

An Ossuary and an Ash Urn in the Ancient World



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Life and death is a dichotomy that has been central to the lives of humans for thousands of years. Some humans spend their whole lives preparing themselves for the afterlife and what it will bring to them. It is mutually important to respect those who have passed before them and proper burial is one of the most central aspects of reverence for the deceased. Different cultures have their own ways of laying the dead to rest, yet many of the rituals have similarities between each other. One example of two cultures that possess different yet comparable death rituals are the Etruscans in Italy and the Jews of the Second Temple Period in Israel. The Etruscans used urns to hold the ashes of their loved ones while the Jews used ossuaries to hold the bones. Both cultures use a container to physically hold the remains of the deceased, yet they have differences in the culture and history behind their burial rituals.

The ancient Etruscans lived in western central Italy, where modern day Tuscany is located. They were a well-educated and civilized culture that flourished between 900-396 BC until Rome began to dominate the region. Rich in minerals such as iron, tin, and copper, many neighboring civilizations were attracted to the Etruscans. Their economy was heavily reliant on trade especially with the Greeks. This trade that lasted centuries led to the spread of ideas and cultures between the two civilizations. The most popular was the spread of mythology and Greek religion to the Etruscans who contrived their own gods and goddesses from the stories of the Greeks and represented them on objects such as mirrors, ash urns, and more (Rahmani Etruscans 29). In 396 BC, Rome sieged the Etruscan city of Veio and established their dominance as the new power in the region. This heightened feelings of fear in the Etruscans and lead to turmoil and war between the two competing powers. In turn, this caused the art of the Etruscans to become more focused on one's mortality and the underworld. This is reflected in a change in the style of art such as on the ash urn in the Kelsey Museum. Similar to the change of power

experienced by the Etruscans, the land of Roman Palestine also had a change in leadership from the Maccabean to the Romans. With the arrival of the Romans came an incredibly efficient administration and a rise in the public standard of living. The Romans were renowned for having a civilization that brought envy to those who were not a part of it. They had public bathhouses which were unique for their ability to bring large amounts of hot water used for bathing, aqueducts to transport the water from the source to the city, and games and entertainment for the citizens. Following the leadership style of the great Persian ruler Cyrus, they believed that the more people wanted to belong to their empire, the more stable it would become. One aspect of pleasing the people of Roman Palestine was to appoint a leader that would be familiar to them. The roman senate chose Harold who came from a wealthy Edomite family. Harold became the King of the Jews in 37BCE. He was one of the greatest builders of infrastructure in the history of this region. He built the Caesarea Martima which was a port that contained a Greek-Roman theater which demonstrates the influence of the Romans on the region. He also built the temple mount by creating a huge, flat platform on the slope of the hills of Central Jerusalem to house the temple. During his reign, the popularity of the ossuary rose greatly. An ossuary is a box where the bones of a deceased person are placed. Beginning in 20 BCE, ossuaries were introduced to Jerusalem. They remained widely used and manufactured until the middle of the third century. The Romans were still in power at this time and would remain so until the rise of the Arab Muslims in 640 CE.

The ossuary in the Kelsey Museum of Archeology is a fairly common design. It measures at 27 centimeters in width by 60 centimeters in length by 30.5 centimeters in height. The walls, which are made of a soft-limestone, are 2.5 centimeters thick. It is a tan or cream color and appears to be once uniform, but throughout time, the wear from moving the heavy box and from

