Caroline Bridel, 2024

A Jewish Gold Glass from the Catacombs of Rome



This gold-glass from the 4th century, now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, shows a medallion divided into two registers: the upper half displays the Torah shrine flanked by two lions holding a scroll, while the lower register shows two menorahs, as well as other traditional elements of late antique Jewish iconography (the citrus fruit *etrog*, the palm tree *lulav*, the *shofar* horn, etc.). The inscription PIE ZESIS ELARES is relatively common and is part of the usual epigraphic repertoire of this type of material. Here in latinized Greek we read: "Drink, that you may live." The provenance of the object is unknown, but it is believed to have come from one of the many catacombs in Rome, as this is where the majority of the 500 to 600 objects of this type that have been discovered to date come from. Interestingly for our investigation, only 16 of these gold-glasses feature Jewish iconography such as shown on our source. Apart from a few exceptions, none of them have been found *in situ*.

While it cannot be denied that the motifs on this object – menorah, *etrog*, *lulav*, and *shofar* – belong to the semiotic repertoire of Judaism, we will question here whether this makes the object an exclusively Jewish one: namely, whether this is an object that would have been made, owned, used, and understood only by Jews.

What if what seems, at first, to be "just another" late antique Jewish artefact was, in fact, a religious co-production? Religious identities are often (if not systematically) assigned by the research to artefacts like this one, bearing what is considered to be a religious sign. They are thus classified and considered as "Pagan", "Jewish", or "Christian",

artefacts (and “Muslim” for later periods). But what does it mean for an artefact to be assigned a religious affiliation, especially in the 4th century CE? It was around this period that religious classification took on a new dimension, through the elaboration of the tripartite separation between pagans, Jews and Christians. But let us not forget that these religious categories are late imperial constructs, based on the reflections of Christian writers on the divisions between groups and their desire to present Christian identity as distinct from other identities (be they religious, ethnic or civic).

The catacombs of Rome, where these artefacts were found, are privileged spaces for a better understanding of the religious interactions of Late Antiquity and, in particular, encounters between inhabitants of the city of Rome, including Jews and Christians. These funerary spaces have yielded a wealth of inscriptions, graffiti, frescoes and other elements of funerary decoration and equipment (sarcophagi, lamps, etc.), among them the gold-glasses. Numerous studies have shown that the Roman catacombs, in terms of ownership, administration and even the laws to which they were subject, were places where familial affiliation prevailed over religious, and that, in fact, nothing prevented people of different religious backgrounds from being buried together in the same chamber or next to one another. In this regard, the only three gold-glasses with Jewish iconography, whose contexts of discovery are known, reveal a provenance of two catacombs usually considered to be Christian (SS. Marcellino e Pietro, and San Ermete), and one Jewish (Villa Torlonia). Moreover, other fragments whose provenance can be traced back to the so-called Jewish catacombs in Rome do not display Jewish iconography, but rather traditional motifs: *putti*, for example.

This is a first step toward co-production: an object’s decor does not always directly indicate the religious ascription of the space where the tomb it adorned was located. On the contrary, a Christian visiting a relative’s tomb might well have offered a libation at a family grave, illuminating the neighboring golden menorah on the medallion as they passed by. A tomb visited by a Christian needn’t even have been Christian and could just as easily have been the one with the Jewish iconography. The spaces in which these objects were used, and the encounters between individuals of various religious backgrounds that may have taken place there, highlight a shared culture and traditions (even rituals) specific to the funerary sphere.

This intertwined dynamic between individuals belonging to different religious groups can also be seen in the places where these artifacts were produced. Several studies on the matter of workshop identity have shown that the places of production of gold-glasses were independent of religious boundaries and may be defined as having functioned through a *common workshop identity*. First of all, in view of the figcaption number of gold-glasses with Jewish iconography, it cannot be assumed that there was in Rome an exclusively Jewish workshop, owned by, filled with, and visited by people identifying within the Jewish collective. The same applies to the production of Christian or pagan gold-glasses: these vessels bases reveal similar techniques, shapes, inscriptions, and uses, which suggest that they come from the same workshop(s).

Beyond this quantitative argument for Jewish glasses, researchers such as J. Engemann (later taken up by L. Rutgers) have shown, particularly with regard to typology and iconography, that the same type of gold-glass could incorporate different religious iconography, meaning that the same workshop could have adapted these objects to the needs of the customer. Thus, traditional or non-religious iconography could also have been commissioned by a Christian or a Jew, and those who wished to embellish their graves with a figure or a sign referring to the Jewish or Christian religions could do so, regardless of their religious affiliation. Moreover, all of these declinations of religious motifs could have been produced by the same artist, again, regardless of religious

affiliation.

By acting as a meeting place for artists and customers belonging to different religious groups, the gold-glass workshops thus create the *possibility* for co-production, where the proximity and encounters fostered by such shared contexts issued in new expressions, new shapes, new iconography. With gold-glasses, co-production manifests itself in the figcaption details, and suggests some dimension of sharing of forms and iconography. For example, our Jewish gold-glass base can be traced back to a specific type of gold-glass, all iterations of which share the same four-triangle frame, but whose central image may also depict Christian apostles, the portrait of a family without any element of religious iconography, or, as here, menorahs and the Torah shrine. According to L. Rutgers, this last motif (the Torah shrine) could be seen as an iconographic construction produced by shared iconography, since, he argues, the form of the shrine of the Torah is reminiscent of the Roman libraries. We might, therefore, be seeing here a co-produced form of the Torah shrine, based on a local form of a library, which wouldn't necessarily be possible without the shared identity of the workshop, owned by and visited by people from different religious affiliations. This indicates that Jews in Rome didn't feel the need to display (or ask for) a specific form of the Torah shrine, for example one with the doors closed, as one finds on the mosaic floors of the 4th to 6th centuries synagogues in the East.

In the end, this gold-glass is a product that, although unequivocally articulating the Jewish iconographic vocabulary (and therefore probably adorning the tomb of someone or some family affiliated with this tradition), was shaped by the multireligious identity of the workshops. These places of production, through their common identity, thus operated as meeting places that created the *potential* for co-production, thus eventually manufacturing *co-produced artefacts* such as this one, where the process of co-production can be seen in the details of the object itself.

Further Reading:

C. Crocci, "Reused from Banquet to Grave: Gold Glass, a 'Popular' Medium in Late Antiquity?", *Eikón Imago* 11 (2022), 47-55.

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H.-J. Nüsse, "Römische Goldgläser – alte und neue Ansätze zu Werkstattfragen", *Praehistorische Zeitschrift* 83, 2 (2008), 222-256.

H. G. Meredith, "Engaging Mourners and Maintaining Unity: Third and Fourth Century Gold-Glass Roundels from Roman Catacombs", in R. Feldmeier et. al (eds.), *Religion in the Roman Empire: The Role of Objects – Creating Meaning in Situations*, Tübingen, 2015, 219-262.

L. V. Rutgers, "A New Gold-Glass From the Jewish Catacombs of ancient Rome. Reflections on Its Iconography and Meaning and on the Chronology of Gold-Glass Production in Fourth Century Rome", *Mitteilungen zur christlichen Ärchäologie* 23 (2017), 92-112.

L. V. Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome: Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora,* Leiden, 2000, 81-85.

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