

Dining In State: The Table Wares from the Persian-Hellenistic Administrative Building at Kedesh

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When the Macedonian general Ptolemy seized Egypt upon the death of Alexander the Great, he moved quickly also to secure a region that Egyptian rulers had coveted and, on and off, actually controlled for three millenia: the Levantine coast (Fig. 1). This highly strategic link provided an efficient route



Fig. 1. Satellite view of the southern Levant with the site of Kedesh indicated.

from the Sinai Peninsula to Syria, a series of excellent harbors, and an array of fertile agricultural landscapes supporting the cultivation of olives, grapes, and grain. These same advantages attracted the attention of Ptolemy's fellow general and rival, Seleukos, with the result that the two claimants battled for control of the entire coast and its narrow but fertile interior hinterland over the course of 20 years. In 301 BC, while Seleukos was fighting Demetrios at the battle of Ipsos, Ptolemy occupied the southern Levant. The region would remain under Ptolemaic control for the next century despite repeated attempts by the Seleukid kings to reclaim it. The dividing line between Ptolemaic and Seleukid-held territory was the Litani River, just north of the city of Tyre.¹

When he took control of the southern Levant, Ptolemy also inherited an already-established imperial administrative structure built when this entire region was part of the Achaemenid Persian empire. In the later 5th century BC the Persians had split Babylonia and Beyond-the-River into two satrapies and created several new administrative postings.² They established one of these new postings at the site of Kedesh, located on the edge of a highland plateau extending 35 km east from the city of Tyre. In the later 2nd millennium BC Kedesh had been a major Canaanite city whose ruler joined a coalition against the Israelites. In the time of the kingdom of Israel, it had been a biblical "city of refuge," where criminals could seek asylum. But since the Assyrian conquest of this region in the 8th century BC the site had lain deserted.³

Kedesh is an enormous double mound, with an upper and lower tel that together stretch 900 meters north to south. Since 1997, under the sponsorship of the Universities of Michigan and Minnesota, we have been excavating an area at the far southern end of the lower mound. We have uncovered a huge building, 2400 m², first constructed in the later 5th century BC (Fig. 2).⁴ Little of the material culture of that Persian building remains because it was used under the Ptolemies and the Seleukids, who were the next two imperial regimes to control the southern Levant. On current evidence, the building appears to have lain abandoned at least for the 30 years after Alexander's advent in the region. Certainly by the time of the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (c. 283-246 BC), however, the administrative building at Kedesh was back in business. Archaeological evidence for a reoccupation of the building consists of several coins of Ptolemy II. Conclusive evidence comes from two papyri that form part of the Zenon archive, a body of over 2000 fragments discovered in the Egyptian town of Philadelphia (modern Darb el-Gerza) in 1914. In 259 BC Zenon travelled to the territory of Palestine on behalf of Ptolemy II and like all good travellers, he saved his receipts. In them he notes two visits to Kedesh. In one visit, he picked up two artabas of flour to tide him over until his next stop; in another he stayed long enough to enjoy a bath.⁵

Zenon's visit to Kedesh is not necessarily an indication that the Ptolemaic-period site had an imperial or official character. According to the papyrus that records flour receipts, Zenon picked up supplies at 11 different places, which vary in character from small towns such as Strato's Tower to large,

Fig. 2. Aerial view of Kedesh, looking north. The Administrative Building is located at the far southern edge of the lower mound.



long established cities such as Jerusalem. On the basis of our excavation, however, it is clear that the Ptolemies and their Seleukid successors reoccupied the Persian-period building and repurposed it as a provincial administrative center, though they made considerable changes to the building's internal organization. The remodeling included rooms for the large-scale collection and storage of grain and, eventually, a records office.