the natural elements has caused it to become discolored. The edges are the lightest, especially the bottom corners of the ossuary. This is, presumably, from sliding the box across a surface because the box was very heavy to pick up. The ossuary has many small cracks on it with a large one that runs along the length of the box near the bottom. It is possible that the box had been broken in the past and then repaired. The material of the box is soft limestone which is a popular medium for ossuaries to be made of. Soft limestone does not require the highest level of training for the artisan who has to carve the rock. It took practice to master the tools and techniques necessary to create certain patterns or designs in the limestone. Hard limestone requires the most amount of training and is the most difficult to manipulate the material, but it is a more elegant and rich material than clay would be. The engravings were made using a method known as chip carving. This method is parallel to the material of which the ossuary was made: chip carving is a less difficult method that requires less training than hard limestone carving, but it is a more laudable method than incision. These materials and methods will be explained in greater detail further on in the essay. The ossuary from the Kelsey Museum would have been made in an artisan's workshop in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the most ossuaries have been found with Jericho being the second location. There are no feet on the ossuary nor is there an inner ledge or ridge to hold a lid. This indicates that the Kelsey ossuary most likely had a flat lid because a vaulted lid or a gabled one would need some kind of depression cut into the sides of the ossuary for handling (Rahmani page 5). It is necessary for an ossuary to have a lid because it prevents the opening of the ossuary, meaning that the one in the museum is missing its lid. Overall, the ossuary in the Kelsey is a standard ossuary that was made for neither the upper-class nor for the lower class and was made with common materials and designs.

The Etruscan ash urn contains more intricate details than the ossuary does. It is made of clay which was the main material for the burial piece. Etruscans “cared very much about equipping their dead with everything necessary for the afterlife” (Taylor) and therefore, would create elaborate urns that were full of detail and art. Through archeological excavations of these urns, historians learn the most about the ancient culture from the burial of their people. For example, in the early phase of their civilization, the deceased would be cremated and placed in another home for the afterlife made by unrefined clay known as impasto (Taylor). From the designs of the urn, historians know what a typical Etruscan house would look like (Taylor). This house design was common in the Iron Age of Etruria and would evolve during the Orientalizing period of 750 to 575 BCE. During this period, the tombs became more elaborate and detailed in their design. The Etruscans received cultural influences from their increased trade throughout the Mediterranean which is representative in the ash urn in the Kelsey Museum which depicts a scene from the Greek tragedy *Antigone*. The scene illustrates a battle between Oedipus’ sons: Eteocles and Polynikes fighting for the right to be king of Thebes. Beside them, there is the female demon Vanth watching and waiting to lead the deceased into the underworld. This scene is symbolic of the Greek influence on the Etruscans. These were figures in a Greek tragedy which shows the connection between Greek culture and its representation in Etruscan life. Battle scenes were often common as well during the Hellenistic period of Etruria. This is because at the time, the Romans were gaining power and began to fight battles against the Etruscans to establish their dominance as the new powerful civilization in Italy. The ash urn of the Kelsey, like many urns at the time, was made using a mold. The mold was carved in relief which means that the artist used techniques to carve out pieces of the clay before the urn was fired to create an illusion that the sculpted material has been raised from the background plane. There is a partial

inscription on the lid of the urn beside the sculpture that reads “Vel [...] Vel [...].” Archeologists believe that this is to denote the name of the deceased contained in the urn, however, they are not able to tell if the deceased is female or male because Vel or Velthur is masculine while Velia is feminine. Due to the fact that the inscription is incomplete, there is no way to be positive if it is referencing the masculine or feminine version of the word. The urn measures approximately 38 centimeters in length by 27 centimeters in depth by 20 centimeters in height with an additional 15 centimeters in height from the lid. The lid depicts a man wearing a robe reclining on something, perhaps a bed. Reclining figures like this were common on ash urns as many were designed in a similar fashion. The ash urn in the Kelsey museum shows the influence of Greek culture on the Etruscans as well as provides a basic model for the typical funerary urn.

