

Imported round stone pyxides in Assyria during the Iron age

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ABSTRACT

The article provides a brief discussion of four round stone “cosmetic” pyxides from Neo Assyrian contexts. These specimens can be attributed to a workshop located in North Syria at Karkemish, active between the Iron II and Iron III periods. Thus, they might have reached Assyria likely as tribute or booty from a North Syrian manufacturing center. These objects were used in Assyria in feasting contexts and they thus served multiple functions.

Keywords: Neo-Assyrian Period, Assyrian Relief, Karkamish, Assyrian Feasting.

حجر باكسيدات مستدير مستورد في بلاد آشور خلال العصر الحديدي

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الخلاصة:

ان هذا المقال مكرس لمناقشة مركزة لأربعة احجار مستديرة "تجميلية" من العصر الاشوري الحديث. يمكن أن تترجع هذه العينات إلى ورشة تقع في شمال سوريا في كركميش ، ازدهرت بين العصر الاشوري الوسيط والحديث. وبالتالي ، ربما وصلوا إلى آشور على الأرجح كجزية أو غنيمة من مركز تصنيع في شمال سوريا في كركميش. تم استخدام هذه الأشياء في بلاد آشور في سياقات الولائم وبالتالي فقد أدت وظائف متعددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العصر الاشوري الحديث، الألواح الاشورية، كركميش، الولائم الاشورية.

1. Introduction

A series of studies have focused on ivory pyxides found at Neo-Assyrian sites, while little attention has been devoted to contemporary stone specimens.¹ Stone pyxides, on the other hand, have been addressed by studies on minor arts in North Syria, highlighting the connection between monumental and small scale artworks during earlier Iron Age.² The corpus of round stone pyxides includes forty-two provenanced pieces from North Syrian sites³ – including some recently excavated pyxides from Karkemish on the Euphrates – and four additional specimens found in North Mesopotamia.⁴ The provenance and significance of the latter ones is the focus of the present paper.

2. Pyxides from North Mesopotamia

Concerning their typology, the four pyxides from Assyria belong to the subtype of round containers with side hole, between two vertical grooves, for the pivot of the sliding lid fastened by a knob on the opposite side.⁵ This kind of containers can present, in general, up to

five inner compartments and both lids and containers are decorated with either carved, incised, or inlaid elements. The decorative motifs can vary from banquet to contest scenes, to more simple geometric decoration. The pyxides discussed here are decorated with hunting scenes.⁶

A first fragmentary container (inv. no. BD 3.57; IM 22447), allegedly made of diorite, was found at Nineveh, near the temple of Ishtar in the so-called palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nineveh, a context generally dated to the 9th cent. BCE (Fig. 1).⁷ The piece presents an elaborate scene, depicting a hunting motif framed by a guilloche. This scene is stylistically parallel, according to Mazzoni, to the stone pyxides from Karkemish.⁸

Three other stone pyxides were retrieved in the temple of the god Ashur at Assur, in pre-Parthian levels. Unfortunately, it is not possible to date these pieces with more accuracy, due to the lack of information on their contexts of retrieval. A fragmentary steatite container (inv. no. Ass 17564B; VA 8263) shows two inner compartments and part of a carved hunting scene on the outside, similar to the examples from Nineveh and Karkemish (Fig. 2).⁹ A second piece (inv. no. Ass 17380) preserves two compartments and a vertical pierced hole for the pivot for the lost sliding lid (Fig. 3).¹⁰ Finally, a third fragmentary stone container (inv. no. Ass 17564b; VA 8261) appears to have been decorated with thin inlays, now lost (Fig. 4).¹¹

3. Manufacture, distribution of stone pyxides and their consumption in Neo-Assyrian contexts

The similar stylistic and typological traits between the stone pyxides found at Nineveh and Assur with those from Karkemish, strongly suggest a common place of manufacture.¹² Although a workshop for stone pyxides has not been identified yet in archaeological excavations, it is possible to infer the presence of a workshop of an elaborate/narrative style in the area of Karkemish during the Iron II (and III as well?), to which we may relate also the pieces imported at Assur and Nineveh. These specimens most probably were hoarded as tribute or booty, similarly to the case of the ivories.¹³

