

# **Renata Kucharczyk**

---

## **Two Roman Toilet Bottles from Kom El-Dikka**

---

**Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 15, 43-45**

---

**2004**

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej **bazhum.muzhp.pl**, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

---

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## TWO ROMAN TOILET BOTTLES FROM KOM EL-DIKKA

Renata Kucharczyk

The glass from Kom el-Dikka consists of a large amount of fragments ranging in date from the Roman until the Islamic period. Work on this assemblage has been ongoing for the past few years and it is arduous. Intact vessels are rare on this site; hence, in many cases a comparative study of vessel shape is the only chance.

Thus, the recent discovery of two almost complete toilet bottles came as an unexpected delight. The vessels were found in the underground corridors of the

Bath service area, in thick ashy deposits originating from the furnaces.<sup>1)</sup> Their findspot leaves no doubt as to their function. Toilet bottles, which were used for kohl, bath oils, sweet-scented essences but foremost for perfume, form a large group of glass vessels, distinguished by a great variety of forms and shapes. The volume of toilet container production was relatively small, compared to other goods, yet it made up an important part of the Roman glass industry.

### MOULD-BLOWN JANUS HEAD FLASK

Under the Roman Empire, the introduction of moulds on a much wider scale than ever before constituted a major step in the development of the industry. These small devices allowed for quick manufacture of a great number of vessels. At the same time, the mold-blown technique gave the opportunity to create many different shapes. Among the new wares there were flasks in the form of fish, bunches of grapes and dates. One of the most popular types of newly introduced form was a toilet bottle in the shape of a human head, often facing two ways, Janus-fashion.

The flask from Kom el-Dikka (*Fig. 1:A*) is of translucent, pale yellowish-amber

glass, with slight iridescence outside. Intact. H. 6.9 cm. D. 4 cm.

The body of this piece is decorated with two identical chubby youthful faces, back to back. The hair around both faces is arranged in knobby locks, covering the ears; cheeks are knobby, too. It was blown in a two-part mold of two vertical sections, probably open at the base. The mold was not well executed. The cylindrical neck with a constriction marking the top of the mould, has a horizontal rim, folded outward, inward and then flattened. Base plain, flattened, no pontil mark.

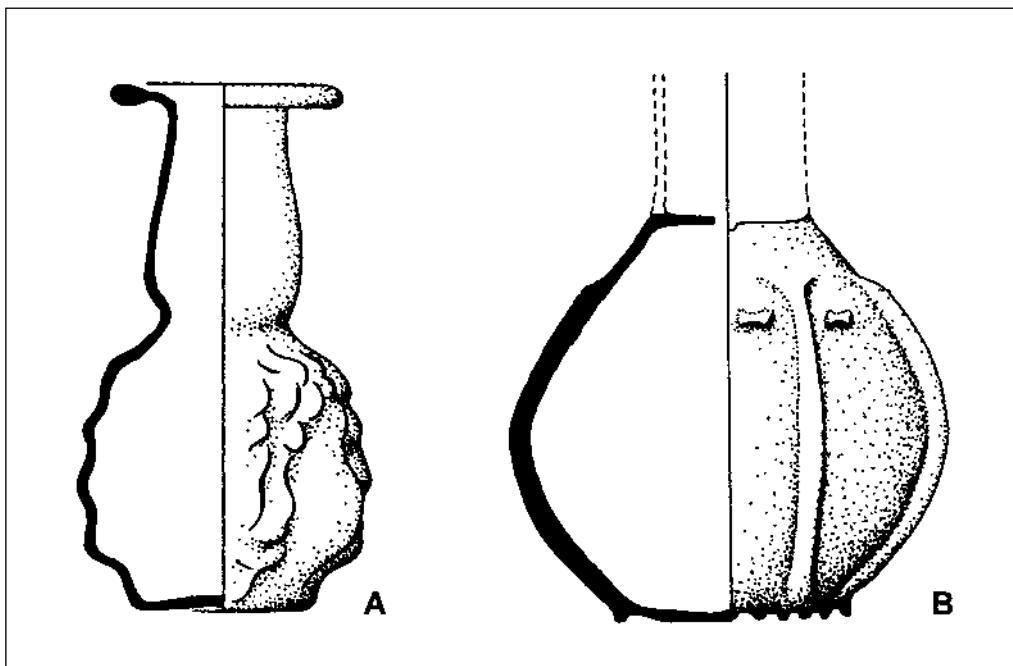
The flask, which is attributed to Isings form 78b,<sup>2)</sup> is traditionally attributed to Syro-Palestinian workshops. This very

1) W. Kołataj, Imperial Bath at Kom el-Dikka (Warsaw 1992), 82-85, Plans V and XIII.

