TWO ANCIENT SILVER VESSELS

By CHARLES K. WILKINSON
Curator of Near Eastern Archaeology

During the ages man has invented and used many forms of vessels to drink out of and many others to fill them with. Some have been simple, some elaborate, some practical, and others more for show than for use. Of these numerous forms one that has proved to be extremely popular at certain periods ends in an animal's head. Its use was widespread and was not peculiar to any one race or area, and the animal elected to fill the decorative role has not always been the same. Sometimes the head was human, but the heads of horses, lions, bulls, deer, rams, and camels were also used, to say nothing of mythological creatures. During the past few years two striking vessels of this type have been added to the collections of antiquities of western Asia in the United States: one now in the University Museum in Philadelphia and the other in the Metropolitan Museum. Both are of silver and are in the form of rams' heads. They came from Persian Kurdistan in the northwest of Persia, a region that was once inhabited by the Minni, as the people were called by Jeremiah, who mentions them in the invocation against Babylon. "Set ye up a standard in the land, blow the trumpet among the nations, prepare the nations against her, call together against her the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz . . . . Prepare against her the nations with the kings of the Medes, the captains thereof, and all the rulers thereof, and all the land of his dominion."

The land of the Minni, or Manneans, was very awkwardly placed politically; it had on its borders Assyria and Urartu (Armenia), two very powerful neighbors antagonistic to each other, both of whom used it as a puppet kingdom. Furthermore, the Medes were to the East, a nation that eventually swallowed it up, and the Ashchenaz (Scythians), who had swept over so much of western Asia, did not leave it untouched. These influences are quite clearly reflected in the art of the country, although they have only been recognized during the past decade.

Interest was concentrated on Mannean art through the discovery in 1947 of a treasure of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. at Zawiyeh, a small village identified by André Godard as Zibia, one of the three chief cities of the Mannean kingdom mentioned in the Assyrian annals. Here is Sargon, the king of Assyria, speaking of them in the sixth year of his reign, 715 B.C., when the Mannean puppet king had transferred his attentions to Rusa, the Armenian king (the translation is Luckenbill's): "Ullusunu, the Mannean, saw the approach of my march, left his city, and in terror hid himself in the secret fastness of the precipitous mountains. Izirtu, his royal city, Izibia, Armid, his strong fortresses, I captured and burned with fire." Assurbanipal treated them just as roughly some years later, around 650 B.C.: "The people inhabiting those cities I shut up and made their cramped lives miserable. That district I conquered, I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire. I laid it waste and poured out misery upon it." Godard suggests that Izirtu is a village named Kaplantu, only three miles away from Zawiyeh, where antiquities similar to the Zawiyeh treasure have been discovered during the past few years. That the two silver vessels came from the area of these villages is practically certain.

As the Manneans of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. were so much under the influence of the people who dominated them it would be well to know the types of vessels used by the Assyrians, especially as the use of animal-headed vessels did not originate in Persia. The sculptured reliefs from the palaces of Khorsabad and Nineveh show that the Assyrians used animal-headed vessels as drinking cups and buckets, some with movable handles. Similar buckets are also shown being brought as tribute by foreigners, whose garments indicate that they came from cold, hilly regions. One such vessel appears in the chased decoration on the rim of the Assyrian bronze receptacle that contained part of
Silver rhyton with ram’s head, in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Height 9½ inches. BELOW Detail of the rhyton shown opposite. Both rhyta were made in the country of the Manneans, VII century B.C.
Silver rhyton with ram’s head, in the Metropolitan Museum. Height 14¼ inches. Dick Fund, 1955
the Zawiyeh treasure. The animal chosen by Assyrian artists on vessels represented in reliefs seems to have been the lion, probably the favored form in actual practice, though none has yet been found in Assyria itself. The lion-headed vessels have a distinctive shape. The cups were held by the bottom, as shown in one of the reliefs above. When not in use the cups were turned upside down. Some of the examples of buckets in the Khorsabad reliefs have two lugs for the attachment of a handle of rope or a strand of metal. In this they differ from the red-figured Greek rhyta, which had curved earthenware handles on the side; but the shapes are much the same, and it is inconceivable that the Greeks did not derive the form from Assyria.

We do, however, know more than we are told by these sculptured and graven records, which are so informative and at the same time so incomplete in their information. The Assyrians

**Right:** A procession of foreigners bearing tribute, including an animal-headed bucket. Drawing of part of the rim of an Assyrian bronze coffin found at Zawiyeh.
to the Assyrian than those from Sencherli. Not only is there a greater similarity in the shape of the upper part but they have the same little lugs for suspension. It is interesting to note that these lugs are decorated with a trefoil that constantly appears in Assyrian ornament, though here the central part is exaggerated. Such a trefoil may be seen on the rung of the chair in one of the reliefs shown opposite.

