nestorian monastery

Fig. 2 Plan of the excavated remains (scale 1 : 125)

Fig. 3 The Syriac mosaic inscription



The inscription led Baramki and Stephan to identify the structure as a Nestorian monastery. This was based on the following details: the palaeography of the Syriac word meaning ›building‹ (but also ›repairing‹/›restoring‹), which is typical of East Syriac, rather than West Syriac; the name Īšōʿdād, which is particular to the Nestorian/East Syriac onomasticon and which is unknown in that of the West Syriac; and the place names mentioned in the inscription, which are well-known from the Nestorian ecclesiastical history. The

inscription (and therefore the entire structure) was dated to the 9th century⁷, though it seems that this dating was based not on the inscription itself, but on the artefacts discovered in the excavations. In fact, Fiey has shown that the inscription should be dated to the mid-7th century, based on literary evidence related to two of the figures mentioned – Yōḥannān bar Parsāye and Bu‘ya bar Šahrzūrāye. Both were celebrated monks who during the mid-7th century were associated with certain locations in modern-day southern Turkey (Mount Ğūdī) and northern Iraq (Šahrzūrāye and Šaqlāwā). Therefore, Fiey reasonably concluded that the two other people mentioned in the inscription – Daniel bar Hūzāye and Īšō‘dād bar Qaṭrāye – who are otherwise unknown – must also have been respected monks who lived contemporaneously with Yōḥannān bar Parsāye and Bu‘ya bar Šahrzūrāye. This served as a means of dating the Jericho monastery, which »was built in the days of« these four individuals⁸. This revised chronology fits well with the dating of at least some of the objects found in the monastery, including the glazed lidded bowl (fig. 4).

As has been mentioned, the bowl was found in a deep niche in the room identified as a »dwelling chamber«. According to the excavators, a stone was placed in front of the niche in order to conceal the objects inside it. These included the glazed bowl, covered by its lid; a glass hanging lamp resting on top of the bowl’s lid; another glass hanging lamp placed beside the bowl; part of a ceramic pipe section; a fragmentary bronze censer; a bronze lamp hanger; and a cup-shaped stone beside which was a small quantity of sulphur. In addition, the excavators noted that »Byzantine potsherds were scattered all over the site«⁹. Most likely, this concentration of objects, most of which can be easily identified as liturgical or liturgy-related (except for the pipe section, unless it was reused for a liturgical purpose), was a permanent cache of at least some of the church’s portable belongings, with the niche serving as a cupboard. In this context, it can be suggested that the glazed lidded bowl was used as either a chalice for holding or mixing water, wine or oil used during mass or communion, or as a container for other, non-liquid material or objects related to church activity (e. g., as an incense holder; see below). Accordingly, it is difficult to accept the excavators’ claim that the room served a domestic purpose; more likely, it functioned as a multi-purpose auxiliary room of the monastery’s chapel¹⁰. Thus, it is highly possible that Fiey is correct in his assumption that the two excavated, partially-preserved rooms represent only part of a more complex monastery that existed at the site, either adjacent to or near the chapel area¹¹.

The finds – or at least those kept by the excavators – were probably removed to the Department of Antiquities’ headquarters in Jerusalem, and since some time after 1938 have been permanently housed in the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem – known today as the Rockefeller Museum – where the Department of Antiquities’ new headquarters were located¹². Currently, the glazed lidded bowl is located (and exhibited) at the Rockefeller Museum (IAA no. 33.1069), together with the two above-mentioned glass hanging lamps (IAA nos. 33.1063 and 33.1068), the bronze censer (IAA no. 33.1065), and

7 Baramki – Stephan 1935, 83 n. 1; 86.

8 Fiey 1983, 35–38; cf. Fiey 2004, 59.

9 Baramki – Stephan 1935, 82 f. fig. 1 (bronze censer) pls. 53, 2 a (bowl-shaped glass lamp). b (globular-/mosque/ glass lamp). c (glazed lidded bowl). d (ceramic pipe section); 54, 1 (bronze lamp hanger).

10 For auxiliary rooms, storage spaces and non-liturgical material in late antique Palestinian churches, see Michel 2007.

11 Fiey 1983, 37. Also noteworthy is the square-shaped apse of the monastery’s chapel, which is a typical characteristic of Nestorian churches in the Near East both

before and after the Muslim conquest. See Carter 2008, 75.

