Mirror-Plaques
from a Fifth-Century A.D. Tomb

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In June 1962 the Department of Antiquities was informed about the accidental discovery of an ancient tomb near Kfar Dikhrin.¹ The tomb was surveyed, and the finds transferred to the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem.² They will be described below, with special emphasis on the pottery plaques which form the main subject of this paper.

Kfar Dikhrin (Zikrin)³ is located some 7.5 km. north-west of Beth Govrin. The tomb was discovered east of the village. Its entrance had been destroyed, but the two burial chambers were found intact. Both were barrel-vaulted, holding two trough-shaped graves, their head-ends somewhat elevated; they were separated by broad shelves (Fig. 1). The burial places contained a large quantity of human bones, whose brittle condition made transfer and identification impossible. The finds were discovered in one group on the shelf between burial places III and IV, at their head-ends.

THE FINDS

Metal. A small bronze pendant in the form of a cross with concentric circles incised on each arm and in the centre (Pl. 15A). Similar crosses are fairly

¹ Thanks are due to Mr. Joseph Blagodatny, who was personally responsible for the salvage of the finds and the surveying of the tomb.
² The author wishes to thank Dr. A. Biran, Director of Antiquities, for authorizing the publication of this tomb group.
³ The identification of Zikrin with Kfar Dikhrin (or Kfar Dikhria) of Roman-Byzantine times seems well established; cf. C. H. Conder and H. H. Kitchener: Survey of Western Palestine, III, London, 1883, p. 257; S. Klein: The Land of Judah, Tel Aviv, 1939, pp. 99, 101 (Hebrew); M. Avi-Yonah: Historical Geography of Erez-Israel, 2nd ed., Jerusalem, 1951, p. 102 (Hebrew). The Talmudic sources are Bab. Talmud, Gittin 57a; Jer. Talmud, Ta'anit 69a; and finally Mird. Lam. R. 2, 2, mentioning this place together with two other villages 'in the south' (תרכות). The Roman road from Diospolis to Eleutheropolis passed through this village; see F. M. Abel: Géographie de la Palestine, II, Paris, 1938, p. 225.
common from the late fourth century onwards, throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, and actually down to the twelfth century A.D. Tomb 242 at Gezer contained a somewhat similar cross, together with other items recurring in our tomb.

Glass. A bottle, somewhat irregularly shaped (Fig. 2:1; Pl. 15C), the neck opening out into a funnel with a spiral coil around its middle. Such bottles from dated deposits are rather rare, the best examples coming from Gerasa, where they are dated no earlier than the fifth century, and mostly even to the first half of the sixth. In tomb 242 at Gezer, the lower part of a similar vessel was found.

A small bottle (Fig. 2:2; Pl. 15B) with long neck, well attested in tombs from the end of the fourth down to the sixth century A.D.

The lower part of a bottle (Fig. 2:3) is almost duplicated in a tomb from the end of the fourth century A.D.

An ointment flask (Fig. 2:5; Pl. 15D), both raised handles carelessly stuck to the body and rim. The closest parallel to our example comes from tomb 242 at Gezer. The ointment flask found in the el-Fajjar tomb, of the fourth century A.D., differs somewhat from our example, having its handles fastened under the rim, and being altogether of more careful workmanship.

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* For an example from a tomb at Tarshiha, of the last decade of the fourth century, see J. H. Iliffe: QDAP 3 (1934), p. 16, No. 6; Pl. VIII:5.
* S. J. Saller: Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, Jerusalem, 1941, p. 310, No. 223, Pl. 137, Fig. 1:1.
* P. V. C. Baur: Glassware, apud C. H. Kräling, ed.: Gerasa, New Haven, 1938, p. 545, Fig. 31:62 (384).
* Ibid., pp. 533-534, No. 62 (384). The find spots of this type at Gerasa are in St. Theodore's, which is dated A.D. 494, and in other buildings there belonging to the sixth century. See also C. Isings: Roman Glass, Groningen, 1957, p. 125.
* Macalister, op. cit. (above, n. 8), No. 242:23.
* From el-Bassa, see J. H. Iliffe: QDAP 3 (1934), p. 89, Fig. 26; but there the neck of the bottle is somewhat shorter. Another, better parallel comes from a tomb discovered on the property of the Passionist Fathers in Bethany, see S. J. Saller: Excavations at Bethany, Jerusalem, 1957, Pl. 57a. It was found together with eleven lamps, ten of which are of the candlestick type.
* Tomb 1 at Bethany, see ibid., p. 57.
* El-Bassa, see Iliffe, op. cit. (above, n. 12), p. 89, Fig. 25.
* Macalister, op. cit. (above, n. 8), No. 242:24.
A small ointment flask, with handles as on the above flask (Fig. 2:4; Pl. 15E). On the lower part of its body there are several slight depressions. It is possible that this bottle originally had a small flat base.

