CHAPTER 19

A Roman Imperial Wine Vessel?

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During the 1926 excavations a large marble vessel was uncovered (Plate 19.1). It was found broken into several fragments, but is otherwise remarkably well preserved (Plate 19.2). The vessel was removed by the excavation team and transferred to Jerusalem where it was restored (Plate 19.3). Later it was moved to the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem where it is on display to this day. Calver identified the vessel as:

A marble basin, probably for wine, with two heads of Ganymede (?) in a Phrygian cap and a small figure of Bacchus on Silenus’ shoulders set at equal distances round the body, and supported by three conventionalized single footed leopards. This object, if complete, would stand, I should think some 70 cm high but it is smashed into more than 90 fragments. I am of the opinion that it is of late classical workmanship.¹

At the Rockefeller Museum the basin is identified as a font for holy water.

Stylistically this vessel can be compared with a larger, Neo-Attic style three-legged labrum (water basin) found in excavations at Herodium and recently on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.² The presence of a Roman basin in a thirteenth century fortress raises questions as to its original provenance and the reason for its presence in a military order stronghold. Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to this elegant and unusual vessel. No serious analysis of its artwork or its use, either in the Roman period, or in the thirteenth century, has been carried out to date.

Close examination of the basin reveals that Calver’s identification of the carved elements on the body of the vessel is probably incorrect. The three animals that were identified as leopards are most likely lions, as is demonstrated by the manes that are quite distinct around the animals’ necks—leopards do not have manes (Plate 19.4). The original identification of the human heads on the basin with Ganymede was probably due to his association with leopards. Having established that these are not leopards, the identification of the heads as of Ganymede is most likely in error (Plate 19.5). Another figure of the Greco-Roman mythology, which is identified by a Phrygian cap, is Attis. The figure of Attis, originally a Phrygian, who is associated with the goddess Cybele and is often accompanied by

¹ Guy to Dean discussing the division of finds [31 May, 1926]. See also Calver’s Final Report, August, 1926, p. 3.
² Rozenberg and Mevorah, 2013, pp. 144–45.
PLATE 19.3 Restoration of marble basin.

PLATE 19.4 Marble basin found in chamber J—detail.
COURTESY OF IAA, ROCKEFELLER MUSEUM, JERUSALEM, PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIANA SALZBERGER.

PLATE 19.5 Marble basin found in chamber J—detail.
COURTESY OF IAA, ROCKEFELLER MUSEUM, JERUSALEM, PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIANA SALZBERGER.