12 See Gibson 1999, 129–131. Today the Rockefeller Museum compound houses the headquarters, archive, and library of the Israel Antiquities Authority (hereafter IAA).



Fig. 4 Jericho, Nestorian monastery. The lidded glazed bowl – photos of the bowl (1) and the lid (2), and drawings and photos of the bowl and lid setting together (3) (scale 1 : 5)

the bronze lamp hanger (IAA no. 33.1064). The location of the rest of the finds mentioned by Baramki and Stephan is unknown. Nevertheless, despite the inability to examine these finds, given the dating of the structure and the other artefacts found there (below) it seems most likely that the ›Byzantine‹ pottery sherds are actually Early Islamic, or at least are no earlier than the 7th century.

Description and Dating

The glazed bowl (figs. 4, 1, 3) is 19 cm in diameter, and its height is slightly uneven (between 10.4 cm to 10.8 cm). It is made of a rather sandy, yellowish clay containing a large quantity of tiny brown and black temper. It is completely covered by a turquoise alkaline glaze (usually up to 1 mm thick), with no slip underneath. The glaze is crazed, especially on the interior (which is

darker than the exterior glaze), and was unevenly fired from the outside. This production error caused the glaze on parts of the bowl's exterior – including about half of the base – to appear as a thin layer of pale brown, vitriform patina with numerous tiny bubbles. Three rounded or oval scars (6 cm apart) are visible on both the interior and on the exterior of the bowl's base, indicating that stacks of bowls, apparently of the same type, were fired together, perhaps upside-down, and were separated by ceramic tripods¹³.

The lid (figs. 4, 2. 3) is 9.7 cm high and has a maximum diameter of 20.7 cm, though its vertically-protruding rim is 17 cm in diameter, allowing it to fit into the bowl's internal rim. The lid is conical in shape and ends in a prominent ridge, from which a cushion-liked handle with a concave centre emerges. It is made of the same clay as the bowl, and is similarly covered throughout by a turquoise alkaline glaze with no slip underneath. Here too, the glaze is crazed, mainly on the interior, and was unevenly fired from the exterior. In this case, the thin layer of pale brown, vitriform patina with numerous tiny bubbles appears on the fringes of the lid's handle tip, while a thick layer of glaze (up to 2 mm) is concentrated in the concave centre of the handle. Three oval tripod scars (6 cm apart) are visible on the interior of the lid, though the absence of similar scars on the lid's exterior seems to rule out the possibility that another lid or vessel was placed on top of it during firing.

As mentioned, the bowl is unique – both in its morphology and the technique with which it was glazed – to the local Early Islamic repertoire of glazed tablewares. Since about the late 8th to late 11th centuries, Palestinian and other Levantine glazed wares were dominated by lead glazed bowls and plates, usually with everted wall profiles, which exhibit various methods of surface treatment, most commonly monochrome glaze, polychrome splashed glaze or polychrome under-glaze painting, with or without sgraffito. These were most probably produced in a number of regional centres, though similar imports from Egypt and Mesopotamia are known as well. Additionally, a variety of Iraqi and Egyptian opaque tin glazed vessels, including luster-painted wares, appeared in the region starting in the 9th century, and were possibly accompanied by some Levantine imitations¹⁴.

However, alkaline turquoise (and sometimes greenish or purplish) glazed wares made of a grainy, light-coloured fabric were a typical south Iraqi (mainly Baṣra region) product that dates back to pre-Islamic, Parthian and Sasanian times. The most common alkaline turquoise glazed vessel forms of the late Sasanid and Early Islamic periods include various bowls and short-necked jars, with lids and smaller containers appearing less frequently. These vessels were most intensively distributed around their area of production, namely southern Iraq, eastern Arabia (especially in the Persian Gulf) and southern Iran¹⁵. Carinated alkaline turquoise glazed bowls, as well as lids, that look very similar (and at times identical) to the bowl and lid under discussion, are known from several relatively well-dated contexts in these regions. Noteworthy examples include Shiraz, where a lid was dated to the late Sasanian or Early Islamic period (no later than 750)¹⁶; Susa, where carinated bowls and a lid were dated to the late 7th to early 8th century¹⁷, and another lid was dated to the late Sasanian or Early Islamic period (7th century)¹⁸; Kush, where carinated bowls were classified as Type 72 and attributed to Period III (late 8th to early 9th century)¹⁹; and Sir Bani Yas, where carinated bowls and lids were dated to the mid-7th to mid-8th century²⁰. Both Kennet and Carter have emphasized the high frequency of carinated alkaline glazed bowls in 8th century assemblages throughout the Gulf region, as well as their absence from earlier contexts, such as those belonging to Periods I and II at Kush, which have been dated to the 5th to 7th century²¹.