In the northwest corner, we found a large storeroom with a plaster floor constructed in the 3rd century BC. In this room 14 huge grain jars – 1.8 m tall – were left leaning against the walls when the building was abandoned in the middle of the 2nd century BC (Fig. 3). Several more such storerooms were built on the western and southern sides of the building. South of the courtyard a series of rooms with sturdy plastered bins of different shapes and sizes may have served officials who oversaw the collection of agricultural goods – grain, grapes or olives – brought as taxation in kind. Partition walls separated these storage and collection rooms from the rest of the building.

In 199 BC Antiochos III defeated Ptolemy V at a battle near Kedesh, close to a small rural sanctuary to Pan located at the springs of the Jordan river just below Mount Hermon. His victory brought Kedesh, along with the entirety of the southern Levant, under the control of the Seleukid Empire. We have evidence that more remodeling was done in the administrative building shortly



Fig. 3. Storeroom in building's northwest corner, with large storage jars lining the walls.

thereafter. An archive room was inserted into the northwest corner, next to one of the storerooms. Most interestingly, an elaborate three-room reception complex, including a large dining room, was built in the middle of the building (Fig. 4). The intact floors of the middle and southern rooms consist of small flattened stone chips embedded in a heavy plaster matrix, similar to *terrazzo*. The walls of all three rooms were covered with masonry-style stucco. In and around this three-room complex we have found a disproportionate amount of well-preserved table ware, apparently abandoned when the building's occupants fled. A confluence of archaeological, epigraphic, and ancient literary testimony allows us to identify and date the event that drove them away, and by doing so also allows us to present an unusually clear snapshot of the fine table wares acquired by provincial administrators in the southern Levant at a single moment in time.

When we first came to excavate at Kedesesh, we had no idea that this enormous administrative structure existed. No ancient author mentioned it, and there were no epigraphic or literary references to it. Since we assumed that throughout the classical period the tel held just a small settlement, we wanted to do a magnetometric survey of the lower tel in order to find the densest concentration of houses to excavate. In 1997, we dug two small probes to determine if the site's geomorphological profile would allow for magnetometry. In one of those probes, we came upon debris on the floor of a room. Within



Fig. 4. Reception complex, looking southwest. The corner of the large dining room appears in the lower right corner.

a space only two by three meters, we found a flask, a small cooking pot, five juglets, a stone mortar and many pestles, several stoppers, and three mud-brick loomweights (Fig. 5). The number of intact vessels and objects suggested that the owners had left in a hurry. An event described in the book of 1 Maccabees provided a likely reason:

Jonathan heard that the generals of Demetrios had come with a strong force to Kedesh in Galilee. So he went to meet them ... in the plain of Hazor ... The army of the foreigners ... made an ambush ... and all of Jonathan's men fled. Jonathan rent his garments ... and prayed. [He] turned them again to battle and they fought. They pursued their enemies to Kedesh. 3000 of the foreign troops fell. And Jonathan returned to Jerusalem (1 Macc. 11.63-67).

The date of the battle described in 1 Maccabees is 144 or 143 BC. The author bracketed his description between two other events datable by internal evidence to 145 and 142 BC, so it must have occurred within that narrow window.⁶ The flask and juglets had parallels dating to the 2nd century BC, making it tempting to link the small abandoned room with the battle between Jonathan and Demetrios. This evidence on its own, however, remained a bit circumstantial.



Fig. 5. Vessels and objects found on the floor of one small room of a building just to the west of the Administrative Building.

The room in which we found the abandoned pottery lay just to the west of the Administrative Building, whose presence we were unaware of until we spotted it on the magnetometric survey map that we made the following year. Since we began excavating the building in 1999, we have found evidence for sudden and wholesale abandonment throughout the complex, along with a satisfying quantity of coins and stamped amphorae laying on floors by which we can precisely date that abandonment. There are four Rhodian amphorae from final usage and abandonment deposits within the Administrative Building one dating to 170-168 BC, two dating to 151 and another one to 146. In addition, there are 15 stamped handles from the second and early third quarters of the 2nd century BC, with a dramatic concentration dating right down to 145 BC.⁷ The amphora evidence, along with the clearly debris-strewn character of these final deposits, strongly encouraged us to connect the building's final days with the battle described in 1 Maccabees. Thus the assemblage of pottery found in the building's Hellenistic deposits must fall within the century or so between Zenon's visit in 259 BC and the abrupt appearance of Jonathan and his forces in 144 or 143 BC. Two stratigraphic horizons within the building allow us to narrow the date even further.