With the arrival of the new King of the Jews, Herod, came the rise of artisans and their workshops. This prompted the production and the popularity of ossuaries made in Jerusalem. There were three common materials for ossuaries to be made of; stone, clay, and occasionally wood. Stone consisted of both hard limestone and soft limestone. The most popular material was soft limestone as it was an abundant resource in the Jerusalem area. In quarries, archeologists found cavities in the stone that were the similar size and shape of ossuaries indicating that they were prepared and formed in the quarries and later sent to the artisan’s workshops for the finishing process and ornamentation (Rahmani page 10). Hard limestone was a very prestigious material to work with because it required the artisan to have a great deal of experience and skill to work with such a physically hard material. These ossuaries were often the most expensive because they were made by skilled masons (Rahmani page 10). Clay ossuaries were occasionally made and would appear finished in a reddish-brown color with a straw temper (Rahmani page 1). These were rarely produced because the finished product was often of poor quality. They were

crudely made with signs of black charring from the firing process. All were locally manufactured and fired, which indicates that they may have been produced for the lower class because they were not able or could not afford to travel to Jerusalem and pay for a stone ossuary from there. The main reason for the unpopularity of clay ossuaries was most likely from the quality of the finished piece. An ossuary was a way for the living to remember and pay respects to the dead. It was therefore crucial to the families to have an ossuary that was well crafted. A more refined ossuary would be the preferable way to honor the dead in comparison to one that was charred, brittle and cheaply made. The rarest material for ossuaries was wood. This is because wood is a perishable material which is not a suitable way to house a deceased family member's bones for generations. Some were made, however, and survived for thousands of years in the Dead Sea region although there is evidence that none were made prior to the Byzantine period that began around 324 CE. The ones that were found lacked either ornamentation or were decorated simply. The number of diverse materials for ossuaries contrast sharply with the single material used for ash urns in Etruria. Both civilizations used clay for some of the pieces. The Etruscans would often use paint and gesso, a type of white primer, to cover their ash urns. This could also cover the charred marks left by the firing process. Different materials required different levels of training for the artisan creating the ossuary with the most training being for hard limestone ossuaries and the least training for the clay ones, with soft limestone being in between and the most common material.

The size of the ossuary depended on the length of the limb bones of the corpse and the width and height were determined by the size of the pelvis and the skull, as well as how many bones were needed for burial. The average dimensions of "an adult's ossuary was 42-65 cm long, 23-28 cm wide and 30-39 cm high" (Rahmani page 6). By these numbers, it is clear that the

Kelsey Museum's ossuary belonged to a large adult as the measurements of the box are in the maximum range of the average sizes. There are examples of larger ossuaries that were designed to hold two people, such as a husband and wife or a mother and her child. The size of the box decreases for teenagers, and further decreases for children and, in some cases, are proportioned for infants, although infants rarely received an ossuary.

The artisans of the late second temple period were able to “demonstrate their skills through tomb facades, architectural remains, and sarcophagi” (Rahmani page 7) made from hard limestone. The stone, in addition with the sarcophagi, was relatively rare due to the level of skill required for the manufacture of these objects as well as the high cost to do so. There were many different techniques that the artisans knew how to do. One example is the hard limestone carvings from the sarcophagi and required the highest level of skill. The next most prestigious method for etching was chip carving. Soft limestone was the most suitable for this method as is reflected in the ossuary from the Kelsey Museum which is a representation of the chip carving method. There are four basic techniques for chip carving. The first is the furrow cut where two cuts descend at an angle to a central groove. Next is the almond cut where two curved cuts meet at a pointed junction, after that is the triangular cut formed by a triangle with wedge-shape chips made out to the center. Finally is the zigzag cut where the triangular or arched chips are carved in alternating directions on a straight or curved line (Rahmani page 7). The rosettes in the Kelsey ossuary are made using the furrow cut while the plant in the middle is made using the almond cut. The artist would first start the process by using a *regula* or a ruler which consisted of charcoal to sketch the design on the already formed box. He could also use a *circinus* or a compass to measure out circles and curves. For the Kelsey ossuary, both of these tools would have probably been used, especially to shape the rosettes. The artist for this ossuary also could