13 Compare the reconstruction of the production method of medieval Islamic ceramic bowls at Bilad al-Qadim in Bahrain: Insoll 2005, 149 fig. 4, 14. According to Insoll, »the [tripod] scars inherent in the finished product may suggest that the ceramics were not of particularly high quality«.

14 For a review of Early Islamic glazed tablewares in Palestine, see Taxel 2014.

15 Kennet 2004, 35–37; Mason 2004, 23 f.; Priestman 2005, 106–110; Carter 2008, 81 f. It should be noted that only a small number of alkaline glazed bowls and jars – at least some of which are probably Iraqi imports – from Early Islamic contexts in Palestine have been published; these usually have been dated to the late 8th to 11th centuries. Most were found in urban settlements and large villages, while only a few are known from small rural settlements (Taxel 2014).

16 Whitcomb 1985, fig. 53 v.

17 Kervran 1977, 83. 88 figs. 34, 7–10; 48, 13.

18 Boucharlat et al. 1987, 202–204 fig. 74, 5.

19 Kennet 2004, 36 f. fig. 5.

20 Carter 2008, 82 f. 89 f. figs. 10, 1–6; 11, 9–11.

21 Kennet 2007, 97 f.; Carter 2008, 82. For the chronology of Kush Periods I to III, see Kennet 2004, 14 f. Carter (2008, 92) has slightly revised Kennet's chronology of Kush Period III, while dating its early phase (which is contemporaneous with Sir Bani Yas) to the late 7th–8th century, and its late phase to the late 8th–9th century.

It is therefore quite clear that the heyday of the carinated alkaline turquoise glazed bowls occurred during the 8th century, though it is uncertain how long they continued after. The alkaline turquoise glazed lids of the type discussed here were most probably already in use in the 7th century, if not earlier, and continued into the 8th century. At any rate, in Iraq and Iran the production of both forms continued, with some changes, until at least the 12th century; some were alkaline glazed (including moldmade, softpaste/frit examples), though most were fashioned using other glazing techniques, notably polychrome lead glaze with or without sgraffito²². It should also be noted that the bowl and lid from Jericho, due to their having been discovered complete and in situ, apparently provide the first evidence for a functional relationship between two alkaline glazed vessel forms – the carinated bowl and the ridged lid; thus far these have only been discussed separately by scholars, who have studied similar vessels from Iraq, Iran and Arabia (lids were usually associated with alkaline glazed jars).

The date of some of the other artefacts found alongside the Jericho lidded bowl, namely the glass hanging lamps and the bronze censer and lamp hanger, seems to support the above dating. The first glass lamp belongs to the bowl-shaped type (8.3 cm in diameter, 8.8 cm high). It has straight walls and an out-folded rim featuring three small suspension loop handles. This type appeared during the Byzantine period and continued with minor changes until the end of the Early Islamic period or somewhat later. It has numerous parallels from Palestine, including in assemblages dated to the 8th to 11th centuries²³. The second lamp has a globular body (9.8 cm in diameter, 12 cm high), an everted, cut-away rim, and three suspension loop handles with a tail-shaped extension on the shoulder. This type can be classified as a predecessor of the so-called ›mosque‹ lamp, which made its appearance during the Byzantine period and which continued to develop throughout the Early Islamic and medieval periods (though the sub-type in question apparently continued no later than the 8th century). Despite having been termed ›mosque‹ lamp, such lamps have been found in various contexts, including churches – as is in this case²⁴. The small bronze censer has a hexagonal body (7 cm wide, 6 cm high) with three short, diagonal legs, a flattened rim and three chains attached to a suspension hook. The bronze lamp hanger (42 cm long) has three suspenders hanging from a Maltese cross, on the ends of which there are hooks for holding a lamp handle; another suspension hook is located above the cross. Both liturgical artefacts represent well-known types that have been used in churches around the Mediterranean and in the Near East from the Byzantine period until at least the 8th century²⁵.

