

A bull's-head rhyton from the Museum of Tarsus in Cilicia, southern Turkey



Abstract: The terracotta rhyton in the form of a bull's head presented in this brief communication, dated most probably to the 1st century BC, is of unknown provenance, in the collection of the Museum of Tarsus since 1973. It is in very good condition and shows an admirable level of craftsmanship. Rhyta were ceremonial vessels that had taken on a votive function in the Hellenistic period when they were frequently deposited in the tombs as part of the grave goods.

Key words: rhyton, Hellenistic ceramics, bull's head, Cilicia, Turkey

Hellenistic ceramics from Cilicia, a region on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor [Fig. 1], represent an underpublished category despite numerous publications of excavation results (e.g., Tarsus-Gözlükule and Nagidus, as well as Antioch-on-the-Orontes in Graeco-Roman Syrian territory). The lack of a general overview of vessel types, production origins and chronology is particularly burdensome with regard to the territory extending from eastern Cilicia to the northern part of Syria. Some information is available from the collections of international museums, but with many of the finds coming from the antiquaries market, reliable findspots are not always indicated. In turn, the local archaeological museums in Cilicia in southern Turkey—Alanya, Anamur, Taşucu, Silifke, Mersin, Tarsus,

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Adana and Osmaniye, listing them from west to east—rarely publish catalogues of their collections, hence the finds in their collections, which could fill the gap with greater reliability, are not known to many researchers.

This is the case of rhyta, small ceremonial vessels, which are not numerous in

Cilician museums. The vessel presented here comes from the Museum of Tarsus, which was inaugurated in 1971 and has an extensive collection, especially from the ancient site of Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia and the most influential Graeco-Roman city of Cilicia Pedias, that is, Plain Cilicia.

RHYTA IN THE PREHELLENISTIC AEGEAN, GREECE AND ASIA MINOR

In ancient times, rhyta (drinking horns) of metal, clay, stone or faience, in various animal forms or with animal foreparts, were ritual offering vessels used mostly during fertility cult celebrations to pour liquids. They were filled with whatever was needed through a hole where the rim

is and emptied during the ritual through another hole in their nostrils.¹ These vessels, used later during banquets for drinking, are often distinguished by the variety and refinement of shape, especially among numerous precious metal goods that were placed in graves as a sign of the status of



Fig. 1. Cilicia in Turkey (Map S. Pataci, 2018)

¹ On rhyta generally: Ebbinghaus 2005; Svoboda – Cončev 1956, 9–89; and for further references on rhyta: Hoffmann 1989, 131 especially note 2; and rotroff 2019.



Fig. 2. Typological comparanda for bull's-head rhyta: top, from Porsuk; center, from Aşvan Kale near Elazığ in eastern Anatolia (Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum in Elazığ); bottom, from the Museum of Çorum in central Anatolia (Photos E. Lafli, 2019)

the deceased and the custom of gathering together to banquet or in adherence to a concept of afterlife that included an underworld often engaged in joyful conviviality (Ebbinghaus 2000: 98; see also Jehasse and Jehasse 1973: 87, Fig. 39). They could well have been drinking vessels or vessels for filling a bowl from which the banqueters would drink, and were increasingly connected with the image “of dead persons” (“heroes”) (Ebbinghaus and Ellis Jones 2001: 393 Note 54).

Rhyta were produced especially in the 2nd millennium BC. Bull’s head rhyta were particularly common in this period. The best-known example of a bull’s head rhyton is a vessel made of serpentinite from the Little Palace of Knossos on Crete, dated to 1450–1400 BC (McInerney 2009: 7–8; see also Hoffmann 1989: 137). It was used in religious ritual, banquet and festival settings. Libations of wine, water, oil, milk, or honey were used to worship a god or honour the dead. The libation would be poured through the neck and spouted through the bull’s mouth and into the earth. The rhyton would be made to represent the sacrificed bull individually in his honour.

According to Herbert Hoffmann (1961; 1989), three types of rhyta appear in Classical Greek art shortly after 480 BC. These are bent rhyta, horn rhyta and animal head cups (Hoffmann 1961: 21). Each of these three types derives from a Persian prototype and these rhyta were considered a symbol of heroic status as *kantharoi*. The known examples of animal head cups in the Greek Classical period have the heads of rams, donkeys, deer, hounds, boars, bulls, lions, cows, vultures, goats, griffins, sheep, lion cubs, panthers, pigs, horses, mules, antelopes and sea dragons (Hoffmann 1989, 141: Pls 1, 2). As a part of “animal head cups”, bull’s head rhyta played a special role in the pre-Hellenistic Greek world,² and they became common again after the birth of red-figured vases in the 5th century BC (Ebbinghaus 2008a: 145; Ebbinghaus and Ellis Jones 2001: 385 Note 9, see also 386 Note 18, 388, 390, 394 Nos 8–9). During the Iron Age, as well as the Archaic and Classical periods in Asia Minor and in the rest of the Eastern Mediterranean, there were numerous well known examples of bull’s head rhyta, mostly made of clay [Fig. 2],³ but also of metal and stone

2 For an Achaemenid bronze bull-protome rhyton in the Antikenmuseum Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (accession no. 31158): Hoffmann 1989, 154, Figs 22a, 22b.