As far as the function of these containers is concerned, the consumption of round stone pyxides in North Syria and North Mesopotamia appears linked to the elite social sphere by the means of public display during feasting and rituals.¹⁴ This interpretation is confirmed also by iconographic representation of pyxides on the banquet scenes on eight funerary monuments, dating between the 9th and 8th cent. BCE.¹⁵ Similarly, in North Mesopotamia carved containers, probably pyxides, appear on the dining tables of Neo-Assyrian reliefs, such as Ashurbanipal's "Garden scene" (Fig. 5).¹⁶ The choice of banquet and hunting scenes for the figurative decorations of stone pyxides from Karkemish, Nineveh and Assur can be also considered a direct reference to the actual consumption of these containers in public and ritual occasions. In light of this evidence, it is possible to suggest that pyxides, rather than containing cosmetics as traditionally assumed, were possibly used to contain spices, oils, or other kinds of expensive foodstuff consumed during feasts and rituals.¹⁷

Footnotes:

1 More than one-hundred ivory pyxides are known between Mesopotamian and the Levant in the early Iron Age, with the largest group retrieved at Nimrud. For a complete catalogue of ivory pyxides, see Wicke 2008 and relevant bibliography.

2 See Winter 1983; Mazzoni 2001 and 2005.

3 An extensive discussion of the corpus of round stone pyxides is included in D'Orazio in press.

- 4 There is no evidence for stone pyxides from South Mesopotamia during the Iron Age. It is worth mentioning that at Uruk four pyxides made of wood were found in Neo-Babylonian levels (van Ess and Pedde 1992, 183-184, nos. 1333, 1336, 1337, 1338, pls. 106, 107a-f, 109; Wicke 2008, nos. Uruk.1-3,6); while at Neo-Elamite sites, such as at Susa, there is an abundant production of decorated pyxides made of frit (Wicke 2008, 157-163).
- 5 For a proposed reconstruction of the closing system of pyxides, see Wicke 2008, pls. 8-10.
- 6 In addition to these pieces from Nineveh and Assur, another carved pyxis, made of black stone, is mentioned from Nimrud – associated to several ivory fragments – allegedly found in room 8 of the Burnt Palace, but it remains unpublished (Searight, Reade and Finkel 2008, 77).
- 7 Barnett 1957, 45, note 11; Mazzoni 2001, 294-295, fig. 1; Reade 2005, 383, fig. 21e; Wicke 2008, 317, no. Nin.1, pl. 43a-b; D'Orazio in press, Cat. no. 43.
- 8 For a discussion of the Karkemish pieces see Winter 1983, Mazzoni 2001, 294; 2005, 44; D'Orazio in press, Cat. nos. 1-5.
- 9 Gries 2017, 98-99, no. 1203, pl. 196a; D'Orazio in press, Cat. no. 44.
- 10 Gries 2017, 99, no. 1198, pl. 196b; D'Orazio in press, Cat. no. 46.
- 11 Gries 2017, 99, no. 1204, pl. 196c; D'Orazio in press, Cat. no. 45.
- 12 Four principal centers of manufacture can be suggested for provenanced stone pyxides, according to style, typology and distribution of the pieces: Karkemish, Tell Afis, Tell Tayinat and Chatal Höyük (D'Orazio in press).
- 13 See, among others, Herrmann 2017.
- 14 Feldman 2014, 63-68.
- 15 For a discussion on their representations on Iron Age funerary monuments in North Syria see Bonatz 2000, nos. C46, C60, C39, C28, C15, C16 and 2016; for the Katumuwa Stele see also Struble and Herrmann 2009, 28, 114-115.
- 16 Wicke 2008, 151-153, pl. 19a-c; Feldman 2014, 67, fig. 7.5.
- 17 Feldman 2014, 68; Herrmann 2014, 114-115. However, the lack of chemical analysis on stone pyxides both from North Syrian and North Mesopotamia does not allow us to exclude a cosmetic function as well for stone pyxides.

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Fig. 1 - Nineveh, BD 3.57 (Mazzoni 2001, fig. 1).



Fig. 2 - Assur, Ass 17564a (Gries 2017, pl. 196a).



Fig. 3 - Assur, Ass 17380
(Gries 2017, pl. 196b).



Fig. 4 - Assur, Ass 17564b
(Gries 2017, pl. 196c).





Fig. 5 - So called "Garden scene" from the North Palace at Nineveh
(Feldman 2014, fig. 7.5).