In summary, the dating of the Jericho lidded bowl can be placed somewhere between the late 7th to early 9th centuries, but most probably the 8th. This being the case, the Jericho lidded bowl can be considered one of the earliest glazed ceramics ever reported from Early Islamic Palestine. It is commonly accepted, based on stratigraphical/chronological data, that glazed wares, including Iraqi and Egyptian imports, were generally not introduced in Palestine and the rest of the southern Levant until ca. 800²⁶. In other words, glazed pottery was virtually unknown in this region – in contrast to more eastern parts of the Muslim Near East (above) – during the Umayyad and beginning of ›Abbasid periods. Although it is probably impossible to determine whether the artefacts from the Jericho monastery, including the glazed lidded bowl, should be dated before or after 750 (the end of the Umayyad dynasty in the Near East), it is not unreasonable to attribute them to the first half of the 8th century. If this

22 See Wilkinson 1973, 64 no. 39; 144 nos. 53, 56; 236 no. 33; 265, 269 nos. 10, 31; Watson 2004, 269–271 cat. 1e.3, 1e.5, 1e.6.

23 Amitai-Preiss 2004, 181 figs. 11, 3, 20; Hadad 2005, 29, 46 f. nos. 413–423, 951–957.

24 Gorin-Rosen – Winter 2010, 173 f. figs. 5, 2, 4–6, with additional references. For ›classical‹ ›Abbasid- and Fatimid-period ›mosque‹ lamps, whose handles have pendant-shaped extensions typical of the mid-8th century onwards, see Amitai-Preiss 2004, 181, 183 figs. 11, 3, 22–26; Hadad 2005, 47 nos. 972–976. I wish to thank Ayala Lester (IAA) and Ruth. E. Jackson-Tal (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) for their advice regarding the chronology of this lamp type.

25 Piccirillo – Israeli 2000, 99, 102, 105 f. For similar bronze censers and lamp hangers from a church assemblage dated to the first half of the 8th century, see Burdajewicz – Mlynarczyk 2006, 26–31 figs. 12–15, 17 c. Interestingly, a bronze censer very similar to the Jericho specimen was found in a Sasanian context at Nineveh (central Iraq), and another, round one, was reported from Sasanian Susa: Simpson 2005, 288 fig. 5.

26 See Walmsley 2007, 52.

is indeed the case, the bowl is even more significant, as it would be a glazed vessel from the Umayyad period²⁷. The earthquake(s) of 747–749, which most severely affected settlements located along the Jordan Valley (such as Scythopolis/Baysān), very likely resulted in the destruction and abandonment of the monastery near Jericho²⁸. Nevertheless, as long as the dating and cause of the monastery's abandonment cannot be precisely identified, one should not exclude other possible nature- and human-induced events, both documented and undocumented, which may have taken place between ca. 700 and 800.

Social and Functional Context

Now that the questions of where the glazed lidded bowl was found, where it originated from, and when it was produced and used have been addressed, we can consider how and why it arrived at the Jericho monastery, and better understand the vessel's broader social and functional context. As mentioned, the monastery was founded around the mid-7th century, when four celebrated Nestorian – or more accurately, East Syrian²⁹ – monks lived, whose names and places of origin/activity indicate a direct link with the region stretching between northern Iraq, southwestern Iran and east Arabia. Since much has been written about the history and material remains of East Syrian Christianity, only a brief review of the subject will be included here. Established in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (to the south of the site where the city of Baghdad was later founded) already in the early 4th century, this most dominant see of the East Syrian Church ruled over a substantial portion of the Sasanian Empire. However, the Gulf region was largely subordinate to the metropolitanate of Fārs (Persia), centred at Rew-Ardashir near Bushire. The southern part of the Gulf, known from Syriac sources as Bēt Qaṭrāyē (territory of the Qataris), was especially prominent in the context of East Syrian Christianity. As indicated both historically and archaeologically, this area was dotted with Christian settlements (including monasteries), which remained active even after the expansion of Islam to east Arabia, and well into the 8th and 9th centuries. This was apparently due to the relative tolerance of the early Muslim rulers, and the good relations between them and the East Syrian patriarchs³⁰.

