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GLASS BEAKER WITH LOTUS BUDS FROM ASSERIA

Summary

The cemetery of Roman Asseria has never been archaeologically excavated. Despite this fact, the Archaeological Museum in Split contains various objects from it, particularly of pottery and glass, acquired by purchase, mostly between the two world wars. Revisory analysis of the museum holdings by curators has established that the Archaeological Museum in Split contains over 260 glass specimens of Asserian provenience. A special place among these glass objects is held by the already well-known conical mould blown beaker with a relief motif of “lotus buds” and four theatrical masks /Fig. 1, 2/.

Conical beakers with lotus bud ornamentation occupy a prominent position among the typological group of glass beakers. Although great terminological variety exists, I prefer the above term – beaker with lotus buds, even though the other names are also perfectly justified in terms of the appearance of several variants of relief decoration on the surface of conical beakers decorated in this manner. On the basis of the decorative relief element, in essence a protrusion resembling a reversed droplet, the following terms are also used: beakers with almond-shaped decoration, beakers with lotus buds, and beakers with knotted protrusions. The fundamental element of the decoration consist of alternately placed rows of oval protrusions that narrow towards the bottom, which is similar to a lotus bud /Fig. 3: 1, 2/. Such protuberances often have a three-stepped profile /Fig. 3: 3-5/. In such cases, the first impression of a bud or an almond is lacking, and the glass beaker begins to resemble a wooden staff with knots. Hence E. Marianne Stern rightfully considered that the creator of the beaker had been inspired by the club of Hercules. It is interesting that occasionally the beakers exhibit a combination of horizontal rows of three-stepped protrusions and a final row of simple unprofiled almond-shaped protrusions /Fig. 3: 3/. It can be concluded that this most probably represents a copy of a metal relief decorated vessel. This is further supported by the fact that horizontally arranged relief hemispheres (or knobs) are often found accompanying the above “lotus bud” relief decoration /Fig. 3: 5, 6/, and sometimes the lotus buds are arranged within a rhomboid web in relief /Fig. 3: 7/. In one case, the lower part of such a beaker was decorated with a grape vine. The conical beaker with lotus buds from Asseria is quite special, as in addition to rows of three-stepped lotus buds and small hemispherical relief protrusions, the lowest row also contains depictions of relief theatrical (?)

masks /Fig. 1, 2/. From an entire series of combinations, especially in terms of the number of horizontal rows, it is possible to distinguish beakers with a simple unprofiled motif of lotus buds, which can be displaced along a vertical axis /Fig. 3: 1/, or arranged one below the other (very rare) /Fig. 3: 2/. Another manner of decorating the surface of these beakers was a combination of simple and triple profiled buds (also very rare) /Fig. 3: 3/, as well as an image of triple profiled lotus buds /Fig. 3: 4/. A combination of triple profiled buds and relief hemispheres (or knobs) is common /Fig. 3: 5/, and the latter sometimes can also be profiled /Fig. 3: 6/. A special and rare manner of decoration involved buds within a rhomboid web /Fig. 3: 7/, and exceptional elements certainly included the highly rare beakers with lotus buds and grape vines above the base, and beakers with triple profiled buds, relief knobs, and relief masks /Fig. 1, 2/. The number of horizontal rows on the surface of the beakers with lotus buds differs. Beakers with only two rows of decoration are exceptionally rare, and most usually they had four or five, and at most six rows.

It can be stated that without reference to the variants in decoration the term “beakers with lotus buds” is the usual and commonly accepted name for this category of glass vessels. The term “beakers with almond-like decoration” can be justified only in cases with simple unprofiled almond-shaped bosses, while the newly suggested term “beakers with knotted decoration” would apply only in the case of three-stepped profiled protrusions. Considering that the lotus bud was a very popular decoration in the eastern Mediterranean, and particularly in Syria where glass was made, and that this term for beakers decorated in this manner has long been accepted and is to some extent standardized, I consider that it is most suitable. The motif of lotus buds was also used on other forms of glass vessels. It appears on glass flasks, on a glass jug /Fig. 4/, and on a rhython /Fig. 5/. Beakers with lotus buds, like the other mentioned glass forms with the same decorative motif, were blown into a relief mould and are classified as expensive table ware. Some authors consider that such beakers belong to the most numerous group of mould-blown beakers. Basically they appear in two sizes. Elongated examples can have a height of over 20 cm, while the height of the shorter ones measures around 12 cm. Different variants exist in both groups in the rims, however, a common element is that the edges are cut and most are gently curved and inverted. In terms of the manufacturing technique, Stern considered that the beakers from Toledo had been blown into a four-part mould, meaning that the mould consisted of three vertical sections, while the fourth section was for forming the base in the shape of a disc. However, beakers are also known that were blown into moulds that consisted of only two vertical sections on the walls.

