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A New Type of Chalcolithic Ritual Vessel and Some Implications for the Nahal Mishmar Hoard

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An unusual vessel dated typologically to the Chalcolithic period has the same type of bird figurines as those found on the copper "crowns" from Nahal Mishmar. This vessel is thus another instance in favor of interpreting the Nahal Mishmar hoard as a group associated with Chalcolithic ritual and religion. Some of the implications would speak for an interpretation that the copper objects are imitations of clay objects. The form of the vessel also supports the continuity of Chalcolithic tradition into the first part of the Early Bronze Age.

The vessel in fig. 1 constitutes an interesting addition to the large corpus of vessels and objects from the sphere of higher culture of the Chalcolithic period.¹

DESCRIPTION

The vessel can be described as a deep globular bowl. The diameters of the base and mouth are almost equal. Symmetry is also found in the short vertical rim, which is matched by a short vertical "ring" (in itself an uncommon feature) bridging the flat base.

The high basket-handle and spout are morphologically and functionally the most prominent features of the vessel. The handle is made of a round coil, but seems overly large and thick in proportion to the size of the body. It is somewhat angular rather than archlike, as if its shape is caused by the weight of the container, an additional indication that the prototype of this form of handle was the woven basket. The spout is located at the base of one end of the handle. It is made in one piece with it, as if stretched out of end of the coil. Despite the fact that the joint was smoothed, this patchwork is clearly noticeable. The short spout has a sieve, consisting of three holes (ca. 4 mm across) made in the wall of the vessel before the spout was added. Traces of the manufacturing of

the vessel on a tournette² are visible on the outer and the inner faces of the body. The outer face of the vessel does not show any special finish; it is light brown with a tinge of red both on the face and in the section of the break.

The most outstanding and thus far unique feature from the standpoint of cultural analysis is the figurines, a pair of birds perched elegantly on the rim of the vessel facing each other. They were fashioned by an expert hand, manifesting a certain measure of expressionistic reserve, since such details as eyes, beaks, wings, and feathers were not included. One can feel traces of the finger work, such as in the fine depression along the back of one of the birds. It would be inadequate to define these bird figurines as "decoration." Rather, this meaningful feature labels the vessel as a ceremonial-ritual one, relating it to a rich category of such vessels in this period.

COMMENTS ON FORM OF THE VESSEL

The Chalcolithic corpus of pottery forms thus far has no examples of this type; the closest parallels are the three deep basket-handled bowls made of copper from the Nahal Mishmar hoard (Bar-Adon 1980: 109, nos. 159–61), one of which is drawn in fig. 2:1. All three are "deprived" of the sieve-spout (and the bird figurines). On the other

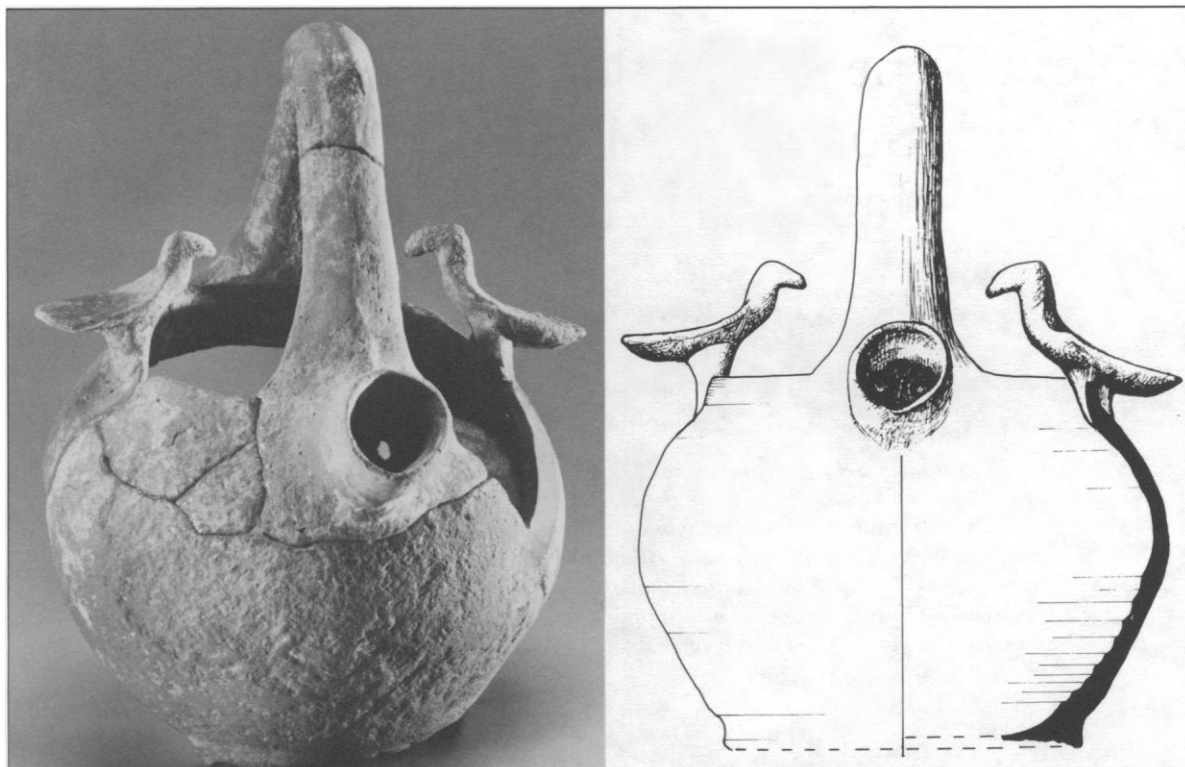


Fig. 1: A and B. Photo and drawing of basket-handled bowl with bird figurines.