Bēt Qaṭrāyē is, of course, the Qaṭrāyē that appears in the Jericho monastery inscription, which is mentioned in relation to the little-known monk

27 Noteworthy is the discovery of a few other, apparently alkaline glazed vessels in the destruction level of the Umayyad marketplace at Scythopolis/Beth She'an (Early Islamic Baysān), which is attributed to the 749 earthquake. Tsafirir – Foerster (1994, 112) mention that based on the finds retrieved from the earthquake debris layer, it can be concluded that »the first glazed ceramics were imported to the country already in the Umayyad period«, though no description of these vessels is given. Somewhat more specific is Khamis (2007, 467) who, while describing the rich finds from a goldsmith's shop in the Umayyad marketplace, writes that the shop owner »was rich enough [...] to hold in his possession

imported vessels like the blue-glazed jar, which was probably imported from Iraq or Persia«.

28 For the chronology of these earthquakes, see Ambraseys 2005. According to Michael the Syrian (late 12th century), one of the chroniclers who described the outcomes of the earthquake, »The spring of water which was by Jericho moved six miles«, which Ambraseys interpreted as »the drying up of a spring and the appearing of a new spring at another place« (Ambraseys 2005, 3. 7 with references). Archaeological evidence of the earthquake's destruction has been found elsewhere in the Jericho area, e. g., at Khirbet al-Mafjar (Whitcomb – Taha 2013, 60).

29 The modern term »Nestorian« refers to the 5th-century bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, who is associated with contemporaneous theological disputes that resulted in the split of the Syriac-speaking Church of the East into the West Syrian/Monophysite and East Syrian/Nestorian Churches (Baumer 2006, 42–50). Although it is agreed today that it is inaccurate, some scholars prefer using »East Syrian« and »Nestorian« interchangeably. For instance, Healey 2000, 222; Carter 2008; Shepardson 2009, 462 f.; Walker 2012, 995.

30 Bin Seray 1996; Bin Seray 1997; Healey 2000, 222–227. 236; Baumer 2006, 59–104. 137–155; Carter 2008, 71. 97–106; Walker 2012, 1015–1018.

Īšō' dād; unfortunately, however, no more specific location is included. The other two toponyms mentioned in the inscription (apart from the very general term Parsāye/Persia) are Ḥūzāye and Šahrzūrāye, which are associated with the monks Daniel and Bu'ya, respectively. The former (known also as Bēt Ḥūzāye) is Khūzistān or Ahwāz, a district in the southern part of modern Iran, which since Sasanid times functioned as a bishopric and whose centre was located in the city of Ahwāz³¹. Šahrzūrāye, or Šahrzūr, was a district within the ecclesiastical province of Bēt Germai, in northeastern Iraq³².

Despite the above information, the identity and exact origin of the monastery's founder(s) is not documented in the inscription or elsewhere in the excavated part of the complex. However, as suggested by Di Segni and Tsafirir, and by Walker, this person was most probably a Nestorian monk, who first made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land – primarily to Jerusalem – before establishing himself in the vicinity of Jericho (Early Islamic Arīḥā). This anonymous monk (or a group of monks) was part of a broader phenomenon of Syrian – mainly East Syrian/Nestorian – pilgrimage and migration to Palestine and other neighbouring regions (such as Egypt), before and after the Muslim conquest. It is believed that a permanent Nestorian presence in the region began no earlier than the short period of Sasanian occupation of the Levant and Egypt (for Palestine, 614 to 628), and perhaps only began following the Muslim conquest (634 to 640). It has been argued that during the Early Islamic period a special effort was made by the Nestorians to establish their own bishoprics in major Levantine cities (including Damascus and Jerusalem) between the mid-8th and mid-9th centuries³³.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the glazed lidded bowl was brought to the Jericho monastery either by one of its founders, or by a later East Syrian/Nestorian visitor or pilgrim arriving from somewhere in the Gulf region. (The latter possibility seems more likely, given the late 7th to 8th century date of the bowl.)

