

REMARKS ON STONE VESSELS FROM ISLAMIC LAYERS ON BIJAN ISLAND

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Abstract: Excavations on Bijan Island in western Iraq were conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, in 1979–1983, as part of the international Haditha Dam rescue project. A multi-layered site was uncovered, featuring complex architectural structures and a rich archaeological assemblage. Four main settlement phases were distinguished: Neo-Assyrian, Parthian, Roman and early Islamic. The present paper focuses on stone vessels attesting to extensive use of stone for utility purposes. The assemblage complements knowledge about the inhabitants of early Islamic Bijan and their economic activities.

Keywords: stone lamps, Bijan, soft stone / soapstone / steatite vessels, Abbasid, Nishapur

Production of vessels in “soft stone”, also called “soapstone”, is part of a millennia-long artistic tradition in the Near East. Use of stone vessels is broadly attested in the archaeological record from the 3rd millennium BC, in Central Asia (Potts 2008) as well as the Arabian Peninsula (Huckle 2003; Zutterman 2004).

Soft stone vessels were also quite popular in the Abbasid period, although not many of its outcrops have been found so far (Le Maguer 2011: 183, Fig. 10; 2013: 53 for

outcrops used in the early Islamic period). Owing to the heat-resistant property of the stone, it was used widely to make vessels for kitchen use (Wilkinson 1944: 285, 289), as well as lamps and incense-burners (Le Maguer 2011: 181–182). Some of the pots were very richly decorated. Soft stone vessels were very popular in the Caliphate, the eastern regions (‘Aqaba, Hadir Qinnasrin) as well as the southern ones (Susa, Nishapur); they also constituted popular trading goods.

THE SITE

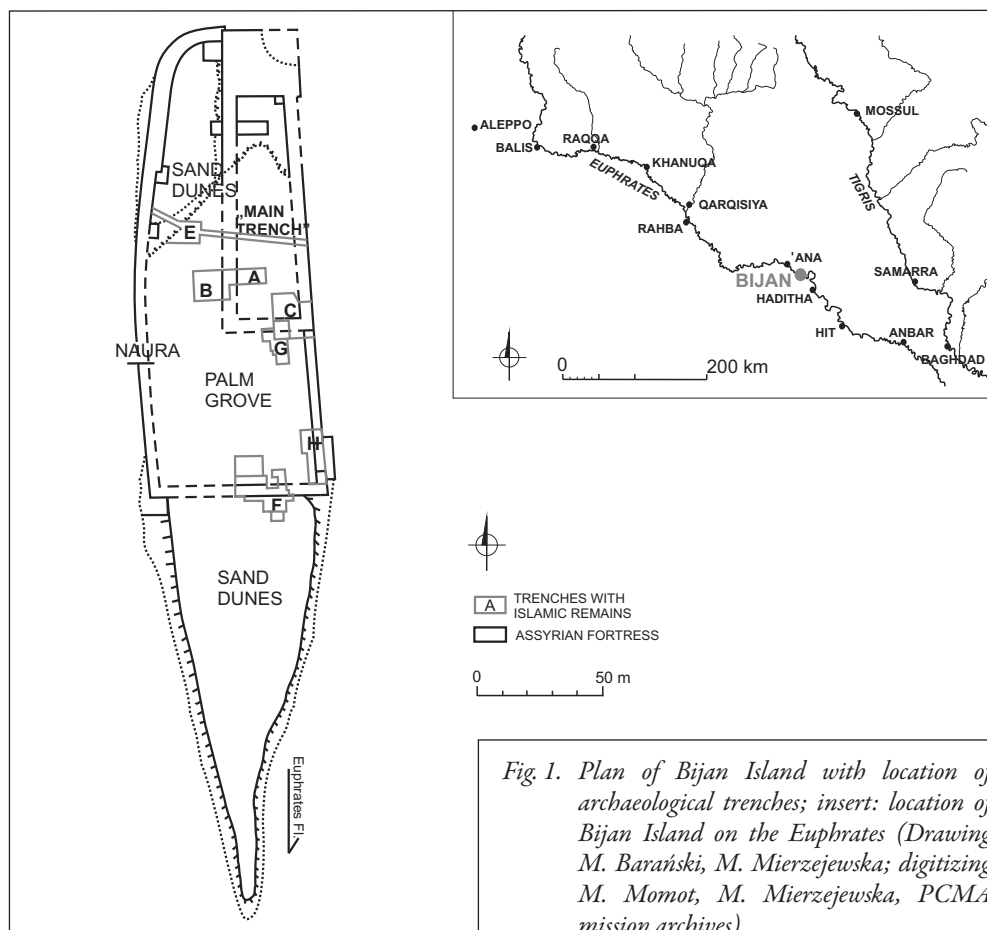
Bijan Island is situated on the Euphrates in western Iraq some 25 km downstream from the city of ‘Ana [*Fig. 1*]. In the late