have used a burin which is used to incise straight lines such as the double lines along the top of the box and the petal decorations in the corners. To carve the furrow and almond cuts, he used a chisel or a carving knife and a *caelum* which is a veining tool with a rounded edge. The final type of method used to create an etching was incision. This required the least amount of skill and therefore would produce the least amount of profit. The artwork created using the incision technique was simpler and had unsophisticated taste. The term *horror vacui* means ‘fear of the empty space’ and this is reflected in the designs on the ossuaries. For example, zigzags were incised in small areas to fill space, such as the inside of the petals of rosettes (Rahmani page 8). The zigzags and other incisions were poorly made because they were often done freehand and without any prior charcoal markings. After incisions or chip carving was finished, the artisan would apply a yellow or red, and occasionally blue, wash over the surface of the ossuary. It helped to emphasize the ornamentation by providing contrast in the colors (Rahmani page 8). The Kelsey Museum ossuary appears to be once painted in red and yellow, but has faded over the years. Similarly, the Etruscan ash urns would often be painted. Archeologists theorize that this may be to help hide the blemishes of the stone and make the urn appear to be made of a wealthier material. All of the ossuaries used in Jerusalem and the neighboring regions were all produced locally. This helped the economy as well as provide jobs for the people who worked in the quarries and the artisan shops who often employed many apprentices to work on the simpler designed ossuaries. The craftsmen, who were employed by the stone industry, had a knowledge of geometry and were skilled with carving tools (Rahmani page 7). They would design each ossuary after common patterns of metopes, rosettes, and other motifs from tomb facades. The Etruscans would also have common designs on their urns. Most common were scenes of battle or religious stories. The ash urn from the Kelsey Museum is an example of one scene that depicts a

battle inspired by a Greek story. While the stories on the sides of the urn may have been different, the portrayal of the characters were often very similar resulting in finished products that were akin in design. In addition Jewish artists would combine these designs of rosettes and motifs with symbols of trees and plants that grew near the tomb (Rahmani page 7). This indicates that the Kelsey ossuary laid in a tomb that was near grass. The salary of the workers ranged from one obol to four dinars, with the highest salary being three sheqels. An obol had very low monetary value and could support one person's daily living if his employer fed him during work hours. Overall, this shows that the craftsmen and apprentices did not receive much money for their work.

While many ossuaries have similarities in their ornamental motifs such as their decorative frames and rosettes, the combinations of the carvings on the façade of the box were different. Most of the time, only the long side of the ossuary was carved. This side usually contained two metopes, some contained more with the maximum number being five. A metope is the empty space between two triglyphs in Doric architecture. A triglyph is sort of box that contains three miniature columns and is used as decoration along the top of a building. In between the sets of columns would be empty space which is known as a metope. This metope often contained small designs or characters. The metope in the ossuaries were often filled with a rosette while the triglyph would be either bare or filled with a separate motif which could be a plant or tree. Artisans had many diverse ways to display their creativity as there were many different motifs and designs for them to use or create. Ornamented ossuaries contain rosettes which have been interpreted as “the eyes of the deceased, as a wheel symbolizing reincarnation, and... as an Ishtar star” (Rahmani page 25). The six-petal rosette, which is the pattern on the Kelsey Museums ossuary, was the most popular design. It was created by sketching a circle and then using a