The high frequency of similar bowls and lids in their manufacturing and main distribution area suggests that they were not considered luxury items, which raises the question of why such a bowl would have been transported. I would argue that in the transferring of the glazed lidded bowl from one geographical and cultural sphere to another (in which it was surely unique), its material and symbolic/sentimental status must have been altered. Thus, it is possible that the lidded bowl was brought to the monastery as a personal item belonging to a Nestorian pilgrim/monk, with no initial consideration of the fact that it happened to be unique in a Palestinian context (though this eventually became apparent). Another possibility is that it was carried more than a thousand kilometres westward due to a highly-valued commodity stored in it. As suggested above, the bowl may have had some role in the liturgy carried out in the monastery's chapel; it could have been used for this purpose (perhaps serving as a chalice) from the outset, or reused as such after being emptied of its contents. It is tempting to suggest that this contents were Arabian incense, a precious gift donated to the Jericho monastery by a Nestorian pilgrim/monk who made this donation either on his own behalf or as a representative of a more senior churchman from southern Iran, Iraq or east Arabia. Since antiquity and throughout Islamic times, the frankincense trade was monopolized by southern Arabia, where frankincense was cultivated. This fact is indicated not only historically, but archaeologically – by the high frequency of various pottery and soft-stone incense burners at Islamic sites along the southern Arabian shore. Certain types of incense burners that are known from southern Arabia that are also present in some Iranian, Iraqi, and Levantine

31 Bin Seray 1997, 210.

32 Fiey 1983, 38; Walker 2012, 1036 n. 180.

33 Di Segni – Tsafirir 2012, 451 f.; Walker 2012, 1016 f. 1036 n. 178. See also Fiey 1969; Schick 1995, 11. 18. 64. 178 f.; Bitton-Ashkelony 2011, 71–99. Jericho and various locations in its vicinity were themselves fairly popular pilgrimage destinations in the Byzantine period, and most probably also at the beginning of the Early Islamic period. See Cirelli – Zagari 2000; Bagatti 2002, 95–99.

sites, apparently indicate commercial and cultural exchanges between these regions. Incense was among the more desired southern Arabian products, and was widely traded throughout the Near East and beyond. It was used by all members of the population, regardless their religious affinity, in domestic and cultic contexts alike. According to the reconstructed Islamic-period incense-trade network, southern Arabian incense could have reached the Gulf region and Iraq via both seaborne trade and terrestrial routes³⁴. Nevertheless, the possibility that the Jericho glazed lidded bowl was brought to the monastery containing something other than incense, or even empty – as a donation by itself or as a personal belonging – should not be dismissed.

Within this context, an interesting comparison can be made with another, presumably better-known Nestorian monastery from Palestine, excavated at Tel Masos in the northern Negev. This small monastery, which based on the palaeography and contents of the Syriac inscription found in it, has been attributed to a Nestorian community, included among its various architectural components, a chapel with a typical square-shaped apse. In accordance with the ceramic assemblage found in the monastery rooms, the complex was dated by the excavators to the mid-7th to mid-8th century³⁵. This dating was later revised, and it is now dated to the mid-/late 6th to late 7th/early 8th century³⁶, though it is likely that the monastery functioned only starting in the early to mid-7th century (especially when taking into consideration when there became a permanent Nestorian presence in Palestine; see above). In other words, it was more or less contemporaneous with the Jericho monastery. However, despite the foreign origin of its inhabitants, and the complete excavation of its remains, the Tel Masos monastery has yielded mostly locally-produced pottery, in addition to some imported eastern Mediterranean and possibly Egyptian forms – an assemblage that mirrors that of contemporaneous southern Palestinian sites³⁷. This lack of special types further highlights the rarity of the Jericho glazed lidded bowl within the local ceramic milieu. Moreover, it reinforces the fact that the presence – in a given archaeological/architectural context, be it Christian, Muslim or other – of any foreign item of material culture that links its place of origin with its place of discovery, should not be considered obvious³⁸.

34 Hardy-Guilbert – Le Maguer 2010; Le Maguer 2011. For the multi-purpose nature of incense among late antique Christians, see Caseau 2007. An interesting evidence for the prestigious reputation of incense in the Early Islamic Near East is given by the Arabic source known as the Life of Timothy of Kākhushṭā – a biography of a late 8th/early 9th century north Syrian saint monk. One episode in this source tells about a Persian man, whose son was cured by Timothy, and who – in return – gave the saint »[...] musk, perfume, incense, and some other things«. After departing to their homeland, the Persian and his

son »[...] continued to visit the blessed one every year, bring along all [sorts of] precious incense: aloe, camphor, musk, ambergris, and other sorts of aromatics. They brought this that the saint might burn them in his holy place of residence« (Lamoreaux – Cairala 2000, 169–173; cf. Foss 2007, 101).