1970s, dam construction projects on the Euphrates launched international rescue excavations in the vicinity of the

city of Haditha. The Haditha Project was coordinated by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (for an overview of the excavation results, see Kepinski, Lecomte, and Tenu 2006). The Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, joined the project in 1979, the work directed first by Michał Gawlikowski and then by Maria Krogulska.

The location of trenches was influenced not only by the nearing deadline of dam construction, but also by the presence of crop fields and a date palm plantation.

As a result, the excavated area accounted for approximately 14% of the inhabited land. Nonetheless, 13 trenches were opened, including a test trench (also called “Main Trench”), which intersected the island on its E–W axis. A tentative determination of site stratigraphy emerged from the collected data. Four main cultural layers were distinguished (Gawlikowski 1983; 1985; Krogulska 1987; 1990; 1992; Krogulska and Stepniowski 1995). These were, starting from the earliest: Neo-Assyrian: 8th–7th century BC, Parthian:



1st century BC to 2nd century AD, Roman: first half of 3rd century AD, and Islamic: the Abbasid period, 9th–11th century AD. The Islamic phase was further divided into three settlement stages (I a–c).¹ The oldest settlement stage within this phase was classified as pre-Samarra (I c), based on parallels of pottery finds. Structures of this stage were founded directly on top of Roman remains, which were adapted only in a handful of cases. The middle stage (I b) represented the so-called Samarra horizon. Apart from some

well-preserved settlement structures, it also yielded a rich and diversified repertoire of vessels featuring, among others, glazed pottery imported from Samarra, thin-ware with incised and applied decoration, kitchen ware (so-called Brittle Ware), common ware including a large set of basins (Mierzejewska 2014)² and a glass assemblage (Reiche 1996). The youngest settlement stage (I a) of the Islamic phase was characterized by an overall thin and mixed layer with barely distinguishable architectural remains.

STONE VESSELS FROM BIJAN: OVERVIEW

Altogether six stone vessels came from the Islamic layers on Bijan. These were two almost complete forms, that is, a lamp and a basin, both with carved decoration. The remaining pieces comprised one undiagnostic fragment with carved decoration, and three undecorated fragments of bases with sections of the wall.

All the vessels were made of a grey stone that was relatively easy to work.³ It was most probably a kind of steatite, popularly known as “soft stone” (Le Maguer 2013: 53). The material could not be identified unequivocally without physical and chemical analyses being carried out.

The stone lamp was found in a sub-surface layer of trench G, together with an Abbasid glazed lamp. The remaining vessel fragments were unearthed in layers of trench F, belonging to the Islamic settlement phase, in the same context as Islamic glass fragments, nails, an iron axle, and bone

fragments. Trenches G and F were located on the outskirts of the excavated area, close to the palm plantation. According to Krogulska, this could well have been the central part of the architectural complex (Krogulska and Stepniowski 1995: 134). The remains of walls and installations in these trenches, as well as the rich repertoire of finds suggest a functional and residential character of the Islamic settlement on Bijan.

The flat-bottomed lamp had the shape of an elongated triangle. It resembled a boat. It was 9.0 cm long and 5.2 cm wide. The walls were 1.3 cm thick and 2.5 cm high [*Fig. 2*]. On the short side there was a vertical handle, decorated with incisions on its edges. The exterior of the vessel was embellished with carved, irregular double rhombuses, arranged in three rows; each figure had a half-way pierced dot in the center.

¹ This division was based on the preliminary results. As a matter of fact, the stratigraphy of the Islamic phase was often difficult to determine, the remains being very poorly preserved.

² The author has published the collection of Abbasid basins and is currently engaged in a comprehensive study of the ceramic assemblage as part of an overall study of the early Islamic settlement on Bijan.

³ Vessels of the same stone were also found in Islamic layers at Palmyra (M. Krogulska, personal communication).