Two jugs, with diagonally ribbed bodies and strip handles. One is somewhat elongated, with a rather broad handle (Fig. 2:7; Pl. 15G); the other has a shorter, pear-shaped body, with a handle squeezed in the middle (Fig. 2:6; Pl. 15F). This type, in all its variations, had a wide distribution in the fourth
century A.D., our variant being attested as late as the beginning of the fifth century.17

Fig. 3. Pottery lamp.

Pottery. Two lids of hard, well-fired red ware, with finely ribbed upper parts (Fig. 2:8). These cooking-pot covers are well attested from the fourth century down to the sixth century A.D.18

A lamp of the ‘candlestick’ type (Fig. 3). This type has a rather long lifespan and is found from the fourth down to the end of the sixth century A.D.19

A plaque in the form of a fish (Pl. 16B), its scales indicated by small circles; in its centre there is a round depression with a raised edge, and remains of plaster. The plaque has a flat, undecorated back and is pierced at one end. The average thickness is 0.6 cm.

The plaque in the form of a fish has, to the author’s knowledge, no parallel, the other plaques in animal form, with similar disks in the centre, being a cock without legs and a dove.20

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17 Isings, op. cit. (above, n. 10), pp. 150 ff., albeit not of such careless workmanship, as is apparent in the clumsily attached handles of our jugs.
18 Saller, op. cit. (above, n. 12), p. 277. The Bethany example was found in a Byzantine context, cf. ibid., p. 148.
19 O. R. Sellers and D.C. Baramki: A Roman-Byzantine Burial Cave in Northern Palestine, BASOR Suppl. Studies 15-16 (1953), pp. 47 ff., Fig. 52, No. 60. Our example, however, has no dots on its base.
20 L. Cer: RB 3 (1894), p. 287, from Umm Tuba (3 miles south of Jerusalem); Palestine Archaeological Museum (henceforth PAM), No. 40.309 (Museum Gallery Book, No. 1686); B. Bagatti: L’archeologia cristiana in Palestina, Firenze, 1961, Pl. 13; a similar plaque, though lacking any perforation for suspension, was published by W. J. Moulton: AASOR 1 (1920), p. 75, Fig. 6; this plaque is supposed to have been found in the Hauran.

The fish-form of our plaque brings to mind fish-shaped Roman lamps, see H. B. Walters: Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum, London, 1914, No. 435, (from Alexandria), and B. Bagatti: Il Museo della Flagellazione in Gerusalemme, Jerusalem, 1939, p. 99, Fig. 51.
FIFTH CENTURY MIRROR PLAQUES

A circular plaque (Pl. 16A), decorated with alternating raised and painted chevrons, and dots in red, dark blue, and yellow. In the centre, the plaque has a round depression with a raised edge. This depression holds a somewhat convex piece of blown glass, backed by a thin layer of lead, now mostly decomposed, and surrounded by a thin gold border. The glass is held in place by a rather clumsy frame of plaster, which overlaps the slightly recessed edge; there are some small holes in this frame. The plaque is pierced; its back is flat and undecorated.

Similar plaques of pottery, soft limestone, or plaster have been found in different places in this country, all in late Roman or Byzantine contexts. A circular plaque, almost identical with our example, was found in the above-mentioned tomb 242 at Gezer, and similar circular plaques were found at Nişana (Auja el-Hafir) and in cave 34 at Bethany, which contained finds of the Byzantine to Early Arab periods. Somewhat similar plaques (sometimes erroneously described as bread stamps) come from a tomb at el-Bassa, dated to the end of the fourth century, and from Homs. An additional example, of unknown provenance, is in the Palestine Archaeological Museum, while others, supposed to come from Beth Govrin, were published by Moulton. Some of these are completely undecorated, but have up to five depressions for glass insets.

INTERPRETATION OF THE PLAQUES

Before attempting to interpret the significance of these plaques, it may be useful to summarize here their various forms (Fig. 4), which, although of