hand, the corpus of EB I pottery forms includes the basket-handled spouted deep bowl as one of its typical components, with a rich series of variations. In fig. 2, representatives of the entire family of this type are assembled, starting with the copper specimen (fig. 2:1), through the new type discussed here (fig. 2:2), developing into the rich series of the EB I period, some of which are reproduced (fig. 2:3–6). The variations include painted or plain, single or double handle; perhaps even the spouted but handleless bowl from Tell en-Naṣbeh (McCown 1947: pl. 26, from Silo 315:1849; IDAM 32.2549) is to be assigned to this family. Figure 2:7, from the cemetery assemblage of the Énéolithique récent of Byblos (Dunand 1973: fig. 160:21901), should be considered a variation of the same type, in spite of some differences in the shape of the body and the rim, and the absence of a spout. A close parallel to this Byblian variant is one of the Azor specimens (fig. 2:6). Peculiar to the Byblian style at the very beginning of EB I is the incised decoration, embellishing also fig. 2:7. Figure 2:8 is a copper vessel, with spout and basket-handle, originating in Tomb 3471 at Saqqara, dated by the excavator to the time of Djer of the First Dynasty (Emery 1949: 20, fig. 14, pl. A). The same type appears earlier on the Narmer Palette (Petrie 1953: pl. J), where the

identical vessel is carried by a person. The similarity of this copper type to the EB I specimens (fig. 2:3–5) is clear. However, I shall refrain from discussing the problem of the priority of one material over the other.

This new type, therefore, can quite safely be considered a welcome link between the previously known variations of its family, thus adding another bit of corroboration for the thesis of the cultural continuity from the Chalcolithic to the EB I period (Amiran 1985).

COMMENTS ON THE BIRD FIGURINES

The most beautiful and intriguing feature of this new vessel is certainly the birds, and mainly their striking similarity to those on “Crown” No. 7 in the Naḥal Mishmar hoard (Bar-Adon 1980: 24),³ though indeed the latter are not facing but following each other on the brim of the “crown,” and they are embellished with incisions to mark the feathers.

Comparison of the new vessel with the Naḥal Mishmar “crown” invites, and perhaps even dictates, new considerations and a new approach to some of the important problems of this magnificent find, metallurgically of high technological sophistication.⁴ The problems dealt with here concern