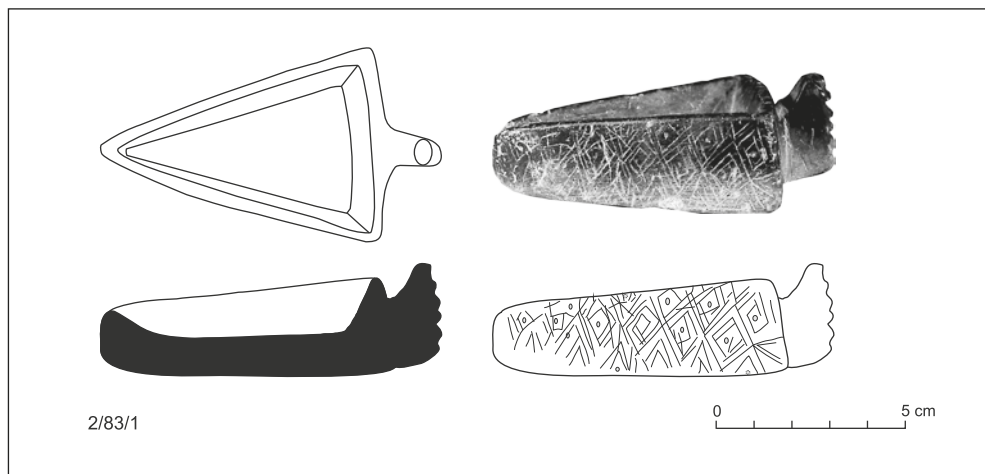


Fig. 2. Boat-shaped stone lamp (Inventory No. 2/83/I)
(Drawing F. Stepniowski; digitizing M. Mierzejewska; photo A. Reiche)

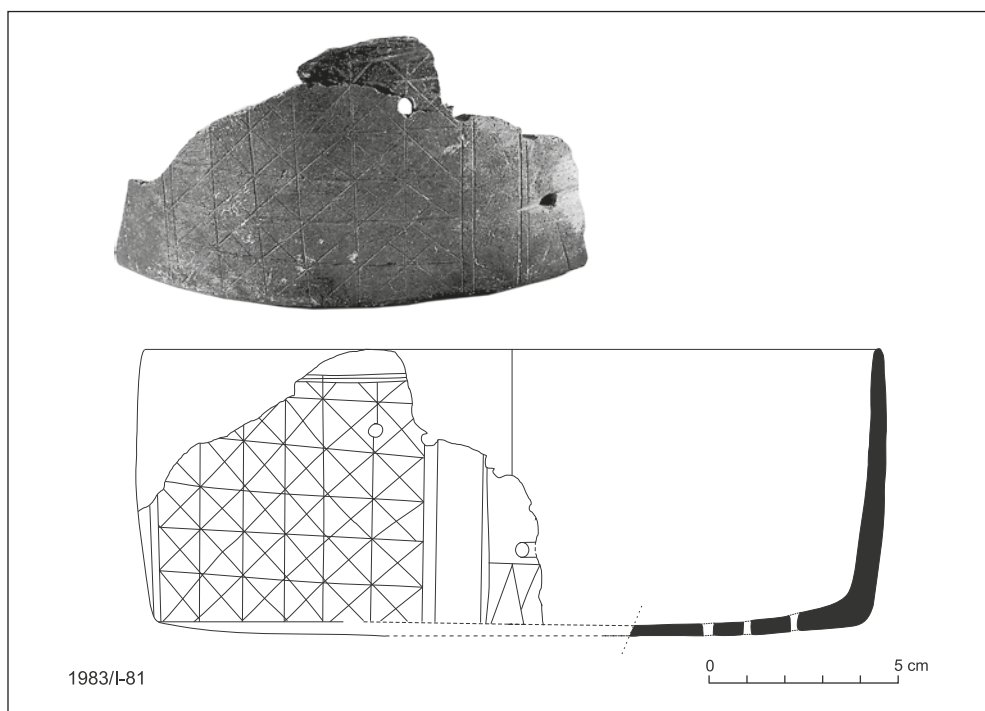


Fig. 3. Stone vessel with carved decoration (Inventory No. 1983/I-81)
(Drawing F. Stepniowski; digitizing M. Mierzejewska; photo A. Reiche)

This boat-like shape seems to have been very rare among early Islamic lamps (Becker 1999; Kubiak 1970; Poulsen 1957: 278–283). The two closest parallels, both with handles on their shorter sides, were found at Nishapur and can be viewed in the online collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One lamp was dated to the 9th–10th century, the other to the 10th century (Accession Nos 39.40.35 and 36.20.20 respectively, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449569> and 449054 [accessed: 4.05.2016]). The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection holds a stone lamp (Accession No. 46.90.2, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450709> [accessed: 4.05.2016]) originating from present-day Iraq, which was dated to the 9th–10th century.⁴ However, the shape of this lamp is more elaborate, but featuring three upturned prongs beside a handle.⁵

Two similar boat-shaped stone lamps were also found in medieval Faras (Kołodziejczyk 1966: 90, notes 27–28). They are currently part of the National Museum in Warsaw collection (Museum Inventory Nos F56/63-64 and F59/63-64). According to Kołodziejczyk (1966: 90), the discussed lamp-form emerged in Sudan after 1000, being used predominantly as church equipment. Clay examples of boat-shaped lamps are also known from Faras (Kołodziejczyk 1966: 90, Fig. 9), undoubtedly constituting a cheaper and an easier-to-make alternative to the stone specimens.