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1 The author wishes to thank Prof. B. Kirson of the Department of Inorganic Chemistry at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, for the analysis of some particles from the lining of the concave glass, leading to the conclusion that it is lead.
2 Macalister, op. cit. (above, n. 8), I, 1911, pp. 387-388, Fig. 201.
3 H. Duncombe Colt, ed.: Excavations at Nisana, I, London, 1962, p. 61 and Pl. XXVI:9, 10, 11, the latter two with five depressions each for mirror insets.
5 Iliiffe, op. cit. (above, n.12), Pl. XXIV:3; PAM, No. 32.2889 (Museum Gallery Book, No. 1690).
7 PAM, No. 40.311 (Museum Gallery Book, No. 1687).
8 Moulton, op. cit. (above, n. 29), pp. 71-74, Fig. 1, 2A, 5A, 5B and 2B-3 (the last with a mirror on either side, and some without suspension holes).
9 From Homs, see Ronzevalle, op. cit. (above, n. 26), Nos. 1, 2, and 4; from Mesmiye, Hauran, PAM, No. 40.312; of unknown provenance, Hebrew University Museum of Jewish Antiquities (henceforth MJA), Nos. 1575 and 1576 (the former has a human face on its upper part). Cf. also above, n. 23.
Fig. 4. Mirror plaques. 1-4, 7—after AASOR 1, pp. 71-79, Figs 1, 2A, 4, 6, 7; 9—ibid., p. 83, Fig. 5; 5—after PEFQS 70. Pl VII:1; 6—after Bizzarro 28, p. 207; 8—after QDAP 10, Pl. XXVII:1.
great variety, have two features in common, viz. one or more glass mirrors fixed into the surface and, in most cases, one or more holes for suspension:

(1) Simple, mostly round (Fig. 4:2). Rare variations show mirrors on both faces,\(^{30}\) up to five mirrors on one face,\(^{31}\) and in one case, in addition to this, a human head on its upper part.\(^{32}\) Suspension holes are missing in certain cases.

(2) Round, with geometric decoration, simple (Fig. 4:1) or elaborate (Fig. 4:4).\(^{33}\) Variations show two joined disks, the juncture decorated with a lattice showing twelve squares.\(^{34}\)

(3) Zoomorphic (Fig. 4:3),\(^{35}\) suspension holes sometimes missing.

(4) Anthropomorphic, showing a female figure holding a round mirror in front of her body. Suspension holes invariably lacking (Fig. 4:7).\(^{36}\) A variation shows a similar figure, with mirror, which has been put into a little shrine (Fig. 4:9).\(^{37}\) Another variation of these female figures has no mirror and thus does not belong to this category; its hands are stretched out horizontally from the shoulders.\(^{38}\)

(5) Architectural:

a) simple gable, arches, niches; mirror at centre.\(^{39}\) Variations show three or more mirrors (Fig. 4:6);\(^{40}\)

b) similar, but with an additional human figure;\(^{41}\)

c) similar, but with additional animals;\(^{42}\)

d) similar, but with additional bird and human figures (Fig. 4:8);\(^{43}\)

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\(^{30}\) Cf. above, n. 29.
\(^{31}\) Cf. above, n. 22-26.
\(^{32}\) Cf. above, n. 20, and our plaque in the form of a fish.
\(^{33}\) Moulton, op. cit. (above, n. 20), p. 73, Fig. 4.
\(^{34}\) Cf. above, n. 20, and our plaque in the form of a fish.
\(^{35}\) Moulton, op. cit. (above, n. 20), p. 79, Fig. 7, probably from the Hauran; Ronzevalle, op. cit. (above, n. 26), Pl. II, No. 5, from Mo‘arret en-No‘man (Syria); the latter cites another example from Cyprus, today supposedly in the Louvre, Paris.
\(^{36}\) Moulton, op. cit. (above, n. 20), pp. 83-84, Figs. 3-4, from the Hauran; the shrine has a suspension hole, which the figurine lacks.
\(^{38}\) PAM, 40.310; the Louvre has another example, from Cyprus (?); I wish to thank my colleague, Miss Myriam Rosen of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, for verifying the form of this plaque.
\(^{39}\) PAM, 40.307; R. Jonas: *Gizaron*, New York 28 (1953), p. 207, Fig. (Hebrew).
\(^{40}\) PAM, 40.306.
e) similar, but with additional birds and seven-branched candlestick(s).

Variations show three or more mirrors (Fig. 4:5). 44

The interpretations of these plaques have so far dealt with some of the groups here mentioned, generally disregarding the others. The explanations given, while fitting one type, would therefore not fit the other types. Cré, who was the first to bring these plaques to the attention of the public, 45 wished to interpret the cock as a peacock, symbolic of the resurrection, and thus saw in the glass disk a receptacle for the Eucharist, which was deposited with the dead. Macalister, 46 citing Cré, explained his plaque outright as a 'pottery pyx for reception of a crumb of Eucharistic bread'; Moulton, 47 following suit, was however at some pains to explain this theory in the light of the discovery of female figurines holding similar disks — especially as these figurines reminded him of Astarte. Ronzevalle 48 was the first to recognize that the glass disks were simple convex mirrors lined with lead, citing as his main authorities Kisa 49 and Michon. 50 He emphasized the 'Astarte' nature of some of these plaques, but thought that most of them were nothing but children's toys. He failed, however, to explain why these small mirrors were often given such a peculiar frame.