The two silver rhyta, though ending in rams’ heads like these earthenware rhyta, have many differences from them, and from each other. If we examine them very closely we may see more than what is like and what is unlike. We may perhaps gain some insight into the craftsmen’s intentions and perceive the way they combined natural with ornamental forms.

The Metropolitan’s vessel is the larger of the two. Its upper part is more cylindrical, while the Philadelphia rhyton flares out to the rim, which is turned over in a simple fold and is not over a wire. In both there is a perfectly clear dividing line between the upper part and the head of the ram. Though this line suggests the separate manufacture of the parts, with one being “drawn on” the other, this was not done; each vessel was made from just one piece of flat silver. In both vessels the space between the rim and the ram’s head has been decorated with a series of horizontal ridges and grooves, an effect more easily achieved in wheel-made earthenware than by hammering metal. Despite the greater technical difficulties in working with metal any such effort is amply repaid because the rippling enhances the richness of the polished metal. For some reason radial or vertical fluting of metal seems the earlier form and horizontal fluting a later innovation that became characteristic of much Achaemenian metalwork in the sixth to the fourth centuries.

In the earthenware rhyta from Zawiyeh the hair of the rams is indicated by little circular projections, easily made by indenting the mold with a rounded object, a method also used by the later Greek potters who made the red-figured rhyta. But in the silver rhyta a technique more suitable to metalworking was employed. An annular punch was used on the exterior to produce circular rings, but no attempt was made to emboss them. The horns of the animals are treated differently in the two vessels, but on neither of them are they as naturalistic as those on the Zawiyeh or Greek earthenware rhyta, though it must be remembered that they represent different types of rams. In the silver vessels the horns are coiled spirally, but not in quite the same way. Those on the Philadelphia rhyton protrude much more boldly, giving a slight resemblance to the horns of a Dorset ram. The impression, however, is not naturalistic. The spiral horns call to mind the mysterious stone rams found to the north of Kurdistan, in Azerbaijan cemeteries in north-west Persia and Armenia. In these figures the horns are of great importance as only by them can the beasts be identified. The dates suggested for these stone animals vary by many centuries—from Assyrian times to the sixteenth
In the group of ram-headed rhyta from Zawiyeh the relationship of horn and ear varies considerably. In some, like the later ones from Greece, the ear projects upwards and backwards with the horn simply curling round. But in another it makes a little extrusion downwards from behind the horn, a feature of some of the stone beasts of Azerbaijan. In the Philadelphia rhyton there are two smooth forms extending beneath the horns on the underside of the head. These are hard to explain; it would be difficult to believe that they are misplaced ears, even though ancient artists thought nothing of turning natural features into conventional designs, seemingly unrelated. They appear to be meaningless decorative additions. If this be the case, then neither head is furnished with visible ears, a condition that can be seen on Dorset rams, whose horns are so massive that the ears can be almost unnoticed.

The designers of the rhyta were, however, perfectly capable of misplacing features purposely. For example, in both heads the eyebrows are emphasized in a most unnatural way, such as is common in many animal heads when portrayed by Assyrian artists; but in the Metropolitan rhyton these eyebrows, if we look at the vessel when it is in a horizontal position, have slipped down, as it were, to a position behind the eyes rather than above them. This peculiarity is less noticeable when the vessel is upright. In fact, when it is in this position many people do not observe anything unusual about it at all, although they may perceive that one eye is higher than the other. The difference in grace when the rhyton is upright and not horizontal suggests that it was designed with this in mind, which is no surprising thing as this was the way it was used. In this position the ringed body of the vessel grows up most gracefully from between the horns.

The eyes themselves are circular and are more prominent in the Metropolitan’s example; those in the Philadelphia rhyton, being sunk, may have been inlaid with another material. As was often the custom in Near Eastern art from very early times the tear ducts are strongly accented. The combination of a circular eye and accentuated tear duct is particularly common in Scythian art of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. preserved in Siberia. It is indeed one of the indicative features of this style, which reduced the more complex forms of nature to simpler ones and then combined them into more subtle patterns.

In many instances, in spite of the fact that certain conventions in ancient art are no longer used, we find that some of them can be readily accepted, so readily, in fact, that we do not even
notice them. The treatment of the muzzle of the large ram is obviously conventional and brutal, while that of the other seems quite realistic until we examine it closely. It will then be seen that the muzzle has been treated in a thoroughly decorative way and that it merges into the general conception of the head. It is this clever use of convention and stylization in the representation of living things that forms much of the fascination of ancient Near Eastern art, and, as these two rhyta demonstrate very clearly, there is variety even when time, place, and subject are the same.

The author wishes to thank Dr. Froelich Rainey, Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, for his kindness in granting permission to include the Philadelphia rhyton in this article.

*The Philadelphia rhyton*