

Trade Relations between the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Iberia in the 1st-3rd cc. AD

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(Presented by Academy Member David Lortkipanidze)

The paper aims at studying the imported glass unguentaria discovered in the tile graves excavated at Mtskheta in the eastern part of Georgia (former Kingdom of Iberia), finding parallels of the finds and identifying Iberia's links and trade relations with the Roman Empire. Glass unguentaria, lacrimaria and flasks represent the homogeneous group of the burial inventory of tile graves dated to the 1st-3rd cc. AD; they were presumably imported from Syria which was under the Roman influence at the time. All of the imported glassware is produced by a blowpipe. Besides Iberia these vessels occur on many sites of the Roman Empire and its environs (e.g. Northern Black Sea Area, Southern Caucasus, etc.). As Mtskheta (the capital of Iberia) was located on the crossroads of ancient trade route connecting east to west, different luxurious goods, like unguentaria with frankincense oil and miniature lacrimaria with perfumes and medicine were delivered to satisfy the cosmetic needs of the local aristocracy. It should be assumed that Syrian products carried by these glass containers were being brought in Iberia via Armenia and would head towards Mtskheta and were eventually distributed to different town centres of the Iberian Kingdom. © 2020 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Cemetery, tile grave, unguentarium, Late Classical period

Large scale archaeological excavations carried out at the Samtavro Cemetery in the eastern part of Georgia (former Kingdom of Iberia) in the last century revealed graves of several types. The tile graves unearthed on the cemetery are dated to the 1st-3rd cc. AD.

Mtskheta was the capital city of Iberia and its environs yielded a broad array of archaeological finds, including coins of almost every Roman emperor and numerous imported items that attest to a trade route passing through Mtskheta.

As early as the 1st century AD glassware forms an essential part of the grave inventory in Iberia

where it seems to be closely associated with funerary practices. This applies especially to flasks and unguentaria, since unguentaria containing frankincense oil would be buried with the deceased [1: 101-120]. 20 glass vessels from the tile graves of the Samtavro Cemetery are mostly intact imports produced by a blowpipe.

Types of the vessels. Miniature lacrimarium made of tinted glass is quite distinct from the rest of free-blown unguentaria. There are six such lacrimaria in all. These are manufactured by exactly the same techniques. Their height does not exceed 2.4-3.9 cm;

similar vessels dating from the 1st c. AD have been unearthed at the Urbnisi (south-eastern Georgia) [2: 156-157] and Garni (Armenia) Cemeteries (the 1st – 2nd cc. AD); and during the excavations of Pompeii which is an indication that this type of unguentarium had existed prior to the destruction of the city, i.e. before 79 AD [3: 156-157].

Conical-bodied green, massive glass flask featuring the long neck, short conical body and wide massive rim is quite prevalent among the tile graves of the Samtavro Cemetery. Average height 8.1 cm, rim diameter: 5.6 cm; bottom diameter: 6.2 cm. There are five flasks of this type in total. These vessels are similar in shape and size. The glass is massive. No iridescence. A very similar Syrian flask dated to the first half of the 2nd c. AD is repositated at the Hermitage Museum [1: 297]. All of these types of flasks are imported vessels, evidently from Syria and can be dated to the turn of the 1st – 2nd cc. AD.

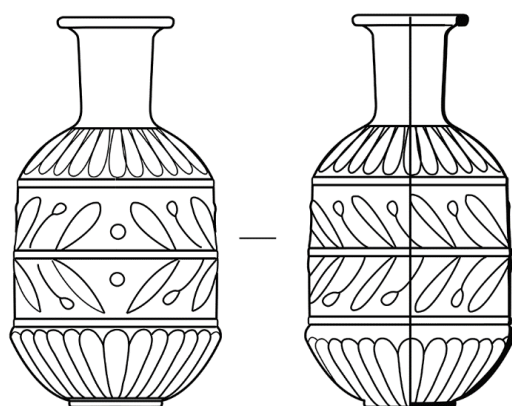


Fig. 1. Figurate flask (#12-54:6729).

