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Decorated Glass Jugs from Late Antiquity: A Hint at Similar Pilgrimage Practices among Jews and Christians?





Hand-held vessels crafted from glass, clay, or lead are among the more common artefacts of Late Antiquity. These “pilgrimage vessels”, Latin *ampullae* and Greek *eulogiai* (literally “blessings”), typically bore Christian iconography. Miracle and pilgrimage accounts recount that these vessels were used to collect holy liquids from the tombs of martyrs, often oil taken from the lamps that hung over the tomb of a martyr and then distributed to pilgrims. In some regions, especially in Syria, stone reliquaries containing the bones of martyrs were pierced, so that visitors could pour oil onto the martyrs’ remains and retrieve the liquid after it had touched the bones. In other places, like the shrine of SS. Cyrus and John in Menouthis (present-day Egypt), water from the sanctuary’s fountain was collected. Pilgrims carried the holy oil or water back home, where these liquids were used to cure ailments or offered as grave goods to protect the souls of the dead who were awaiting resurrection.

A series of about 200 hexagonal or octagonal jugs and jars made of molded glass between the 5th and the 7th century raises interesting questions about Late Antique pilgrimage practices across religious boundaries. Many of these vessels were discovered in Palestine, and most bear either Jewish or Christian iconography. On the Jewish vessels, a *menorah* (the seven-branched Jewish candelabra) is often depicted, sometimes framed by other ritual objects like a *lulav* (palm-frond) and a *shofar* (ram’s

horn). The Christian vessels are decorated with several types of crosses, including one atop a flight of steps, which is probably depicting the monumental bejeweled cross erected by Emperor Theodosius II on Golgotha around 420 CE, a popular pilgrimage site that also appeared on imperial coinage from around 560 onwards. Christian pilgrimage vessels were often produced locally near a holy site, identified by the artefacts' iconography or their inscriptions. The depiction of Golgotha on Christian vessels thus suggests that the workshop that produced them was in or near Jerusalem. Because the Christian and Jewish glass jugs closely resemble each other in technique, shape, and design, they were probably manufactured in the same workshop, which sold to both Christian and Jewish pilgrims.

What is most curious here is not one workshop producing artefacts for both Jews and Christians, but the evidence these artefacts provide for a shared ritual practice. This is especially curious because Judaism, unlike Christianity, did not have a cult of martyrs. Jews did visit the tombs of their deceased close relations at appointed times, and also adorned the graves of the "prophets" and "the righteous" (*Matthew* 23:29). Such monuments had become major landmarks by the 1st century CE at the latest. By the 5th century, the rabbis begrudgingly accepted that miraculous events could take place at the tombs of major Biblical figures, such as King Hezekiah. However, although Late Antique Jewish pilgrimage to the ruins of the Temple Mount is documented since the 4th century, there is no record of pilgrims collecting any substance from there or anywhere else. The first mention of Jews purposefully circumventing the tombs of holy rabbis asking for a cure appears in a 10th century polemical text.

While anointing for hygienic and medical purposes was a far-spread practice in Antiquity, the idea that a liquid could acquire any kind power from its contact with a person considered holy is not articulated in Jewish literature. Who, then, was using the *menorah*-decorated vessels and for what purpose? Were Jews also collecting liquids from their own holy places in Jerusalem? Did they collect oil after anointing a stone on the Temple Mount every year, as one Christian witness from the 4th century claimed? Or were the glass jugs not "pilgrimage vessels", but instead, used for another purpose?

While there is no definite answer to these tantalizing questions, our glass jugs attest to the co-production of religious practices during Late Antiquity. They were literally produced together for Christians and Jews alike. If their purpose was indeed to bring healing substances back from holy sites, such a practice was not inherited from any Roman custom. Since Christian pilgrimage to the tombs of holy men and women for therapeutic purposes is unequivocally documented from the 4th century onwards, Jews were probably imitating their Christian neighbors when they began to use their own pilgrimage vessels. But many Jewish funerary customs of the Roman period, such as grave offerings and funeral banquets, are only known to us by archeology and never mentioned in writings. So it is not completely impossible that therapeutic pilgrimage to holy sites was an originally Jewish practice carried on by Christians, who later institutionalized it. The custom could also have appeared at a time when the boundaries between Jewish and Christian communities were still permeable.

Although they were criticized by several religious authorities for doing so, many early Muslim pilgrims also brought back soil or perfumed oil from either Mecca or Jerusalem. According to some scholars, at least one glass vessel from our late antique Jerusalem workshop bore a portrait of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, as depicted on copper coinages from the 680's. This vessel could have been purchased by a Muslim and used to carry oil that was rubbed on the holy rock (*sakhra)* inside the Dome of the Rock. The practice does not seem to have caught on, but the existence of this unique vessel, like

its more common Christian and Jewish kin, reminds us that it is never easy to say where co-production begins, and where it stops.

Further reading:

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