Mayer and Reifenberg saw in them, probably quite rightly, representations of the Torah-shrine. Moreover, they interpreted these plaques as a 'prototype of the mizrah pictures' 51 (i.e. showing the direction of prayer). Jonas 52 evidently accepted this view. While this explanation disregards the different types of plaques and also fails to account for the presence of the mirrors, Goodenough 53 tries to circumvent this difficulty by emphasizing that the different forms might indicate different uses. He sees in the glasses or mirrors some sort of symbol of mystic light and eternal life, because they appear here in place of the rosette, which in his opinion serves invariably as a symbol of this mystic light. Citing two plaques somewhat similar to those published by Mayer and Reifenberg, 54

45 Cré, loc. cit. (above, n 20).
52 Loc. cit. (above, n 40).
54 Cf. above, nn 42-43.
he finally considers the possibility that they all were intended as funerary objects, placed in the tomb as symbols of eternal life. This theory, taking much for granted, fails, however, to explain the many undecorated or sparsely decorated plaques, nor does it deal with the question of the suspension hole, which a mere deposition near the buried body made absolutely superfluous. Saller,\textsuperscript{55} reconsidering all previous views including the possibility that they were 'burial plaques', rejects them all. He also denies the possibility of their being mirrors, as they are, in his opinion, much too small for that use. Finally, Dunscombe Colt calls them mirrors, without entering into any further discussion.\textsuperscript{56}

Trying now to find an interpretation which might fit all the types of plaques here described, we should take into consideration the fact that each type has one or more small mirrors as an inset. It should be emphasized that these are indeed mirrors, lined with lead. That this is so was not only recognized by Ronzevalle, but was proved by the analysis made at the Hebrew University. As to their size, it should be pointed out that small Roman mirrors of 5 cm. diameter are no rarity.\textsuperscript{57} True, the mirrors on these plaques have a diameter of not more than 3.5 cm. and are often even smaller, especially in the specimens which have a number of mirrors; such a small size seems indeed too tiny for any practical, everyday use. One is thus forced to look for some kind of symbolic, ceremonial, or magical use of mirrors, which may have been, in the fifth century, acceptable to the three main religions. Jewish use is indicated by plaques decorated with the seven-branched candlestick; the plaques in the form of a female figure, with or without a small shrine, point to use by pagans; Christian use, finally, seems indicated by the cock and, still more so, the fish, but in any case by recurring instances of such plaques being found in tombs together with small cross-pendants.

The only common motif coming to mind seems to be the apotropaic use of mirrors. In different parts of Europe, North Africa, and China, small mirrors were fastened to the cradle to protect the child, to one's own body as personal protection, or near the bed as protection against evil spirits.\textsuperscript{58} The idea behind this practice was simply that any possible evil, inherent in

\textsuperscript{55} Cf. \textit{loc. cit.} (above, n. 24).
\textsuperscript{56} Cf. \textit{loc. cit.} (above, n. 23), p. 61.
\textsuperscript{57} Pauly-Wissowa, \textit{loc. cit.} (above, n. 50).
\textsuperscript{58} S. Seligmann: \textit{Der böse Blick und Verwandtes}, II, Berlin, 1910, pp. 276-278.
the evil eye, would thus fall back upon itself in some sort of 'autofascination'.\textsuperscript{59} This motif, which was well known to the classical world,\textsuperscript{60} reappears in folk literature of various peoples (e.g. the Spanish and the Japanese),\textsuperscript{61} and seems indeed to be self-evident and universal. It therefore seems permissible to apply this motif in our case as well: we thus see in these mirror-plaques charms against the evil eye, which had served their owners in life and were placed into their tombs with some hope that they might here, too, prove effective against the perils of afterlife.

\textsuperscript{*} This expression was first suggested by Seligmann, \textit{ibid.}, I, Berlin, 1910, pp. 178-182, where full documentation is given.

\textsuperscript{**} Cf. the story of Narcissus (Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses}, III, 339; Pausanias IX, 31:6; and Plutarch, \textit{Symposiac Questions}, 7); see also Papyrus Paris 2298 (C. Wessely: \textit{Griechische Zauberpapyri}, Wien, 1888), where the magician threatens Selene that she would be confounded should he hold a mirror to her face, cf. Pauly-Wissowa, \textit{op. cit.} (above, n. 50), col. 28. See also the story of Perseus and the Gorgon in Greek mythology.

\textsuperscript{*} S. Thompson, edit.: \textit{Motif Index of Folk Literature} (revised ed.), IV. Copenhagen, 1957, p. 366, K 1052.
A: Bronze pendant

B-C: Glass vessels.

B-C: Bottles.
D-E: Ointment flasks.
F-G: Jugs.

FIFTH CENTURY MIRROR PLAQUES
A-B Pottery plaques.

FIFTH CENTURY MIRROR PLAQUE