Tile graves of the Samtavro Cemetery yielded in all six white, yellowish or greenish iridescent, free-blown glass unguentaria with the spherical or slightly flattened body and the long neck. Neither of these vessels are similar in colour or shape. A Parthian coin of the king Gotarzes (40/41-51 AD) recovered with one of the unguentaria should date the grave to the second half of the 1st c. AD. Apart from the Samtavro Cemetery, in Georgia such

unguentaria were unearthed at the Urbnisi and Zhinvali (north-eastern Georgia) Cemeteries [3, 4]. Their countries of origin are hard to tell, since such unguentaria were prevalent throughout the Roman Empire during the 1st – 8th cc. AD and their specific chronological groups are markedly different from each other in shape, colour and glass quality. Unguentaria are known in the Northern Black Sea area (Panticapaeum [1], Olbia [5], Chersonessos), in Armenia (Garni and Vagarshapati burials), in Egypt and Syria itself [6]. Based on the above the unguentaria from tile graves also should be dated to the 1st – 2nd cc. AD.

Figurate flask is made of the coloured glass featuring relief ornamentation: only three thin walled, handleless flasks of this type have been recovered from tile graves. The glass is of high quality. No iridescence. Height: 8.5 cm; rim diameter: 2.5 cm; bottom diameter: 2 cm (Fig. 1). The vessels mould-blown in a two-piece mould. This is

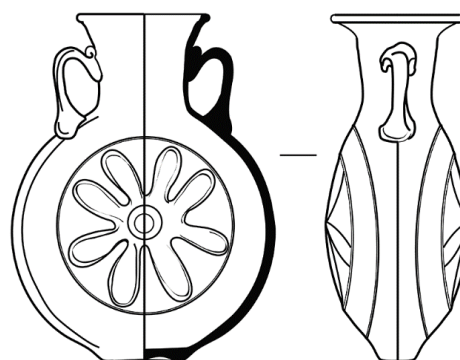


Fig. 2. Figurate flask (#12-54:9085).

evident from the seams, which remain in relief on the sides. At the Urbnisi Cemetery vessels of this type have been recovered from grave #170, dating from the first half of the 1st c. AD [2]. Very similar figurate flasks occur at a number of cemeteries abroad (Panticapaeum [1], Armenia, the Samothrace Cemetery and Syria [6: 53, no. 63, Fig. 40.]).

Very similar finds from elsewhere in the Roman Empire allow us to specify Syria as the

country of origin and to date these flasks to the second half of the 1st c. AD. Interestingly, in addition to the above finds, a similar flask has been unearthed in Syria itself (reposited at the Museum of Damascus). It is dated to the 3rd c. AD which is a clear indication that their production continued up to the 3rd c. AD [6].

G. Eisen considered these vessels to be Sidonian and dated them to the first half of the 1st c. AD. A very similar vessel is reposited at the Roman-Germanic Museum of Cologne, dated to the 1st c. AD [7: 154-155]. Two such vessels have been recovered from the Mogvtakari Cemetery in Mtskheta; two more from the 1st – 2nd cc. AD layer of the Urbnisi Cemetery [2: 13], of three similar flasks reposited at the Hermitage Museum one is from the Panticapaeum excavations, while the other two are from a private collection [8: 24-25]; the above data suggest that figurate flasks were produced from the second half of the 1st c. to the beginning of the 2nd c. AD.

The ubiquity of figurate flasks in the ancient world is an indication of their inexpensiveness. Often the halves of the vessels were not aligned correctly which prevented them from standing. This is yet another indication that they were connected with funeral rites [1: 122].

Our specimens of figurate flasks are likely manufactured at Ennion's workshop in Sidon [1: 140]. Ennion's signature survives on more than twenty mould-blown vessels. His workshop (in or near Sidon, Syria) produced some of the finest examples of Roman mould-blown glassware and his products were traded extensively from Syria to Italy and from Cyprus to the Northern Black Sea area [8: 24; 1: 102]. It appears that his products were popular in Iberia too. Frankincense oil was imported with unguentaria, which were unquestionably connected with funerary rites. This is evident from the bases of figurate unguentaria on

which the vessels cannot stand. Perfumes and medicine also would be put in miniature lacrimaria [9: 156-157].