We have established that the Ptolemies, probably Ptolemy II, repurposed this building, turning it into a grain collection and storage site. The basis for this conclusion is the stratigraphy of the storerooms, which all have a single



Fig. 6. Kitchen room with upper floor made of broken pottery sherds of Central Coastal Fine.

floor below which we found pottery datable to the 3rd century BC or earlier. In two other rooms, however, we found two floor levels. The first such room is the archive room in the building's northwest corner. The second such room lay immediately west of the bin room, in the storage and tax collection sector of the building. This second room contained a series of ovens – tanurs – and so functioned as a sort of kitchen. Stuck underneath one of the bedding cobbles of the upper floor was a coin of Antiochos III or IV, thus providing a *terminus post quem* of the early 2nd century BC. But the most interesting point about both these later floors was how they were made: using hundreds of fragments of small saucers and bowls almost like tesserae, embedded within a plaster matrix (Figs. 6, 7).

Petrographic analysis of the sherds that made up these upper floors indicates that their fabric comes from the coastal plain immediately around the Carmel mountains.⁸ This area included a string of coastal cities, including 'Akko-Ptolemais, Dor, and Apollonia-Arsuf. We call the ware made from this fabric "Central Coastal Fine," since we do not know its precise production locale and there may well have been more than one manufacturer.⁹

Central Coastal Fine apparently comprised the common ceramic tableware used by the Ptolemaic officials who lived at Kedesh in the 3rd century BC (Fig. 8). While it is probable that at least some of the officials also had fancier cups and bowls in metal and possibly also glass, we have not found



Fig. 7. Sherds of Central Coastal Fine, used as flooring material for the Archive room.

any evidence of such. The absence of metal vessels is not surprising since the building remained in continuous use and was briefly occupied by enemy forces. But we have found no cast glass and barely any fragments of other fine tablewares of the 3rd century BC, even eastern Mediterranean productions regularly found elsewhere in the region, for example at 'Akko-Ptolemais and Dor.¹⁰ Either life in the Ptolemaic era was exceptionally lavish and we are missing the expensive table settings, or it was a poorly supplied backwater posting for low-level functionaries.

Sometime after the Seleukids took over, the character of official life at this



Fig. 8. Central Coastal Fine saucers and bowl.

posting seems to have changed. We have found an array of different ceramic table wares from the building's abandonment phase. While stratigraphically we can date this phase to the first half of the 2nd century BC, in practical terms the pottery that we found must all have been available and in use at the time of Jonathan's attack in 144 or 143 BC. The array thus provides a detailed view of the contents of the pantry shelves of a provincial Seleukid outpost precisely in the middle of the 2nd century. Based on the variations of fabric and surface treatment, it appears that those shelves held serving vessels, platters, saucers, and bowls from at least three distinct manufacturing centers.

Most of the serving vessels – table amphorae, jugs, and dipper juglets – are in a clean, pale, peach-brown fabric that we call semi-fine.¹¹ Shell inclusions discovered via petrographic analysis strongly suggested that semi-fine was made on the coast. At Kedesh we have identified two versions of this fabric. One is quite soft, almost chalky, with only occasional very small inclusions (Fig. 9). The second is fired a bit harder and has perceptible small angular grits embedded in the fabric (Fig. 10). Slip adheres better to this variant. The repertoire of serving vessels occurs in both but we find small perfume and oil containers mostly in one or the other version. Amphoriskoi and unguentaria come in the first softer version, while juglets with a cupped flanged rim – of which we have many – occur only in the second, harder, slightly more gritty version. For the first, softer version, aspects of distribution and especially the overwhelming quantities of this ware found at Tyre point to that city as a source. On current evidence, it appears that the second, harder version, may come from 'Akko-Ptolemais.¹²