3 Typologically and chronologically, the closest vessel to the rhyton from Tarsus was excavated in Aşvan Kale near Elazığ in 1969. It came from the destruction level of a late Hellenistic building dated by coins to about 65 BC (Mitchell 1980: 253, Fig. 126, discussion of the find context, 37–41). This fits the late Hellenistic date assigned to the example from Tarsus (S. Mitchell, personal communication, 29 March 2021). Bull’s head rhyta were especially popular in Phrygia and central Anatolia during the Iron Age; see Ebbinghaus 2008b; a fragment from Gordium: Bald Romano 1995: 6–7, No. 6 Pls 3, 6 (early or middle Phrygian period, not later than the 5th century BC, manufactured in central Anatolia); some further Phrygian examples: Tuchelt 1962: 64–68, Pls 10, 11; and other examples from the Aegean and Anatolia between 1600 and 700 BC: Guggisberg 1996: 206–218. For Persian-period ceramic rhyta from Gordium studied by Susanne Ebbinghaus: Sams, Burke, and Goldman 2007: 380–381. See also rhyta from Egypt: Adriani 1938–1939; and Iran: Ghirshman 1962: 77, Fig. 10.

(for instance, Drew-Bear et al. 2007: 398). During the Classical period, scenes depicted on figured bull's head rhyta were sometimes arranged on the neck, mostly with Dionysian imagery (Hoffmann 1989: 150, Figs 18a–c, 151), although there are numerous examples without figures as well. The great abundance of rhyta in different animal forms or with animal foreparts in neighboring Cyprus (Jehasse and Jehasse 1973: 85–92) can most probably be attributed to Persian influence,

but the rhyta from Cilicia are not known in greater detail. Some examples of terracotta rhyta are also known from Hellenistic and early Roman Syria [Fig. 3].⁴ Because of their elaborate form, perhaps commissioned by their owners, these rhyta have few comparanda, making their dating more difficult in general. Terracotta rhyta in the shape of a bull's head during the Hellenistic and Roman period are less known in Asia Minor compared to the earlier periods.⁵

TERRACOTTA BULL'S HEAD RHYTON FROM TARSUS

The terracotta rhyton in the shape of a bull's head from the Museum of Tarsus (accession no. 18670; on display)



Fig. 3. A terracotta rhyton from Hama in western-central Syria, Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen (Photo E. Lafli, 2019)

is remarkable in terms of the state of preservation, details of craftsmanship and richness of the decoration. It was certainly intended for a special table [Fig. 4]. It was acquired in 1973 by a local salesman who probably found it in the area of Tarsus.

The measurements are: length 26 cm; height (with horns) 18 cm; width across projecting ears (at back) 8.9 cm; across forehead at root of horns 6.7 cm; depth of open chalice 5.8 cm. wall thickness from 0.2–0.3 cm in the cheek part to 1 cm in the more heavily moulded places; chalchalice wall thickness 0.5–0.6 cm; strap handle low set, thickness 2.8–2.9 cm.

Except for two little broken horns, the rhyton has survived intact. The surface is

4 For instance, a red-slipped fragment from Hama in western-central Syria, today in the Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen: Papanicolaou-Christensen and Friis Johansen 1971: 203, Fig. 79, 204, with references to two further examples from the National Museum of Damascus and Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

5 "Hellenistische Figurengefässe" with some references to Hellenistic rhyta and chronology of Hellenistic and Sub-Hellenistic–(Early) Roman plastic vessels, especially from Asia Minor: Mandel 1988: 212–215, especially 214. Also a formerly unnoticed clay bull-head rhyton from the Roman phase at Zank Höyük near Avanos in Cappadocia in central Anatolia: Sever 1998: 530 (no photo or drawing).