2) C. Isings, Roman Glass from Dated Finds (Jakarta 1957), 93-94.

popular type of ornamental vessel has been found all over the Roman world, even as far away as the northern coasts of the Black Sea. It is commonly dated to the period from the 1st to the 4th century AD.<sup>3)</sup> Some later examples, from the 5th century AD and later, have also been attested.<sup>4)</sup> The complete specimen from Kom el-Dikka

finds parallels in several pieces from the Constable-Maxwell Collection,<sup>5)</sup> an object from the National Museum in Warsaw<sup>6)</sup> and another from the Bosra Museum.<sup>7)</sup> Two more bottles can be quoted: one from Karanis<sup>8)</sup> and another from the Newark Museum.<sup>9)</sup> The Kom el-Dikka glass assemblage has yielded other fragments



*Fig. 1. Roman toilet bottles. A: Janus-head flask; B: sprinkler  
(Drawing R. Kucharczyk, inking M. Momot)*

3) D. Whitehouse, Roman Glass in the Corning Museum of Glass, vol. 2. The Corning Museum of Glass (New York 2001), 66-77; E. Marianne Stern, Roman Mold-blown Glass (The Toledo Museum of Art 1995), 201-246, figs. 155, 156, 158.

4) M. Sternini, "Il vetro in Italia tra V e IX secoli", in: ed. D. Foy, *Le Verre de l'Antiquité Tardive et du Haut Moyen âge*, (Musée Archeologique, Département du Val D'Oise 1995), 260, fig. 18, no. 35; ibid., D. Foy, "Le verre de la fin du IVe au VIIIe siècle en France Méditerranéenne", 193-194, pl. 6:17; M. O'Hea, "The glass industry of Pella and the Decapolis", *ARAM* 4:1 and 2 (1992), 257.

5) Catalog of the Constable-Maxwell Collection of Ancient Glass, auction catalog, Sotheby (London 1979), 72-73, 114, 117-118.

6) B. Filarska, *Szklá starożytne. Katalog naczyń* (Warszawa 1952), 112-113, pl. XVIII, 3.

7) O. Doussart, *Le verre en Jordanie et en Syrie du Sud* (Beyrouth 1998), 175-176, pl. 59-3.

8) D. Harden, *Roman Glass from Karanis* (Ann Arbor 1936), pl. XVIII:629.

9) S. Auth, *Ancient Glass at the Newark Museum* (Newark 1976), 74, no. 74.

of this type of flask originating from earlier excavations, dated by the archaeological context to the 4th century AD. While highly similar in appearance to the

piece described above, the glass in these cases is very weathered, discolored, occasionally characterized by heavy peacock irisation.

## SPRINKLER WITH INTERNAL DIAPHRAGM AND VERTICAL RIBBING

Another type of glass container for storing precious liquids is also linked with Syro-Palestine. This perfume bottle, also referred to as a “dropper bottle” or sprinkler, is distinguished by the plastic decoration on the body and the constriction inside the neck. This type of vessel is generally dated to the 3rd-4th centuries AD.

The flask from Kom el-Dikka is yellowish-greenish in color. The glass is transparent and translucent. The surface is well-preserved and fire-polished, with small areas of peacock iridescence. There is no pontil scar. H. 5.00 cm. Dia. 5.3 cm.

The intact piriform body is decorated with eight evenly distributed vertical ribs (*Fig. 1:B*). (They resemble the so-called pillar-molded or ribbed bowls made by casting, one of the commonest shapes of glass vessels, widely distributed from the

mid-1st century BC until at least the 1st century AD.) Between them there is a row of eight “pinched out” projections. The body is supported on eighteen small, also “pinched out” knobs set in a circle. The neck is missing. It may have been tubular or cylindrical, broadly splayed. Like the characteristic sprinkler flask of the Roman period, the piece had a constriction ring at the base of the neck, an internal diaphragm, which controlled the flow of the liquid (perfume, rose water, oils) out of the flask and prevented evaporation.

Our example shows close affinities with a bottle from Newark Museum<sup>10)</sup> and also with a piece from the Hans Cohn Collection.<sup>11)</sup> To this short list we can add a related vessel from the Corning Museum,<sup>12)</sup> a pitcher from the Smith Collection<sup>13)</sup> and a small ribbed bottle from the Benaki Museum.<sup>14)</sup>

10) Auth, op. cit., see note 8, 120, no. 148: references to vessels with similar decoration.

11) A. von Saldern, Glass 500 B.C. to A.D. 1900. The Hans Cohn Collection (Los Angeles-Mainz 1980), 110-111, no. 110.

12) Whitehouse, op. cit., see note 3, vol. 1, 199-200, no. 348.

13) Solid Liquid. Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Glass, Fortuna Fine Arts, LTD (New York 1999), no. 193; Glass from the Ancient World. The Ray Winfield Smith Collection, Corning (New York 1957), 138-139, no. 271.

14) Ch. Clairmont, Catalogue of Ancient and Islamic Glass (Athens 1977), pl. IV,73.