

FOUR BYZANTINE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS FROM JERASH

by
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I. Introduction

The author received several decorated pottery fragments from an unstratified deposit in Jerash. After examining the fragments, Mr. Abu Hilal, who found the sherds, was asked to restore them. The fragments proved to form a large pottery vessel neck.

This neck is important because it is the first reported pottery neck of its type known to the author. It has four Byzantine religious symbols depicted on its external surface in brown paint. These symbols are water, birds, fish and a tree.

The form of the missing body that corresponds to this neck is uncertain. This study is, therefore, restricted to the four symbols and their functional purposes.

The clay texture of the neck and the four symbols on its surface suggest a date for this unparalleled object between the fifth and early sixth centuries A.D.

II. Description (Figs. 1-3).

Ext. Length: 12.3 cm.

Approx. Diameter: 4.1 cm.

Thickness: 0.4-0.5 cm.

The pottery neck is missing the upper rim and lower body. The neck is thick at the middle and slightly tapers upward and downward. It is of light pinkish ware with a dark grey core in places as a result of imperfect firing. Some small and medium white limestone grits are present. The external surfaces are comparatively coarse to the touch, while the internal walls show definite traces of the potter's wheel. The neck shows some denting and warping in places. A thick coat of creamy yellow slip covers the entire external surface. Two horizontal panels of light brown paint are depicted around the neck. The panels are separated by a horizontal band or line. The

elements in the upper panel consist of two birds separated from each other by a fish and a tree, while the lower panel depicts three fish of different sizes swimming. A considerable number of dots in both panels represents water, while the largest dots, scattered around the tree, may represent its fruit. The effect of the whole scene is one of "Horror vacui".

III. Discussion

The water represented in the form of dots scattered on the external surface of the neck is not standing but rather running or living water. To confirm this significance, the writer believes that the artist intentionally depicted the tree, fish and birds in that water. According to Danielou (1964: 42, 46), water in its Christian sense symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The Arabs before Islam conceived the spirit of the dead person as a bird that continually begged for water to drink, and to confirm this meaning, the artist of the neck has added, beside the other elements, birds, which are probably ducks, swimming in that water. Such birds, usually doves or ducks, were made of pottery and filled with water and buried with the dead to represent and nourish the continuing vitality of the soul ('Amr 1980: 276). The whole scene with living water, which gives life, reminds one of mosaics in the churches of Madaba and Jerash that often depict the baptismal spring of living water surrounded by the trees of life. Thus one would think of the water and birds on this pottery neck as representations of the Holy Spirit.

The use of fish as a Christian symbol probably derived from the combination of the initial letters of the Greek words "*Iesous Christos Theo Uios Soter*", meaning Jesus Christ Son of God, Saviour. The first letter of each word forms I - ch - th - u