Although some authors consider that beakers with lotus buds are the most numerous group of mould-blown beakers, nonetheless a relatively small number have been discovered on the territory of the Roman Empire. They have been found only in individual examples or fragments, no matter how broad their zone of production or distribution. E. M. Stern very accurately noted that beakers with lotus buds do not appear at sites in northern Italy, but one example of an entire beaker with lotus buds was nonetheless found at Adria. They can be found in southern Italy and

along the Rhine River by military camps – at Asciburgium and Bonna. They are relatively numerous at sites in northern Switzerland, again at places where Roman legions had been stationed – *Vitudurum*, *Vindonissa*, and *Augusta Rauricorum* (Augst). Several beakers were also found in southern Switzerland, in the canton of Ticino. Fragments of these beakers are relatively numerous in the vicinity of the military camp at Nijmegen in the Netherlands, and several examples have been found in England, Spain, France, and Portugal. They have also been noted in Slovenia, and in the Balkans – in Serbia and in Romania, and they have also been found in the regions along the northern coast of the Black Sea. Naturally, they are not unknown in the eastern Mediterranean, which was apparently the original starting point for production of mould-blown beakers with ornamentation of lotus buds.

The number of conical beakers with relief buds discovered in Liburnia is not inconsiderable. One such beaker was found in Roman Osor, and one example is known from Asseria, while three more come from Zadar, Nin, or Asseria. If two fragmentary beakers with lotus buds from the Roman harbor at Zaton are added to this number, it appears that a total of 7 conical beakers with relief lotus decoration have been discovered in Liburnia. They all belong to the group of short beakers with a height of around 12-13 cm, and the diameter of the base (often with concentric circles) measures approximately 4.5 cm. Differences among them are nonetheless visible in the manner of decoration, indicating that they were not made in the same mould. Most probably they were blown into four different moulds – unprofiled lotus buds without droplet-shaped protrusions (examples from Zaton and Osor); - unprofiled lotus buds with droplet-shaped protrusions (one example from Zaton); - profiled lotus buds with droplet-shaped protrusions (two from Zadar, Nin, or Asseria); - and finally, profiled lotus buds with droplet-shaped protrusions and four human figures in the lower section of the beaker (one from Asseria and one from Zadar, Nin, or Asseria).

E. M. Stern considered that the variations in decoration were much more numerous on examples from the western part of the Empire. She noted for the relief decoration of the eastern Mediterranean examples that it was formed exclusively from three-stepped knots (buds) in alternation with hemispherical protrusions. Thus she reached the conclusion that the beakers with simple lotus buds, or those with a vertical arrangement of this ornament, were of western production. The majority of the series was nonetheless produced in the eastern Mediterranean, most probably in Syria, in Sidon, where decoration with lotus buds was very popular. The site of the workshop (or workshops) in the Western Empire has not yet been located. Naturally, at this stage of research it would be premature to review the entire distribution route. In reference to the eastern Adriatic coast, it is most likely that the examples of these beakers were imported from the eastern Mediterranean workshops.

The question of the interpretation of the conical beakers with lotus bud relief decoration would certainly be more suitable as the subject of a separate work. But here I would like to point out, at least in outline, some of the basic problems. The simple unprofiled decoration of lotus buds

or almonds truly is not in the least reminiscent of knots of wood, not even in olive wood. On the other hand, E. M. Stern is right to recognize in the ornament of triple profiled protrusions (buds/almonds) knots of wood, specifically the knots on the club of Hercules. She offers comparisons with an *ara* dedicated to the Roman Hercules (Greek Heracles), on which a club with knots was depicted, as was also the case with bronze domestic figurines, where Hercules holds a skyphos in one hand and in the other a club with knots, meaning that knots truly represented an essential detail of Hercules' club. If that was the case, and as it is known that Hercules was fond of food and drink, and was depicted in drinking contests with Dionysus, the very god of wine, it does seem possible that beakers with triple profiled lotus buds, or knots, might depict some attribute of Hercules. Particular powers could have been attributed to such beakers. Perhaps their owners used them on exceptional occasions for serving special drinks, such as toasts, wardings, and so forth, calling forth the magical protection of Hercules in cases of physical weakness or illness. In that case these richly decorated beakers could also be called "Hercules beakers". However, if the knot is a composite detail of the club of Hercules, why don't all the conical beakers have triple profiled decorative elements of alternatively placed rows of oval protrusions that narrow towards the bottom in a knotted protrusion? Why were some beakers made in a combination of unprofiled almond-shaped and profiled knotted decoration elements? Why was such a decoration of oval protrusions found within a rhomboid web? And finally, what was the connection between the triple profiled elements of oval protrusions that narrow towards the bottom and images of human figures or theatrical masks?

