

CITY OF DAVID STUDIES OF ANCIENT JERUSALEM

The 24th Conference | Editor: Eyal Meiron | Megalim Institute - City of David, Jerusalem | Elul 2023 | **18**



ISRAEL NATURE
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Three Notes on Vessels made of Stone of the Early Roman (= Late Second Temple) Period

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■ Introduction

The phenomenon of abundance of stone vessels and implements in the repertoire attributed to the Early Roman (=late Second Temple) period became evident since Y. Yadin's excavations at Masada (1963–1964), and particularly since B. Mazar's excavations near the Temple Mount (1968–1978) and N. Avigad's excavations in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem (1969–1982). Y. Yadin (1966: 147) and L.Y. Rahmani (1974: 68, note 27) had already related these stone vessels to halakha (Jewish religious code), but did not emphasize this as a general conclusion. Over the years, several excavation reports have been published, from Jerusalem and other contemporaneous sites, in each of which a substantial section covered the subject of stone vessels. From the comprehensive studies devoted to the subject, mention will be made of those by Y. Magen (1976; 2002), S. Gibson (1983) and Y. Adler (2011). Recently, S. Gibson (2022) summed up the subject, including a full bibliography.

The aim of this article is to present some new ideas relating to the phenomenon.

■ On the Particular Status of Stone for the Production of Vessels and Implements and its Possible Meaning

The possible preference for the use of stone vessels and implements in the later part of the Early Roman period is explained by halakha (Jewish religious code), which states that of all materials of which vessels and implements were produced, such as pottery, wood, stone, metal, fabric, leather, etc., only stone is not susceptible to ritual impurity. Recently Y. Adler suggested (2011: 171–173) that this exclusive preference for stone stemmed from the fact that stone vessels and implements are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible among the vessels made of materials that are susceptible to impurity. In addition, Adler stated that stone vessels were considered vessels of inferior status, and it was not always obvious that they should be listed under the definition "vessel" regarding matters of purity / impurity.

I would like to offer a different explanation for the special status of stone vessels and implements within the religious code pertaining to matters of cultic purity/ impurity, which developed considerably in the Early Roman (= late Second Temple) period. In my opinion, the answer is associated with the understanding of how stone differs from all other materials, or better said, how the method by which a stone vessel was produced differed from the production of vessels made of other materials.

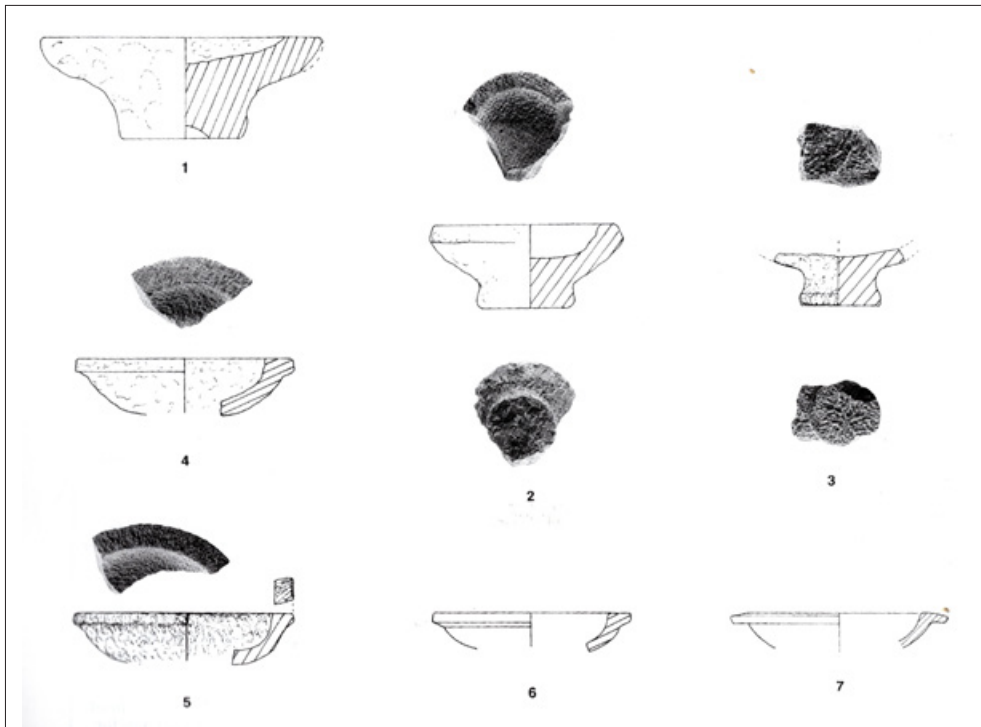


Figure 1. Hard stone vessels (Reich 2003, Pl. 1.8)



