A Perfume Flask or a Fish?

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The discussion on the ASOR site of our "Jonah and the big fish" image (as we have identified it) has moved, as of yesterday, from a pillar (*nephesh*) or funerary monument to a glass perfume flask–technically called an *unguentarium*. Joan Taylor has some nice images in her post putting forth this interpretation. In our discussions and consultations over the past year with our eighteen outside academics, a few of whom had suggested the "tower" idea, the possibility of an amphora or specialize vase had also been raised. I cover this in my article with some examples of such images on ossuaries. In the end we rejected this interpretation in favor of the fish with Jonah spewed out of the mouth. Frankly I found the pillar idea completely far-fetched–for one thing it would be up-side-down, but in shape, form, and details there is little to nothing about this image that resembles these typical monuments (see Rahmani, *CJO*, pp. 31-34). In contrast the amphora idea is one we carefully considered, since there are some clear similarities, though we found no amphora images that we thought really matched our ossuary "fish" image closely.

1. The "tail" of our image is sharply pointed and quite elongated on the left side. In fact, when we first got a glimpse of the partial image we thought it was the prow of a boat! In contrast, the mouths of amphora and perfume bottles are round and quite symmetrical.



2. The clear stick figure in our image with the enlarged "ball" or head at the bottom seems to be in contrast to the typical flattened or knob like ends of some perfume bottles. The arms of the figure are positioned in a classic eastern pose (*oaanes*), in contrast to what we find in the west–the *orans* position of supplication with both arms

raised. This is a major point and we are presently preparing a special paper dealing with the motifs associated with the various sea-man figures of the eastern Mediterrean world in this period. The "head" itself has a very distinctive pattern on it which we have taken to be the artists attempt to represent seaweed "wrapped about my head" as mentioned in the text of Jonah (2:5). The "eye" of the fish is also etched on the lower right side, with a curved line. We are not yet certain what the Etruscan "F-like" 𐌅 marking is to the left of the figure's body as it is now oriented but our guess is it has to do with an eastern mythical hero motif and several suggestions have been made by two of our ancient art historians.



3. The patterned body of the "fish" with its scale/tile like patterns, which led some to conclude it was the brickwork of a tower, we understand to be akin to the armor of the mythical fish *Leviathan* (aka Behemoth, Rahab, etc.)–which in modern Hebrew still means "whale." In Jewish tradition this unique sea creature represents "death" and the righteous are to eat its flesh in the last days, thus "swallowing up death" forever (Isaiah 27:1; 25:8; *Baba Bathra* 74b). When this happens the "dew of light" will shine on the world of the death and those in the land of shades will live or be resurrected (Isaiah 26:19).

4. The downward orientation of our fish image, which some have taken as an objection to it being a fish, is to the contrary just what one would expect, as we understand Jonah is being spat out on land in this depiction. To have the nose of the fish oriented upward (heavenward), or to right or left, would be to spit him into the waters of "chaos," which he is now to escape, by being vomited on dry land. The head of our "Jonah" figure is actually touching the border of the bottom of the ossuary, which seems to represent that land.

The creator of the Jonah image is taking his or her cues from the text of Jonah itself—

not from a pattern of evolving types—since we have no extant Jonah images from this period, or for that matter, any biblical scenes at all. This would be a first. The text of Jonah seems to provide the clues and that is how I have interpreted its several features as I explain in my paper:

I called out to Yahweh, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried . . . Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit (Jonah 2:2-6).

We are convinced that these detailed features resemble much more closely a fish than the mere similarity in shape to an amphora. After all, even though an amphora, or especially an alabastron, might be somewhat cylindrically "fish like" in shape, no one would mistake a flask or perfume vial for a fish–and we think something in the reverse is working with this latest suggestion. Lots of inanimate objects can "look like" animals…but usually in art history we can easily tell the "beast" from the thing…



Our interpretation is further supported by the other fish motifs on the ossuary itself, as mentioned in my paper, particularly the six little fish along the top border of the ossuary as if they are swimming along a canal or river, the cross-like gated "bars of death" on the right side panel (compare Rahmani, *CJO,* Plate 7: 46F and Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, plate III-7a), and the half-fish or tail, on the right end. We see this as representing a patterned narrative. Even though its elements might be lost to us we think the general motifs are clear–namely entrance into "death" and chaos and being "brought up" from the "pit" or Sheol–presented by both the waters and the great fish.