35 Fritz – Kempinski 1983, 138–185. See also Schick 1995, 463 f.

36 Magness 2003, 57 f.

37 Fritz – Kempinski 1983, 153–158 pls. 99–101. 167–169.

38 Recently, we suggested that the discovery of Early Islamic Egyptian coarse ware basins (namely, neither

fine tableware nor typical commercial containers) and Egyptian ceramic rattles at a number of coastal sites in Palestine indicates the existence of Egyptian migrants – notably soldiers, officials, and/or merchants accompanied by family members – in these locations. See Taxel – Fantalkin 2011; Taxel et al. 2013. However, in contrast to the case of the Jericho glazed lidded bowl, no additional direct evidence (such as epigraphic finds) was available in order to establish a solid link between these Egyptian artefacts and the locations in which they were found.

Conclusion

Some time in the middle of the 7th century, an unknown number of Nestorian/East Syrian monks who apparently made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land – which at that point had only been under Muslim rule for a few decades – founded a small monastery east of the town of Jericho/Arīḥā. The names of the four individuals mentioned in the mosaic dedicatory inscription found in the monastery's chapel indicate that the social and geographic affinity of this monastic community was most probably related to regions far from Palestine, and closer to the centre of the new Early Islamic state. The excavated parts of this monastery have yielded a small number of finds, notably a group of in situ liturgical and liturgy-related objects, the chronology of which allows for the suggestion that the monastery continued to exist into the 8th century. The most unique object of these was an alkaline glazed lidded bowl, apparently a southern Iraqi product, identical equivalents of which were found at sites located from southern Iran to eastern Arabia. The bowl's distribution area not only fits the general geographic origin of the monastery's founders, but it also indicates that people (perhaps pilgrims) from those regions continued to visit the site until as late as the 8th century. Given these data, some points should be emphasized:

- The alkaline glazed lidded bowl from the Jericho monastery forms part of the earliest class of glazed wares produced in the Early Islamic world. The Jericho example shows, probably for the first time, a functional link between a carinated bowl and a ridged lid. While the alkaline glaze technology, as well as the morphology of the lid, have roots in pre-Islamic (Sasanian) times, the carinated shape of the bowl is an original Early Islamic development.
- As such, the Jericho glazed lidded bowl can be considered one of the earliest Early Islamic glazed wares reported from Palestine, very likely from the Umayyad period (late 7th to mid-8th century), though an early 'Abbasid date (second half of 8th century) should not be excluded.
- Regardless of its exact date, this bowl found its way to Palestine not as a result of commercial activity (as was the case with the later mass import of glazed tablewares from Iraq and Egypt)³⁹, but was due to an individual's personal motivation, namely a desire to dedicate the bowl and/or some precious material in contained to a certain monastery in the wilderness of Jericho.

39 Similarly, the handful of late Umayyad- and 'Abbasid-period alkaline glazed jars reported from Palestine, such as those found in the marketplace at Scythopolis/Baysān, can be considered commercial containers that were brought to the country (perhaps by individuals from Arabia, Iraq or Iran) in order to transport certain (unknown) contents. With respect of the latter issue, it has been suggested that these jars plausibly represent the sale and transport of pickles, since until recently similar vessels have been used for this purpose in Iraq and Iran (Simpson 2003, 353).

Abstract

Itamar Taxel, *Pots and People from East to West: a Rare Early Islamic Glazed Lidded Bowl from a Monastic Site near Jericho, and Its Cultural and Historical Context*

This article discusses a glazed lidded bowl that was found in the 1930s during the excavation of an Early Islamic Nestorian/East Syrian monastic site near Jericho. The vessel is unique to the Palestinian/Levantine ceramic repertoire, but – as an apparently southern Iraqi product – has identical equivalents at sites located from southern Iran to eastern Arabia. Not only can this lidded bowl be considered one of the earliest glazed vessels ever published from Early Islamic Palestine, but it also represents a rare example of a direct link between people and objects belonging to the same cultural world, both of which are archaeologically attested far from their place of origin.

Keywords

Palestine • Jericho • Early Islamic epoch • alkaline glazed pottery • Nestorian/East Syriac Christianity

Sources of illustrations

Fig. 1: I. Ben-Ezra, Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University • Fig. 2: modified from Baramki – Stephan 1935, 81 • Fig. 3: courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority, negative no. M5071 • Fig. 4: drawing Y. Gotlieb, photos P. Shrago, Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University

Abbreviations

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