Figure 2. A selection of soft chalk vessels from Jerusalem (photograph: R. Reich)

Pottery, metal and glass are all artificial in nature, each made of various raw natural materials combined and processed at high temperatures. The original affinities of each raw material changed in the process, which is irreversible – there is no physical or chemical way to separate such materials into their original components. A stone vessel, on the other hand, was created by taking a raw block of stone, quarried directly from its natural bedding, and by chipping stone splinters from it, with the help of a sharp tool until the desired shape of the vessel was created. Despite the change in form, from a shapeless block of stone to a vessel, it is still part of a specific point in nature that can actually be identified. A stone vessel retains all the properties of the layer of stone from which the original block was extracted, such as color, hardness, texture, etc. A stone vessel continues to be part of nature of "the Land", although it was disconnected from it. This might be the reason why this property, of unsusceptibility of stone was deemed insusceptible to cultic impurity, a property also attributed to "the Land" of Israel itself (e.g. Mishnah, Hagiga 3, 8).

Vessels and tools made of wood are also not made from a mixture of materials – they too were carved from a single wooden trunk, and one can point to the specific location on the tree from which the wood was taken. And yet, there is a difference between stone vessels and wooden vessels. Stone is part of the Land while a piece of wood – growing, living tree and its fruits – are part of the land, and not susceptible to impurity as it is connected to the earth. But when a tree is felled, or the fruit is picked, it is no longer part of the land, hence its fruits might become impure (Lev 11:32), and so, one should assume, might the tools that are made from it.

■ On the Rabbinic Expression, "Vessels made of Cattle-dung, Vessels made of Stone, Vessels made of [Unburnt] Clay" (Mishnah Kelim 10, 1)

The immunity of stone vessels from ritual impurity is mentioned several times in the Mishnah, where such vessels are always listed with those made of two other types of materials that are not susceptible to ritual impurity: "vessels made of cattle-dung, vessels made of stone, vessels made of [unburnt] clay" 'כלי גללים, כלי אבנים, כלי אדמה' (Mishnah Kelim 10, 1; Ohalot 5, 5; 6, 1; Para 5, 5; Miqwa'ot 4, 1; Yadaim 1, 2).

The inclusion of vessels made of cattle-dung on the list of vessels that are not susceptible to ritual impurity is quite surprising. The common explanation in its plain meaning is that these are vessels of animal excrement that was collected, kneaded, fashioned into a vessel and dried. The surprise is in the fact that this material was used to make vessels. It should be emphasized that one does not find vessels or pieces of vessels of this material in

excavations, although it is available everywhere, and it preserves well through the ages. To the best of my knowledge fragments of animal-dung vessels were found only at Masada (Bar-Nathan 2006: 238–243). At Masada, whose besieged Sicarii inhabitants lived in dire conditions, one can understand the use of this material, since clay, that commonly accumulates in riverbeds and of which pottery vessels were made, was lacking at the mountain fortress.

Noteworthy also is the fact that "vessels made of animal dung" are always mentioned first in this Mishnaic statement. This fact might indicate that this was the most frequently used type of vessel, or the most important among the three types mentioned. One wonders – what importance do vessels made of animal dung have over all others?

I venture to suggest that one should distinguish between "גללים" (gelalim) and "כלי גללים" (kelei Gelalim). "גללים" are indeed animal droppings. These were occasionally used to mend cracked barrels (Mishnah Kelim 3, 4), or were used together with another material dubbed "חלמא" (khelma) in the production and crafting of iron (Mishnah Kelim 11, 4; Tosefta Bava Mezi'a 1, 5).

On the other hand, one should consider the expression "כלי גללים" in a different way. The word "גלל" in the expression "אבן-גָּלֵל" appears in the Aramaic part of the Hebrew Bible (Ezra 5:8; 6, 4). In these verses, it is clear, that the word has to do with construction stones (Ezra 5:8). One can understand that the reference was to stones of the best quality – ashlar – incorporated in the construction of the Temple (Ezra 6:1). It seems that כלי גללים is not a material different from stone but is in fact type of stone, or even a style of dressed stone. If the above-mentioned definition "stone vessels" pertains to household objects made of soft limestone or chalk (see below), which are the most abundant type in the said period, then it may be suggested that the term כלי גללים refers to vessels produced of hard or semi-hard limestone, a type of stone used to produce dressed construction stones.