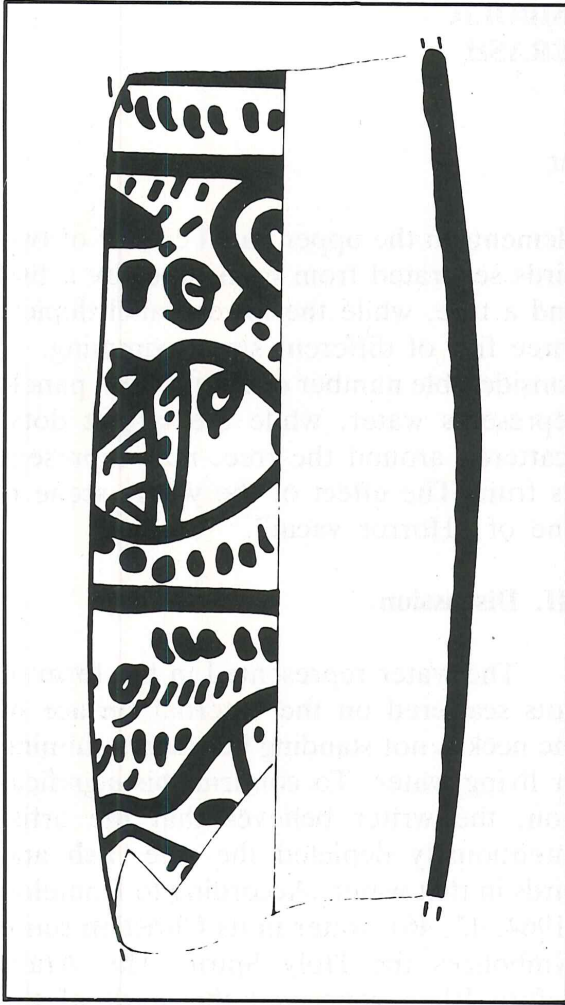


Fig. 1

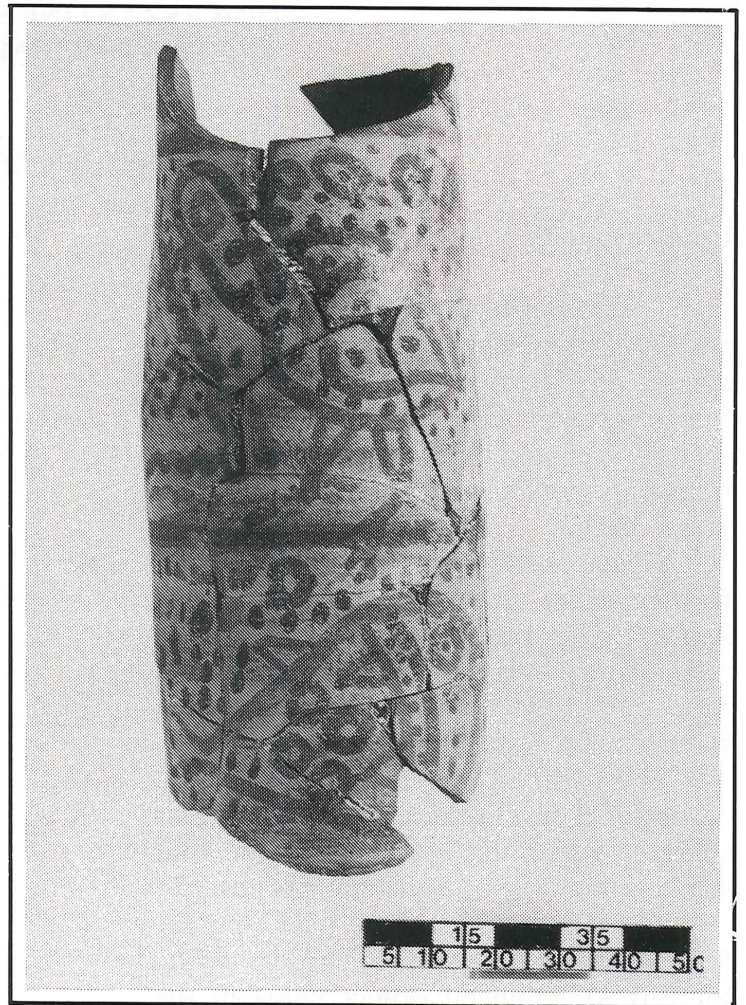


Fig. 2

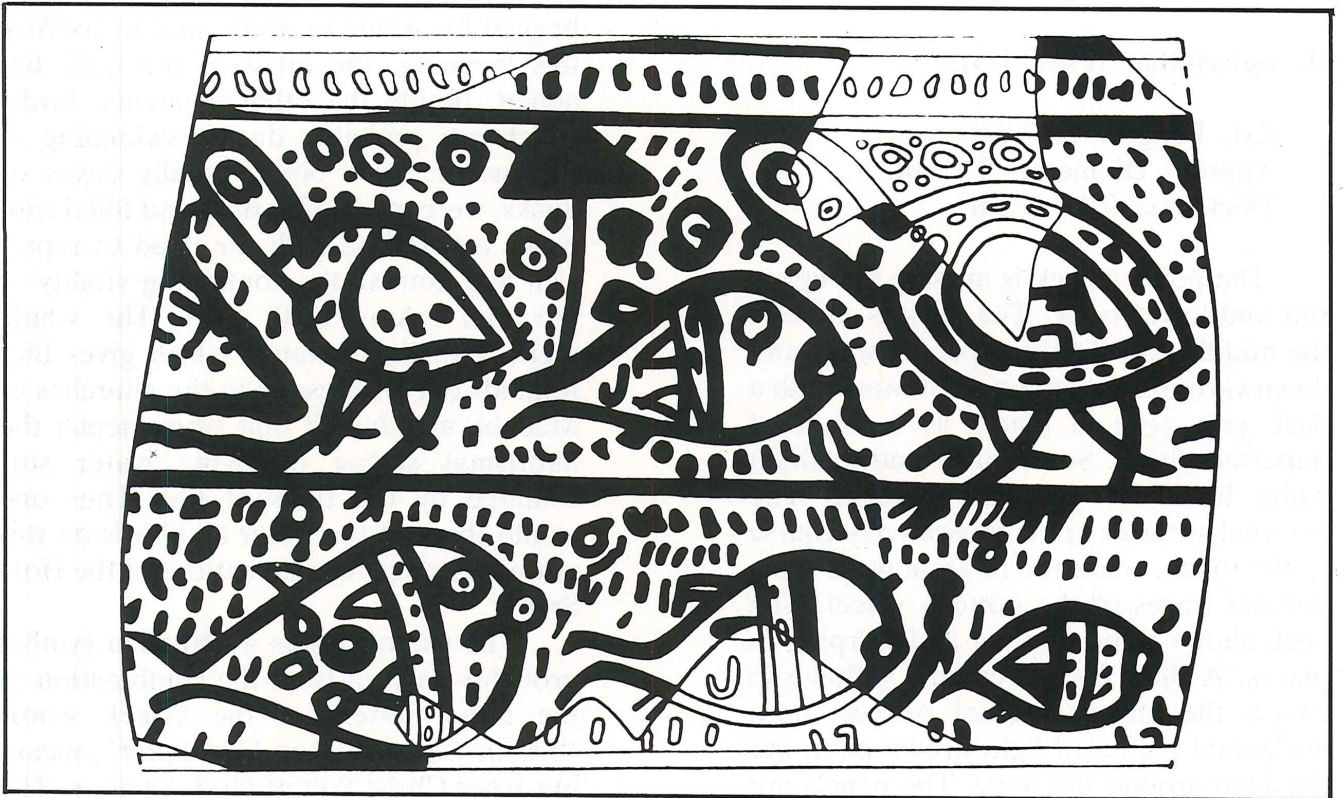


Fig. 3

- s, the Greek word for fish. The fish, therefore, was adopted as a Christian symbol standing for Christ, who took his first disciples from among fishermen of the Sea of Galilee (Rops 1962: 236-39). The fish that are shown on the neck look as if they belong to the same family. They are deep-bodied compressed fishes with dorsal and anal fins. Fish of such qualities and with circled mouths remind one of the kissing Gouramis (*Helostoma Temmincki*) except that the artist did not show both the pectoral and pelvic fins. The kissing Gouramis were chosen to be shown on this neck possibly for their fame in liking each other. Thus the Gouramis symbolize Christ, the Son. In addition, fish generally appear in a baptismal context: "But we, little fish, are born in water". "It has been reserved for you that water should bring you forth to grace, as it brought forth other [living beings] to natural life. Imitate this fish..." (Danielou 1964:50). Therefore, it seems very possible to confirm that the baptismal symbolism of the fish is connected with the living water which has also a baptismal overtone. This probably answers the question of why the Jordan River, before it flows into the Dead Sea, became the sign of living water with baptismal significance in early Christian art.

The representation of the Holy Spirit symbolized by water and birds, and Jesus Christ, the Son, symbolized by the Gouramis fish, leads one to surmise whether the tree of the neck symbolizes the Father. Such an assumption seems inevitable for it recalls Matthew 15.13: "Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up". The *Odes of Solomon*, as quoted by Danielou (1964:26), provide more examples strengthening this idea:

"My foundations were laid on the hand of the Lord: because he established me. For he set the root and watered it and fixed it and blessed it; and its fruits are for ever... The Lord alone was glorified in his planting and in his husbandry... by the beautiful planting of his right hand: and by the splendour of his planting." It becomes clear that planting in general and trees in particular are the work of the Father, our Lord. Thus the planted tree on the Byzantine pottery neck may symbolize the Father since planting is established only by his hand and, therefore, could be considered a good sign to his existence.

In conclusion, this pictorial pottery neck was not made for use in daily life or as secular art, but reflects a religious significance. It seems very possible that it forms a pictorial translation of the well-known Christian text which says: "Concerning baptism, baptize, thus, in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in living water". The neck may belong, therefore, to a large vessel that was used for ritual and baptismal purposes. It also reminds one of the passage in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (XI, 10-11). which says:

"And then what says the prophet? 'There was a river flowing from the right hand side, and beautiful trees grew from it; and he who shall eat of them will live for ever'. That is to say, we go down into the water full of sin and defilement, but we come up out of it bearing fruit in our hearts, dread and hope in Jesus, being in the Spirit".

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