The second almost complete stone vessel found on Bijan was a thin-walled

basin, measuring 7 cm in height and 20 cm in rim diameter. Its bottom was slightly convex, with a diameter of 19 cm, and featured six pierced, oval holes [Fig. 3]. Similar holes were present on the walls of the vessel; two of them were fully visible on the preserved fragment, and traces of three more along the break line. Panels of carved decoration covered the walls, separated by a plain wide vertical band. Each panel was bordered with two carved lines and featured six rows of six rectangles each (forming six columns). The diagonals of the rectangles were carved, creating four inner triangles.

Another fragment of stone vessel with carved decoration (Inventory No. 1983/I-81-nn) was not diagnostic [Fig. 4]. The preserved fragment depicted two rectangles bordered above and below by three carved lines, and separated from one another by two vertical lines. One of the rectangles had both diagonals

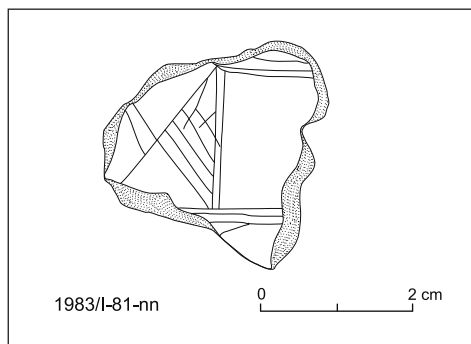


Fig. 4. Undiagnostic vessel fragment with carved decoration (Inventory No. 1983/I-81-nn) (Drawing F. Stępniewski; digitizing M. Mierzejewska)

⁴ The lamp is said to have belonged to Ernst Herzfeld, which may suggest that it was found in the vicinity of Samarra, where he was excavating (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450709> [accessed: 4.05.2016]).

⁵ Similar steatite lamps were also found at Nishapur: Accession Nos 39.40.36 and 38.40.116 (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449570> and 449328 respectively [accessed: 4.05.2016]).

marked, creating four inner triangles. The other rectangle was left blank.

The remaining three undecorated fragments (Inventory Nos 2559, 2654, 4744) were vessel walls turning into the bottoms, too fragmentary, however, to allow the form to be reconstructed. One of them (2559), similarly to vessel 1983/I-81, featured three pierced oval holes, but the fragment in question also bore traces of bitumen.

Similar stone vessel forms were found at nearby 'Ana (Northedge 1988: 81, 89, Figs 38.24, 38.25c, 41.5), as well as at the more distant Samarra (Iraq Government, Department of Antiquities 1940: 8–9), Kadhima (Le Maguer 2013: 53–54), Susa (Labrousse and Boucharlat 1972: 111, Figs 28.10–12), and Nishapur (Wilkinson 1944: 289). Most of these vessels were, like the Bijan fragments, middle-sized bowls and cooking pots, embellished with carved (Iraq Government, Department of Antiquities 1940: 9) or incised (Labrousse and Boucharlat 1972: 68) decoration.

There are also many parallels for the decorative motifs of rectangles with marked diagonals and of rhombuses with a dot in the center. Such ornaments were

featured on various types of stone vessels, such as an incense-burner⁶ found at Hadir Qinnasrin (Whitcomb 2001: 70, Fig. 31 for more information, see Hardy-Guilbert and Le Maguer 2010; Le Maguer 2011; Mikati and Whitcomb 2006), or a jar (Accession No. 36.20.6) and a lamp shade from Nishapur (Accession No. 40.170.691), (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449040> and 450345 respectively [accessed: 4.05.2016]). Similar decoration was also attested on clay bowls at Nishapur and Khirbet al-Mafjar (Whitcomb 1988: 55, Fig. 1 No. 1H; Wilkinson 1959: 235, Fig. 1), and on a metal bowl from Nishapur (Melikian-Chirvani 1974: 137, Fig. 19). This abundance of parallels clearly testifies to the popularity of these motifs.