compass to draw overlapping semi-circles until all of the petals were created. Rosettes could be simplified to having only three petals or become more complex by creating a 24 petal pattern. The more complex and the more petals that were created, the more skilled the artisan was. Similarly, the more braches that were represented in a plant on an ossuary, the more skill was required. Plants required careful and patient work by the artist who would use a ruler and a compass to carefully plan out his carving. The ossuary in the Kelsey Museum is an excellent example of a work done by a talented artist because of the tightly packed foliage that runs vertically between the two rosettes. It was not done freehand and required the artist to use his mastery of the carving tool to create the precise and repetitive depth that is uniform throughout the design. Encompassing the whole design would be some type of a frame. These frames could contain many different styles of design ranging from interlaced semi-circles to geometric patterns to zigzags. These patterns were often times easy to execute and were laid out in a double row form across the top, bottom, sides and in the middle of the metope. The corners of the ossuary would contain an angle ornament with an ivy leaf or a lily coming from the inner corner. The ivy could represent females while the lily represented the coming of the dead to the afterlife. Many of the designs on the ossuary were symbolic of the journey of the deceased from the world of the living with the rosettes meaning the movement of the soul into reincarnation while the lilies represent the journey to the underworld and the nature etches resembled the area around which the ossuary lay. These are all ways for the family to remember the dead and help their loved one through the journey into the afterlife. In contrast, the ash urn was not designed for the people paying reverence to the dead to be reminded of their life, but rather it was a cultural or religious scene. Creating this scene did not require the same level of skill as it did for an artist to carve a plant into the soft limestone, for example, because the design was created while the clay

was still soft, prior to the firing process. The sculptor was able to use his tools to carve out sections of clay and mold the remaining clay as he needed. He could also fix any mistake he made by putting more clay on top whereas a mistake in the soft limestone could not be hidden by an addition of more limestone on top of it. The ornamentation of the ossuary was a way for the artist to display his creativity as well as for the family to remember their loved one.

There is no certainty about where ossuaries were purchased nor by who or how the purchaser chose the criteria for the design (Rahmani page 10). It is known that plain ossuaries were cheaper than ones that were ornamented. Comparatively, ossuaries that were incised were also less expensive than those that were chip carved. The more precise and complex the ornamentation of the ossuary, the more expensive it was. Hard limestone ossuaries were bought by the upper class and were the most expensive to purchase, as were intricately designed ones. However, a simple or plain ossuary did not necessarily mean that it would be purchased by the poor as many ossuaries found in the Tomb of the Kings, a burial place owned by a royal house, were of plain design (Rahmani page 11). A plain ossuary with a sliding lid would have cost approximately one *drachma* and four *obols*. This price was “well within the range of the average minimal daily wage” (Rahmani page 10). This means that the average person could afford to bury their loved ones and not have to use a mass grave like the poor would in Rome and in Etruria. The lower class Etruscans, in comparison to the Jews, most likely could also afford an ash urn due to the fact that their designs were mass produced in molds (Haynes page 341). The lack of need for creative design for each individual ash urn reduces the need for more artisans, which will lower the cost of the design process. Similar to the religious and cultural influences on the designs of the ash urns, these were also considered in the decision in how elaborate the design of the ossuary would be. Elaborate expenditures of money to either appease the dead or

alleviate the feelings of guilt of the mourner were not approved of during the first and second centuries CE (Rahmani page 11).

Jewish ossuaries were an essential part of the burial process. During the reign of Herod in the Roman period, artisans were encouraged to display their creativity and to own workshops where they would decorate the stone boxes they received from the stone quarries around Jerusalem. They could receive either hard or soft limestone from the quarries or occasionally a clay box to be ornamented. These materials required different levels of skill in the worker to manipulate the medium using tools such as a compass, a ruler, and different carving knives into ornamented patterns. These patterns were symbolic of the journey to the afterlife which was represented in the rosettes and the lilies and decorated by frames and plants. The cost of the finished product depended on what the ossuary was made of and on how complicated the design was. It is clear though that all people could afford to buy some sort of ossuary, whether it was plain or detailed, made of soft or hard limestone, and whether it was small or large. Ossuaries were essential aspects for reverence of the deceased. Those who wanted to pray for the dead or pay respects, could visit the ossuary in the family tomb or burial location and pray directly to their loved one. The Etruscans also found a way to remember their dead. They used ash urns in contrast to house the incinerated remains of their family. These urns were made using clay that was modeled after a cultural or religious scene that often had foreign influence, especially from the Greeks. Both cultures had different ways to pay respect to the dead, yet to each burial container was an elaborate display of craftsmanship, artistry, and culture that has inspired many in the years since their use.

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