The latter, triple profiled elements of oval protrusions that narrow towards the bottom with images of human figures, or theatrical masks, refers only to the exceptionally rare mentioned examples of richly ornamented conical mould-blown beakers, one of which was found in Asseria and is kept in the Archaeological Museum in Split, and the second was taken to the Murano Glass Museum in Italy, and came from Zadar, Nin, or Asseria, while the third is part of a private collection – the *Loeffler Collection* (no. 137), and its provenience is unknown.

The beaker from Asseria was made from green-blue glass. The conical body narrows towards the base. The rim is cut, with one engraved horizontal line below it. The height of the beaker with lotus buds and masks from Asseria measures 13.3 cm, the diameter of the rim is 7.2 cm, and the diameter of the base 4.1 cm. The glass is particularly thin at the bud-shaped protrusions. The surface of the beaker is decorated with five rows of three-stepped lotus buds mutually shifted around a vertical axis. Four rows of profiled relief hemispheres (knobs) are located between the rows of buds. The fifth row contains four theatrical (?) masks in relief instead of knobs. One mask has a Negroid appearance – with large ears, a high forehead and a rounded chin. The second mask was of an elderly man with exceptionally large ears, a wrinkled brow, and heavy eyebrows. The third mask depicted a very broad face and parted hair (?), while the fourth mask represented a male figure with a luxuriant beard.

The only direct parallels for the beaker from Asseria from throughout the entire area of the Roman Empire consist of merely another two known examples. One is a beaker that also comes from Liburnia, either from the cemetery of Zadar (*Iader*), Nin (*Aenona*), or Podgrađa near Benkovac (*Asseria*), today kept in the Glass Museum in Murano. The second analogous beaker is of unknown provenience, and is in the *Loeffler Collection* (possibly from Syria or again from the eastern Adriatic coast, from Dalmatia). This means that two out of three known examples are of southern Liburnian provenience. Perhaps both even came from Asseria.

According to the numerous general analogies with beakers that belong to the typological group of mould-blown conical beakers with lotus bud reliefs on the surface, the rare Asserian example can be dated to the 1st century AD, most probably in the second half. Most scholars support such a chronology, although it is also suggested that such beakers could also have been in use at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. However, examples from Pompeii and Herculaneum support the earlier dating, as they offer a *terminus ante quem* of 79 AD.

It is presumed that the beakers with lotus buds were originally an eastern Mediterranean product, but that they were most probably also manufactured in western glass workshops. At the present state of investigation and with the abundance of variations in the relief, meaning the workmanship of the mould, as well as the diverse dimensions of the beakers, it is difficult to locate the western production centers and the distribution routes. The center of production of the more richly ornamented beakers (three-stepped bud profiles, relief hemispheres), which includes the examples with relief depictions of theatrical masks, should definitely be sought in the eastern Mediterranean, in Syria. It would truly be too hypothetical to consider that the beakers with lotus buds, relief knobs, and theatrical masks had been blown in some local glass workshop on the eastern Adriatic coast, i. e. in the province of Dalmatia. However, it is quite strange that of the three known examples in the world, except for one for which the provenience is unknown (*Loeffler Collection* - no. 137), the other two are specifically from the region of southern Liburnia, one from Asseria and one from Iader, Aenona, or Asseria.

The Asserian example of a glass conical mould-blown beaker with buds and masks thus represents one of three such rare specimens throughout the territory of the Roman Empire, and indicates the high living standards of the inhabitants in its place of use. It is especially interesting that two of these three examples (the third with unknown provenience) come from the same area – southern Liburnia, and that both could be from Asseria. In any case, there is no doubt that the beaker from Asseria belongs among costly items of glass production in the 1st century AD, as is evident from the exceptionally small number of discovered examples (3), along with the not very large amount of finds from the entire typological group at individual sites both in the eastern and western parts of the Empire.