Second are examples of saucers and small bowls similar to Central Coastal Fine but in a better quality fabric that is quite clean, very hard, and covered wholly or partially with a well-adhering, slightly lustrous orange-red slip (Fig. 11). Saucers and bowls of this fabric do not appear in the Ptolemaic-period fills at Kedesh; they show up only in the building's Seleukid phases. When we find body sherds of this fabric, it is very difficult to distinguish it from Eastern Sigillata A – and indeed when we first came across it we called it “proto-ESA.” Petrographic analysis of “proto-ESA” vessels from Kedesh have been found to have an identical mineralogical profile to ESA.¹³ Samples of very similar vessels in this fabric from Gezer that have been subjected to NAA fell into the same chemical group as ESA.¹⁴ These convergences notwithstanding, we prefer not to group the vessels in this ware with ESA, for three reasons.

First, the shapes are those of middle Hellenistic table vessels, most of which do not occur in what we have come to think of as the standard ESA typology.¹⁵ Second, most vessels are covered by slip that was brushed on rather than having been dipped, which is the standard practice for ESA. Third, most of the vessels (even those that are dipped) are only partially slipped, instead of fully covered as is “standard ESA.”¹⁶ Thus, even though the clay itself appears to be the same as that used for ESA, neither the great majority of the



Fig. 9. Semi-fine amphoriskoi and table jug (and Campana A plate) from the Archive room and NW storeroom. This soft, chalky variant comes from Tyre.

shapes, nor the method of decoration, nor the style of decoration conform to those features of ESA.

Perhaps these reasons sound like special pleading. Why not simply expand the definition of ESA to include these “proto-ESA” saucers and bowls? Doing that depends on two things: what we want ESA to mean, and what we think it meant in antiquity?

Beginning with the second point: what was ESA in antiquity? At first ESA vessels were simply better versions of some table shapes that had been around for a while, as we can tell from the fact that the earliest ESA shapes are identical to some middle Hellenistic shapes, such as the large drooping rim dish with recessed center (Fig. 12). In antiquity the first ESA vessels were likely to have been thought of as improvements of existing products. In that sense, in antiquity the most important point about ESA was where it came from.



Fig. 10. Semi-fine flanged rim juglets. This hard, gritty variant may come from 'Akko-Ptolemais.



Fig. 11. Northern Coastal Fine dishes and platter.



Fig. 12. Drawing of Northern Coastal Fine platter (K00P157). The form is identical to that of early ESA fishplates with drooping rim.

It appears that the Kedesh “proto-ESA” vessels come from far northern Phoenicia or Cilicia. The shapes and especially the quality of the fabric and slip are identical in look and feel to middle Hellenistic table vessels from Kinet Höyük, in Cilicia.¹⁷ This is very interesting because, on the basis of the petrographic analysis and NAA, it appears that proto-ESA vessels were produced in workshops that went on to make ESA.¹⁸ Since the Kedesh “proto-ESA” is contemporary with Central Coastal Fine, but appears to come from the northern Levantine coast, we have named this ware “Northern Coastal Fine.” We believe that both Northern and Central Coastal Fine were Levantine productions of the 3rd and first half of the 2nd century BC. The difference in their quality is attributable simply to the fact that the northern Levantine coastal region has superior clay sources for tableware production.

Returning to the first question posed above: what do we modern scholars want the term and category of ESA to mean? Why not expand the definition to include vessels made of the same clay, but in different shapes and with different surface treatments? The best reason not to enlarge the definition of ESA is that retaining its now well-understood parameters provides us with a critical chronological aid – and, with the help of the refined stratigraphic and occupation history of the administrative building at Kedesh, an even more precise beginning date.