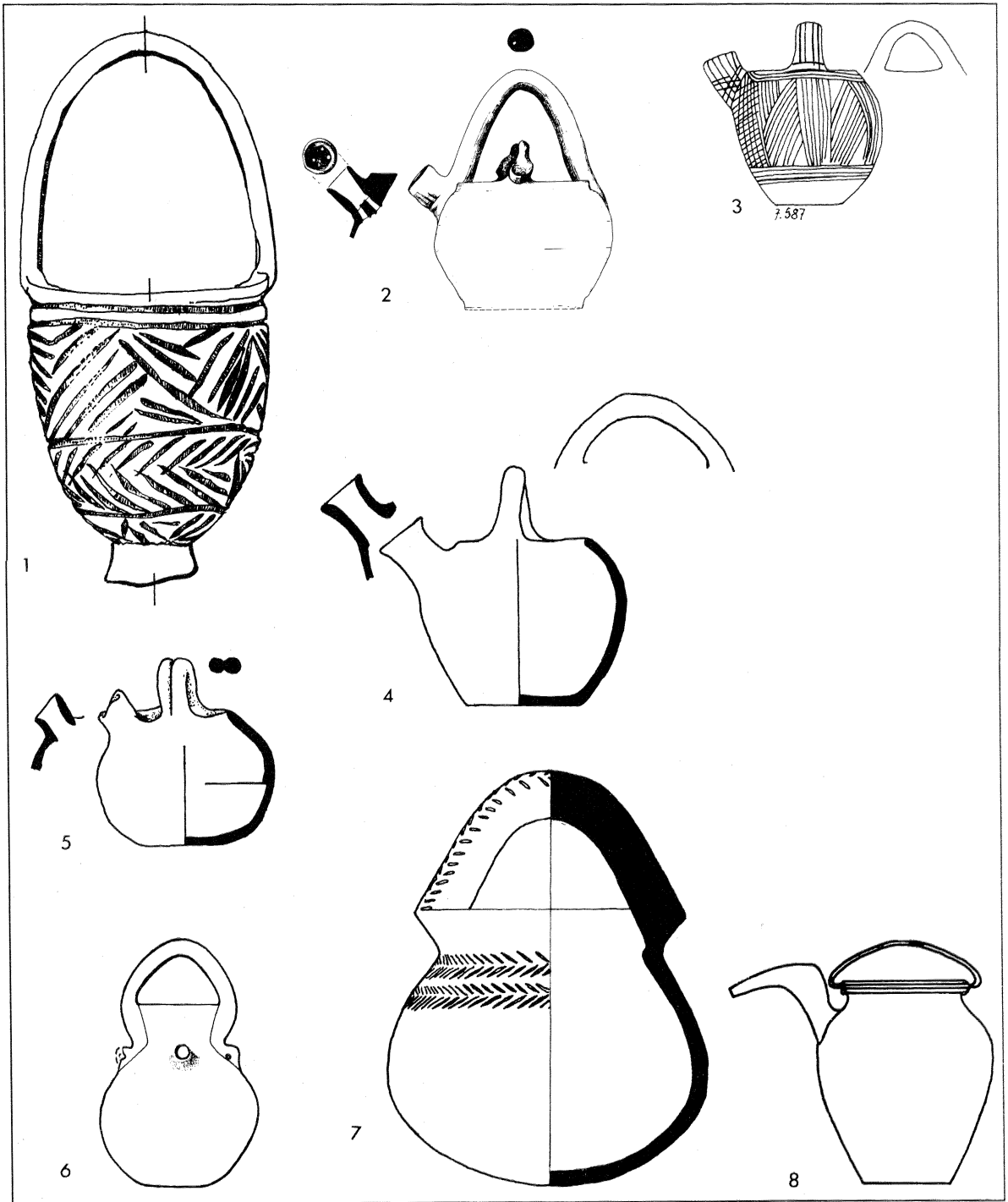


Fig. 2. Variations among basket-handled vessels from the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze I periods. (1: Bar-Adon 1980: 109, no. 159; 2: the new vessel; 3: Marquet-Krause 1949: pl. 67; 4: Sussman and Ben-Arieh 1966: 38, fig. 9:26; 5: Ben-Tor 1975: 41, fig. 10:5; 6: Ben-Tor 1975: 37, fig. 8:14; 7: Dunand 1973: fig. 160: 21901; 8: Emery 1949, Tomb 3471).

cultural interpretations and connotations of cardinal importance, such as: a) the origin of the copper hoard and the milieu out of which it

emerged and developed; b) the use and function of the vessels and objects; and c) how the new bird vessel contributes another meaningful item to this

hoard, the totality of which is imbued with deeply imprinted ideas and symbols the understanding of which is every scholar's goal. In other words, the problems discussed here are an illustration of Renfrew's "archaeology of the mind."

Concerning a), the fact that the same figurative-representational elements are used in both materials, copper and clay, suggests that these vessels and objects were widely used by the Chalcolithic population. We could infer further that ideas and customs override and bridge diversities of technical differences and artisanship. It seems safe to assume that the shape of the vessel (basket-handled bowl) and the shape of the birds originate in the material of clay, and that the copper creations are but imitations of the more ubiquitous, popular, and less expensive vessels. Finger-molding of the birds seems more natural in clay than in copper. Indeed, sophisticated casting methods were essential to "fashion" the copper birds, ibexes, and other intricate forms. It seems, therefore, that the basket-handled copper specimens, as well as the copper birds, have their prototypes in the clay repertory of the period, and not vice versa. This leads us to state that the origin of the material (=arsenic copper) and the origin of the ideas embodied in the hoard are not necessarily interdependent. Ideas may be part and parcel of the local culture and tradition,

while the material for such a hoard may have been imported and used by local artists and artisans for a very specific purpose. Even before the discovery of this new pottery vessel, the problem of antecedents or prototypes of the metal birds should have been apparent, just as the form of the metal birds had to evoke some suspicion of prototypes in clay.

As for b), both basket-handle and spout show that the function of such a vessel was probably ritual libation. The sieve suggests that the liquid was probably beer, or anything else containing a chaff-like ingredient. And it is important to note that ritual libation is only one act in the intricate cultural network of an ancient society.

Regarding c), the symbolic meaning of bird figurines perching on the rim of the libation vessel or on the brim of the "crown" from Nahal Mishmar might best be understood as items in the cult of a female deity. This would accord nicely with the possible, or even probable, connection of the Nahal Mishmar hoard with the temple at En-Gedi, as Ussishkin (1980) has argued.

Thus the wealth of information embodied in the Nahal Mishmar hoard, along with other Chalcolithic finds, provides an insight into the religious life of that culture, fragmentary though that might be.

NOTES

¹The form under discussion was discovered, along with a few common vessels, in a wadi in the Negev. It is now in a private collection.

²On the technology of pottery making in the Chalcolithic period see Perrot and Ladiray (1980: 53).

³In a paper to be published in the volume dedicated to Olga Tufnell ("A Suggestion to See in the Copper

"Crowns" of the Judean Desert Treasure Drums of Standlike Altars"), I attempt a restoration of these ten crowns in the way expressed in the title.

⁴The "crown" was described and analyzed by Bar-Adon and R. Rotaszkin, K. Bar-Avi, and C. A. Key in Bar-Adon (1980).

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