The distinctive holes on vessels nos 1983/I-81 and 2559 also merit more discussion. Their location along the break line suggests that they were made to repair a broken vessel. As in the case of stone vessels from Ramla (Laureys-Chachy 2010: 305, 313, Fig. 14.3:1) or from Kadhima (Le Maguer 2013: 54), the Bijan examples could have been mended with iron wires or even with an ordinary cord. Thus repaired, vessels could remain in use for a long time.

DISTRIBUTION OF STONE VESSELS IN THE ABBASID PERIOD

When the political center was moved from Damascus to Baghdad in the beginning of the Abbasid rule, a network of trade and pilgrimage routes had to be established between the two cities. The middle Euphrates became an area of intense activity in consequence, connecting the western parts of the Caliphate with its eastern regions. Moreover, the area in question was close to a popular pilgrimage

route, the so-called Darb Zubayda, leading from Kufa, through present-day northern Saudi Arabia, to Mecca (Kennet 2013: 10; Petersen 1994: 48, Fig. 1).

The middle Euphrates region was also under heavy influence of the peoples from the Jazira and the Syrian plains, who profited from trade and redistribution of goods (Northedge 2006: 397). They were in need of places where they could sell

their goods and acquire products necessary for animal husbandry. Settlements located on the bank of the Euphrates, such as 'Ana, constituted natural trading centers. The inhabitants of nearby Bijan must have participated in these trade exchanges to some extent, either sporadically or regularly. The material found on the island attests to this, not the least the luxurious vessels executed in the Samarran style (Krogulska 1987: 156; 1990: 12) as well as the said stone vessels, which were imported most probably from northeastern Iran (possibly Nishapur).

An analysis of the distribution of stone vessels, especially those of kitchen use, indicates that they were very popular at many early Islamic sites, from Ramla (Laureys-Chachy 2010: 305, 313, Fig. 14.3:1) and Hadir Qinnasrin (Whitcomb 2001: 70, Fig. 3) in the west, through 'Ana (Northedge 1988: 81, 89) and Samarra (Iraq Government, Department of

Antiquities 1940: 8–9), to Susa (Kervran 1984: 226) and Nishapur (Wilkinson 1944: 289) in the east. All this suggests that stone vessels were not characteristic solely for the microregions, where the outcrops were located (such outcrops are known from the Arabian Peninsula and northeastern Iran, see Le Maguer 2013: 51), because they were also distributed along trade and pilgrimage routes (Le Maguer 2011: 181, 183, Fig. 10). Last but not least, stone vessels, like the boat-shaped lamps and incense-burners were of much higher value than others. Due to their decorative and cultic function (Le Maguer 2013: 53), they were certainly no ordinary commodities, and therefore all the more valuable and desired. Consequently, it is not surprising that these particular stone vessels were attested predominantly at the important centers, where the inhabitants had the economic status enabling them to acquire such objects.

CONCLUSIONS

The distribution of finds showcases the widespread use of stone for the production of utilitarian vessels. It was motivated by the durability of the material as well as its fire-proof properties. The broad functional range of stone vessels was another important factor determining their popularity. Vessels were used for food preparation or cooking (e.g., vessels from Bijan, 'Ana, Samarra, and Ramla). They also combined utilitarian aspects with decorative quality (e.g., a lamp shade from Nishapur). Others still were used in cultic context (e.g., incense-burners from the Arabian Peninsula or Hadir Qinnasrin).

The versatility of boat-shaped lamps is a separate issue. At Abbasid Nishapur they

were found in residential contexts, while at Faras they were used as church equipment. Moreover, such lamps were discovered in distant areas of the Near East and they remained in use for a considerable period of time. Suffice it to mention artifacts from 9th–10th-century Iranian Nishapur, through the objects from Iraqi Bijan, to lamps from 11th-century Sudanese Faras.

Stone vessels made of locally unavailable material, with traces of mending, must have had a great value not only in economic, but also in sentimental terms. Clearly the demand for luxurious items outweighed their cost, which may also highlight the affluence of the island's inhabitants. Given

the durability of the stone and the mastery of execution, the dating of these vessels is difficult for they could have been in use for several decades. The stone vessels from Bijan can be dated to the 9th–10th century on the grounds of parallels from other sites. As far as their origin is concerned, the

lack of physicochemical analyses makes it impossible to determine the stone outcrop (or outcrops) from which the material was extracted. Nonetheless, the similarities in shape and style of execution suggest at least some connection with northeastern Iran (probably Nishapur).

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