It should be assumed that products of Syrian workshops were being brought to Georgia via Armenia. As in Armenia they were distributed a little bit early than in Iberia. The second reason is a political situation. In Iberia imported goods would head towards Mtskheta primarily through the southern trade route and would eventually be distributed to different town centres of the Kingdom of Iberia. During the 1st – 2nd cc. AD the relations between Rome and the Kingdom of Iberia were mostly peaceful which was dictated by bilateral economic interests: the interests of the Romans involved the trade artery, which connected the countries of the East with the western world via the countries of the South Caucasus, whereas the leaders of the Kingdom of Iberia were interested in goods, which came to Iberia from the West [10: 65-66]. As for the local glassmaking per se in this period, no glassmaking enterprise dating from the 1st – 3rd cc. AD was discovered on the territory of Georgia. It is conceivable that in the 1st c. AD glassware would come from Syria and Roman provinces and the population of Iberia made imitations of imported glassware locally.

Import of Syrian glassware to Iberia lasted until the 3rd c. AD. The varieties of grave inventory thereafter are severely restricted, while no tile graves are found at cemeteries dating from the 4th c. AD onwards, which should be accounted for by the spread of Christianity and a change in the funerary practices.

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არქეოლოგია

სავაჭრო ურთიერთობები რომის იმპერიასა და იბერიის სამეფოს შორის ახ. წ. I-III სს.-ში

ქ. შავლაყაძე

საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმი, ს. ჯანაშიას საქართველოს მუზეუმი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის დ. ლორთქიფანიძის მიერ)

წინამდებარე ნაშრომი მიზნად ისახავს საქართველოს აღმოსავლეთ ნაწილში, სამთავროს სამაროვანზე (ყოფილი იბერიის სამეფო), კრამიტსამარხებში, 1938-1958 წლებში აღმოჩენილი იმპორტული მინის ჭურჭლის შესწავლას, მათი პარალელების მოძიებას და ამის საფუძველზე იბერიის რომის იმპერიასთან კავშირებისა და სავაჭრო ურთიერთობების იდენტიფიცირებას. სამთავროს სამაროვნის კრამიტსამარხები ახ.წ. I-III საუკუნეებს განეკუთვნება და ამ პერიოდის სამარხებს შორის რაოდენობით პირველ ადგილზე დგას. მინის სანელსაცხებლები და საცრემლეები ახ.წ. I-III საუკუნეებში იბერიაში, სავარაუდოდ სირიიდან არის შემოტანილი, რომელიც ამ დროს რომის იმპერიის გავლენის ქვეშ იყო. ყველა მათგანი საბერავი მილის გამოყენებით არის დამზადებული. იბერიის გარდა მსგავსი სანელსაცხებლები აღმოჩენილია რომის იმპერიის პროვინციებსა და მის შემოგარენში (მაგ. ჩრდილო შავიზღვისპირეთი, სამხრეთ კავკასია და ა.შ.). იმის გამო, რომ მცხეთა (იბერიის დედაქალაქი) აღმოსავლეთისა და დასავლეთის დამაკავშირებელ, სავაჭრო გზაზე მდებარეობდა სხვადასხვა ფუფუნების საგნები, როგორცაა სურნელოვანი ზეთი სანელსაცხებლებით, წამლები და სუნამოები მინიატურული საცრემლეებით შემოდიოდა ადგილობრივი არისტოკრატის კოსმეტიკური მოთხოვნილებების დასაკმაყოფილებლად. წინამდებარე ნაშრომში ნაჩვენებია, რომ სირიული იმპორტული მინის სანელსაცხებლები მცხეთაში სომხეთის გზით ხვდებოდა და შემდეგ ნაწილდებოდა იბერიის სხვადასხვა საქალაქო ცენტრებში.

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