The abandonment of the administrative building in 144 or 143 BC is not actually the end of the building’s occupational history. Here and there inside some of the rooms we have found a few makeshift walls, the occasional re-worked floor surface, and some installations, primarily large ovens, which are all the work of a small group of people who lived here for a brief time after the battle and the abandonment. Associated coins and stamped amphorae allow us to fix the date of their sketchy occupation to the third quarter of the 2nd century BC. We have found quite a bit of standard, canonical ESA in the debris that these people left behind; indeed, this is the first phase at Kedesh where we find unmistakable ESA (Fig. 13). Conversely, in the living contexts of the Administrative Building we have not found a single fragment of a standard, by-the-book ESA vessel. If we retain the definition of ESA to be vessels of the typological series long identified, decorated on all surfaces by being dipped in vats of slip, then the tight stratigraphy and historical chronology at Kedesh combine to help us pinpoint the first appearance of ESA in this part of the southern Levant to the decade of the 130s BC.

Clarifying the date and character of ESA and its 3rd- to mid 2nd- century BC predecessor, Northern Coastal Fine, brings us to the third fine table ware that the last Seleukid administrators at Kedesh were using. These are platters

Fig. 13. ESA mastos (K08P22) found in occupation debris dating to the third quarter of the second century BC.



and bowls covered in a shiny, well-adhering black or mottled red-black slip (Fig. 14). In her publication of the fine wares from Tel Anafa, Kathleen Slane first identified this as a ware earlier than but related to ESA; she named it BSP, the Black Slipped Predecessor of ESA.¹⁹ Slane postulated that ESA was the chronologically immediate and geographically proximate successor to BSP for two reasons: the fabrics are chemically identical; and most of the early shapes of ESA appear also in BSP, including several that occur in no other eastern Mediterranean fine ware, such as the large plate with offset rim.

While it may well have been that ESA was first developed in BSP workshops, a few inconsistencies and anomalies give us pause. First, while it is true that the two wares are chemically identical, it is also the case that the Tyrian variant of semi fine is chemically identical as well.²⁰ This renders the scientific



Fig. 14. BSP incurved rim bowls found in Administrative Building.

argument less conclusive. Further, as Slane has demonstrated via analytical study, BSP and ESA were actually made by two different firing processes. BSP vessels were made via a two-stage firing with an initial reduction firing followed by at least partial oxidation, whereas ESA vessels were made via a single stage oxidizing firing.²¹ Slip application differed as well; finger marks show that workers held BSP vessels by the foot and dipped them straight into a vat while ESA vessels were generally double dipped from the rim.²²

While hard numbers are generally lacking, it appears as if distribution patterns and quantities of BSP and the earliest ESA are not as similar as one would expect if they had the exact same source. ESA appears in exceptionally large quantities in and around the area of Antiocheia, whereas BSP is currently better attested further south, from Tyre to 'Akko and inland to northern Jordan, and even the Sharon and Shephelah in the south.²³ Moreover, there is intriguing evidence that suggests a chronological discrepancy for the earliest appearance of ESA between the northern and southern Levant. At Jebel Khalid, a Seleukid administrative outpost on the Euphrates, ESA likely appears at the site by c. 150 BC – whereas, as we show here, the excavations at Kedesh indicate that it was not available in southern Phoenicia until the 130s.²⁴

These points make us wonder about the origin of BSP. We have seen that the Seleukid-period officials at Kedesh acquired fine ceramic table vessels from various locales along the Levantine coast: Northern Coastal Fine saucers and bowls from the region of coastal Cilicia/Antioch; semi-fine serving and also perfume vessels from Tyre and probably also 'Akko-Ptolemais; and Central Coastal Fine platters and plates from the vicinity of the Carmel mountains. From where did the site's BSP come?

