

## A FORGERY OF AN EARLY CHRISTIAN PILGRIM AMPULLA FROM THE MAX-FREIHERR-VON-OPPENHEIM COLLECTION (COLOGNE, GERMANY)

Felix TEICHNER

*ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Die private Sammlung des bekannten deutschen Orientalisten Max Freiherr von Oppenheim umfaßt in erster Linie das Fundmaterial seiner eigenen Grabungen auf dem Tell Halaf (Syrien). Neben diesen Realien der vorgeschichtlichen, griechischen, römischen, byzantinischen und islamischen Epoche befanden sich im Besitz des Forschers aber auch eine Reihe außergewöhnlicher Fundstücke, die er offenbar am Anfang unseres Jahrhunderts auf seinen Reisen in der Levante erworben hatte. Eines dieser archäologischen Objekte soll an dieser Stelle kurz vorgestellt werden: eine kleine tönernerne Pilgerampulle. Die in einer Modellform hergestellte, birnenförmige Flasche zeigt neben zwei klassischen biblischen Szenen den eingestempelten Schriftzug "NAZARETH". Das ungewöhnlich gut erhaltene Fundstück gehört zu einer Serie von Fälschungen frühchristlicher Gegenstände, die Pilgern gegen Ende des 19. und zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts im Heiligen Land zum Kauf angeboten wurden.*

From 1989 onwards, loans from the Max-Freiherr-von-Oppenheim Foundation can be found in the collection of the Archaeological Institute of the University of Cologne (Fless 1997). The collection is essentially characterised by the exceedingly individualistic interests of Max Freiherr von Oppenheim (1860-1946). Based upon his general enthusiasm for the Orient, he increasingly concentrated on the exploration of Tell Halaf, a hill of ancient settlements in the north-east of modern Syria, after abandoning his diplomatic activities in Istanbul and Cairo (Caskel 1951; Moortgat-Correns 1989; Treue 1969). Accordingly, one part of the collection comprises finds from Tell Halaf, another various archaeological finds from the Middle East and particularly from Egypt. In 1943 many of the finds in a museum established by Max Freiherr von Oppenheim in Berlin were destroyed during a bombing raid. Today some of the pieces can be found in other museums in Berlin, London and Cologne.

A small, strikingly hard-fired and well-preserved bottle of fine washed light yellow clay (Munsell 10 YR 8/2) stands out among the Cologne finds (height 5.7 cm, diameter 3.4 cm) (F. Teichner, *in*: Fless 1997: 122-123). It has a drop-shaped body with a cylindrical neck, which contrasts with the body by a narrow encircling collar band ending in a slightly thickening brim. Both of the rectangular, curved, bar-shaped handles are joined to the body of the vessel, and consequently do not stand out from it. The ridges clearly indicate that the small bottle was made from a bipartite mould at the same time as the handles. Both the massiveness of the piece that has been hollowed out in the area of the mouth and its generally rough manufacturing, are striking.

The oval of the low relief picture impressed in the face of the bottle (Fig. 1) shows three full upper parts of human bodies flanked by two divided ones turned to the right in a simple trapezoid boat. At the bow of the small ship two rudders are stuck into the water which is animat-

ed by two fish with lenticular bodies and cleft fins also swimming towards the right. There is a rectangular writing cartouche with the raised letters "NAZARETH" below the image field at the rounded bottom of the bottle. On the opposite side of the vessel, a rough fillet of beads forming a pointed arch frames a relief picture worked out three-dimensionally. A Latin cross suspended in the centre is flanked by small pendant semi-arches on both sides which are probably to be understood as pendant chandeliers. Below this, several stacked cubes stand, partly tied up and symmetrically arranged.

Unfortunately there is no data about the origin of the find available today, so that only a general antiquarian analysis of the object can be carried out here: The *peregrinatio sancta* attested from the time of Constantine onwards was not only restricted to the Holy Land but before long also extended over the areas of activities of eminent saints in the whole Eastern Mediterranean region (Kötting 1950: 404-413; Andersson 1989: 137; Stopford 1994). The pilgrims' wish to be able to take home some of the special powers (magic, intercession and other effects) of the holy sites they visited was met by the concept that it was possible to transfer this power to other physical objects. The mass-produced, predominantly double-handled pilgrim ampullas, with richly decorated relief pictures, served to hold these mostly liquid relics (usually water or oil). Products from Asia Minor with a simple, oval-roundish shape and pictures of apostles are clearly to be distinguished from the rather flat Egyptian ampullas depicting the national saint Menas in the known inventory of finds (Wulff 1909: 263, pl. 68-69; Czrcic, Clair 1986: 120; Metzger 1981: 22).

The proposed massively worked out ampulla was inappropriate for the storage of relics (*eulogies*). The absence of perforated handles or eyes also prevented the customary wearing of the small vessel as an amulet or talisman.



Fig. 1. Christian pilgrim ampulla showing the maritime scene and a writing cartouche (avers) and a resurrection (?) scene (reverse) (Neg. No. 101887/17, 10188/5) (H. 0,57 m., max. Diam. 0,34 m.).

Finally the indication of origin “NAZARETH” applied in Latin characters casts doubt on the authenticity of the small vessel. Indeed very flat ampullas (“saint ampullas”) mostly made of metal have become known from the area of ancient Palestine but the inscriptions there are exclusively written in Greek (Engemann 1973: 5).

The remarkably good state of preservation, as well as the hard firing of the fragment in a very “non-antique” manner, indicate a post-antique production. In all probability, the small ampulla is one of the imitations manufactured by local antique dealers in numerous places of the Holy Land around the end of the last and the beginning of this century<sup>1</sup>. However, it appears hardly credible that the small bottle was acquired as an “original” in the antique trade by an expert like Max von Oppenheim. It is more likely that it was added to the collection as an “oddy”.

The maritime scenery depicted on the front of the bottle is borrowed from the Early Christian pictorial canon (*LCI*, IV, 62-67). The ship which is turned to the right aspires to reach paradise which is situated in the east, according to early Christian conceptions. The portrayal of the travellers equally adapts to the Christian pictorial programme as it was, for instance, compulsory for the miraculous fishing of St Peter (John 21, 1-14; Luke 5, 1-11; Mark 6, 45-51) or the voyage of Christ and his disciples on the Sea of Galilee (Luke 8, 22-25; Mark 4, 35-41) (Vikan 1991: pl. 8; Munch Thye 1995). Comparable pictures of voyages are obviously directly related to the worship of the seafarers’ saints, St Phocas and St Isidor (Metzger 1981: no. 118; Czrcic, Clair 1986: 122; Vikan 1982:

10-40; Kaufmann 1910: 168). The picture on the other side is more difficult to interpret, perhaps one of the resurrection scenes to be found on bottles from Asia Minor served as an original in this case. The semi-arch resting on two pillars usually represents the tomb of Lazarus there. The Latin cross is suspended above a rectangular altar, misunderstood as a bale of goods in our case (Metzger 1981: 48).

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1. According to information kindly supplied by Prof. Dan P. Barag (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) comparable specimen with Cyrillic inscriptions for Russian pilgrims were created right up until 1914. See for the Middle Ages: Kötzsche 1988: 14; Folda 1995: 294-297.