One should note that none of the three components of this expression is mentioned separately in the rabbinic literature, but always as a group. In this respect the expression resembles other such triads in rabbinic literature, such as: "cisterns, ditches and caves" בורות, שיחין ומערות (Mishnah, Bava Qama 5, 5; Bava Batra 2, 1) pertaining to all cavities in the ground designated to collect rainwater (Reich 2013: 29); "A chest, a box, a cupboard" תיבה, שידה ומגדל (Mishnah Kelim 15, 1; Ohalot 8, 1), which refers to all closed furniture in the house that are used to store utensils, to protect them from undesired uncleanness. Through these comparisons I suggest that the expression "vessels made of hard stone, of stone, of clay" is a general expression that refers to vessels made of all types of stone.

■ On the Date of Stone Vessels made of Hard Limestone

I published a report on the stone vessels from Area A in the Jewish Quarter Excavations (Reich 2003), which pointed out a group of objects made of hard limestone, worked with a pointed chisel. These objects differ distinctly from the common stone vessels made of soft chalk, and by their production methods: either by hand with a flat chisel, or by turning the block of stone on a lathe.

In this excavation one could discern an elaborate stratigraphy (Reich 2000) that was well dated by the rich numismatic and ceramic record. The dozen fragments of hard limestone could be well dated by the rich numismatic and ceramic record.

In my opinion, stone vessels produced of hard or semi-hard limestone (Reich 2003: 263–265), fashioned with a pointed chisel, were the earliest stone vessels of the Second Temple period, marking the beginning of this phenomenon, produced in the middle of the 1st century BCE. Sometime later, in the early 1st century CE, these vessels were replaced with vessels made of soft chalk, carved by hand with a flat chisel or knife or on a lathe. It seems to me that the first hard stone vessels were introduced in the Jewish community soon after the regulation was introduced stating that stone was not susceptible to ritual impurity. The ascent to the throne of the Hasmonean dynasty seems to have been the beginning of intensification of religious piety among the Jewish community in Jerusalem (Reich 2017). During the reign of the Hasmoneans, perhaps toward the end of their reign in the middle of the 1st century BCE, stone masons seem to have initiated the production of this type of vessel with the tools at their disposal. But soon enough, artisans replaced the type of stone and the tools, and the art of producing stone vessels became a craft in its own right.

Hillel Geva (2006: 220) expressed a similar view, based on the finds from Area E of the Jewish Quarter excavations: "Their [the hard stone vessels] disappearance is connected, no doubt, to the introduction of the lathe in the Herodian period, which brought about the transition to mass production of chalk vessels."

With regard my observation above, Yonatan Adler (2011: 219–220), stated that vessels made of hard limestone were also found in Jerusalem in loci from the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. He points to fragments from the dumps on the eastern slope of the City of David in Jerusalem, published by Jane Cahill (1992). A close examination of these shows that only a single item (Cahill 1992, locus 2046, Fig. 14:3) was associated by the excavators to the Persian period. On the find spot of this item, the excavation report says (De Groot and Bernick-Greenberg 2019: 20) that it was cut on the east by the sloping debris of the Hellenistic period. This implies that the debris might

have been mixed, and not necessarily from the Persian period. On the other hand, the fragments of hard limestone from the Jewish Quarter excavations originate from well-leveled, stratified and dated floors, far more reliable for dating than the debris layers dumped upon the steep slopes of the City of David.

■ Summary

Stone was used to produce household implements down through the ages, particularly for milling and grinding, which take advantage of its hardness and rough texture. What is peculiar to the Jewish community of Eretz Israel in the late Hellenistic and Early Roman (late Second Temple) periods is the significant increase in use of stone, this time for the production and use of containers of various kinds. It has not been yet demonstrated statistically, but it seems that the use of stone increased by one or even two orders of magnitude – an unprecedented change. The increase in such use was the outcome of religious regulations pertaining to ritual purity, which decreed that stone vessels were immune to ritual impurity. In light of this ruling, people realized the practical advantage of using such vessels. As suggested here, the beginning of this trend was launched by stonemasons, using their pointed chisels on common semi-hard limestone, with which they were accustomed to work in construction. This created the first stone vessels, which are probably those referred to in the rabbinic writings as כלי גללים. It was soon realized that soft chalk, which the stonemasons had never used in construction, was an easier material to work with, and much cheaper for this purpose. This turned the stone manufacture of vessels into a craft of its own, an industry, using various tools in the hands of specialized artisans.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my thanks to Yonatan Adler and Shimon Gibson for their constructive comments. Obviously, the responsibility for the ideas expressed in this article is solely my own.