Perhaps we might consider one of the large, wealthy central or southern Phoenician cities such as Berytus, Sidon, or Tyre. Such an origin would explain the ware's popularity in this precise region as well as the slight discrepancies of distribution and chronology between BSP and ESA. It would also fill in what is otherwise an odd gap in the buying habits of the officials living at Kedesh. On present evidence they acquired platters, plates, saucers, and bowls from coastal suppliers to the south and quite far north, but not from anywhere in between.

Despite the fact that a posting at Kedesh in the 2nd century BC meant being sent to the back country of southern Phoenicia, the site's table wares reveal that officials were not cut off from Mediterranean society and its pleasures. This is especially clear when we take a step back and look at the building and its finds in a regional context. Survey and excavation in the surrounding area have found no large, urbanized settlements contemporary with the site's Seleukid-period occupation. The entire area, which is today almost completely rural, seems to have been that way in the early-mid 2nd century BC as well.²⁵ The administrative building clearly exerted a pull on suppliers. That circumstance made life better for its ancient inhabitants – and quite helpful for its modern investigators as well.

Notes

- 1 For the situation in the southern Levant after Ipsos see Polyb. (5.67-68); Grainger (1992, 47); Cary (1972, 42-43).
- 2 Establishment of Beyond-the-River: Stolper 1989; major Achaemenid administrative centers: Lachish (Tufnell 1953, 131-135; Fantalkin & Tal 2006, 181-183); Ramat Rahel (Aharoni 1956; Lipschits & Vanderhooft 2007); Jerusalem (Lipschits 2006); and Samaria (Crowfoot et al. 1957, 3; Tadmor 1974; Knoppers 2006).
- 3 Josh. 20:7, 21:32; Chr. 6:61; Jos. Ant. 5.91.
- 4 Herbert & Berlin 2003.
- 5 P. Cairo Zenon 59004; Westermann et al. 1940, no. 61.
- 6 Goldstein 1964, 170-171.
- 7 We do find imported amphorae used by the subsequent occupants (on which, see further below). However there is a gap for at least five years; the next stamped handle dates to 140-138 BC.
- 8 Personal communication, Anastasia Shapiro, Israel Antiquities Authority.
- 9 For central Coastal Fine vessels from 'Akko-Ptolemais (Berlin & Stone forthcoming, Dor (e.g., Guz-Zilberstein 1995 fig. 6.3:27).
- 10 Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1995a, 222-233, figs. 5.8-12. On 'Akko-Ptolemais, see Berlin & Stone forthcoming.
- 11 Berlin 1997a, 9-10; 1997b.
- 12 Berlin & Stone (forthcoming).
- 13 Personal communication, Anastasia Shapiro, Israel Antiquities Authority.
- 14 E.g., Gitin 1990, figs. 33:16, 38:22. The ware is identified here as ETS-1.
- 15 As in Hayes 1985b.
- 16 For a clear explanation and description of the characteristic of ESA, see Slane 1997, 269-271.
- 17 For knowledge of the pottery from Kinet Höyük we are indebted to Marie-Henriette Gates, who received us for a few days of study and has allowed us to cite this material in our study here.
- 18 Lund et al. 2006, 492, 503.
- 19 Slane 1997, 255, 269-271.
- 20 Slane et al. 1994, 59-60.
- 21 Slane 1997, 270-271.
- 22 Slane 1997, 269, on ESA dipping; for BSP vessels, personal study of vessels from Kedesh.
- 23 BSP from 'Akko-Ptolemais (Berlin & Stone forthcoming), Anafa (Slane 1997, 269-271, 275-282, pls. 1-4, 37-38), Pella (McNicoll 1992, pl. 77:1-2); Maresha (Levine 2003, 76 fig. 6.1:5-6).
- 24 For information on the appearance of ESA at Jebel Khalid, we thank Heather Jackson.
- 25 Village sites dating to the early or mid 2nd century BC have been excavated nearby at Khirbet Zemel (see Hartal 2002), Tel Anafa (see Herbert 1994, 13-14; Berlin 1997a, 20), and Khirbet esh Shuhara (see Aviam & Avitai 2002).