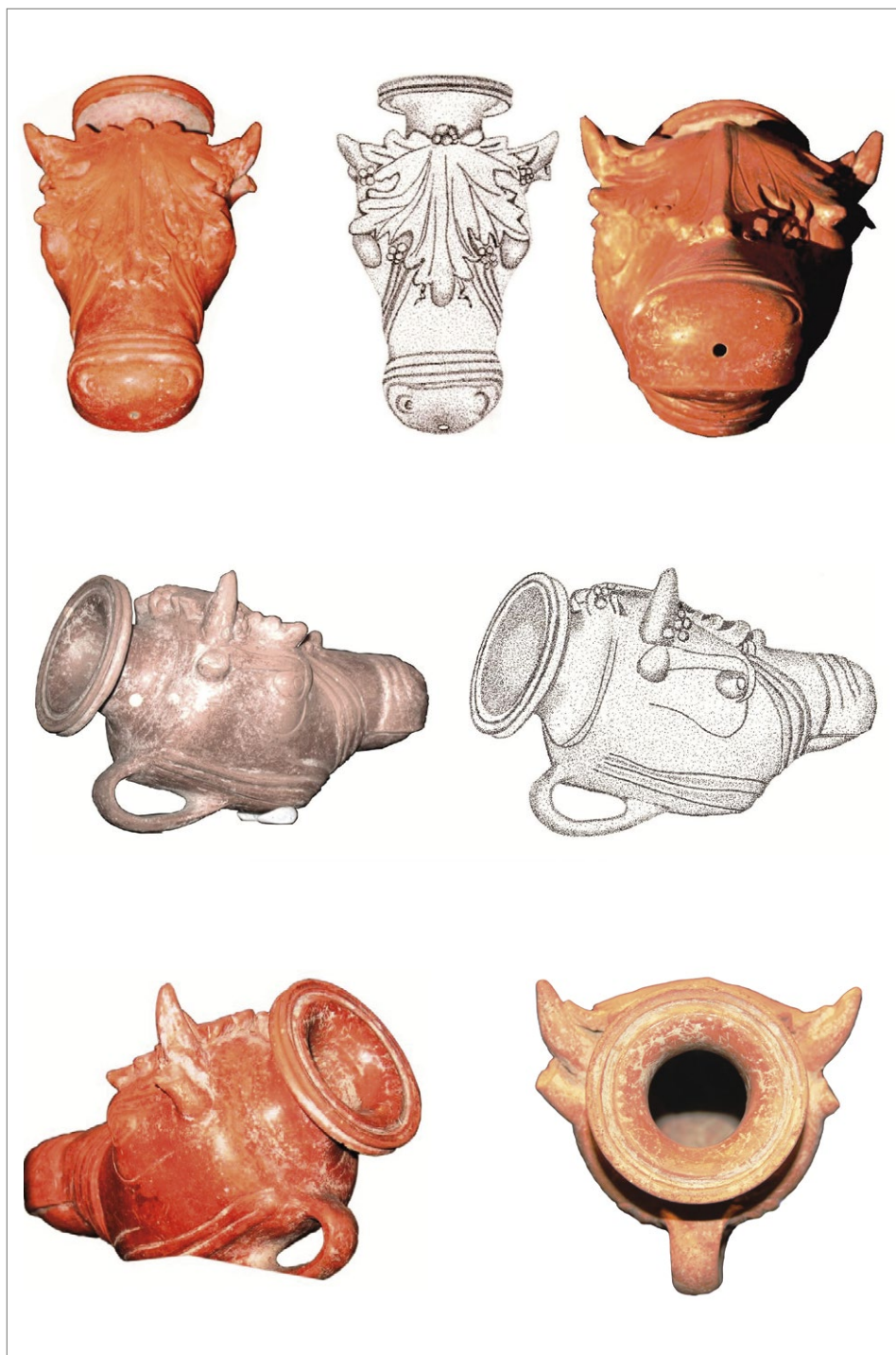


Fig. 4. Bull's-head rhyton from the Museum in Tarsus (Courtesy Museum of Tarsus)

also perfectly preserved with a shiny slip and very fine patina.

The fabric is similar to ESA fabric: orange-red ware with inclusions, slip the same color as the clay, glossy over the exterior.

The rhyton was mouldmade with parts modeled by hand as well as using the potter's wheel. It is shaped as a bull's head with two little horns and a horizontal handle, clearly imitating a lost bronze prototype. In keeping with the standards of late Hellenistic coroplastic art, the bull's head is finely modelled with rich details in relief, such as the large vine leaf on the forehead with clusters of small grapes. This is a Dionysian symbol reminiscent of the theme of the feast, while the infulae adorning the snout symbolize a sacrifice. The craftsmanship imitating metal prototypes and the naturalistic style are typical of Hellenistic relief ceramics of Asia Minor and Syria, especially

in the form of a leaf. A hole (diameter roughly 0.5 cm) appears at the top of the snout, which could reflect ritual use of the vessels.

COMPARANDA

An unpublished terracotta rhyton said to be from a necropolis in Rough Cilicia, displayed today at the museum of Anamur, has an amphora-like body [Fig. 5]. It originates most probably from the necropolis of Kelenderis or Nagidus and can be dated to the 4th century BC (for a parallel, see Ebbinghaus 1999: 403, 4th–3rd century BC). However, it is neither morphologically, nor chronologically parallel to the discussed rhyton from Tarsus.

Several other figured vessels are known from Cilicia, most of which are typologically not a “rhyton”: a terracotta vessel in the form of a boar's head with a protruding tusk was found in a rock-cut grave in the necropolis of Elaiussa



Fig. 5. Terracotta rhyton with an amphora-like body from Rough Cilicia, 4th century BC (Photo E. Lafli, 2007)



Fig. 6. Boar's-head vessel necropolis of Elaiussa Sebaste, late 1st century BC/early 1st century AD (Photo E. Lafli, 2007)

Sebaste; rescue excavations at the cemetery were conducted by the museum of Erdemli in 1973 [Fig. 6]. It has been said that a coin of Claudius I, an early Roman terracotta unguentarium and an amphoriskos were also uncovered in the same burial (Mustafa Ergün from Mersin, personal communication, 2005). This ceremonial vessel appears to belong to the late 1st century BC and early 1st century AD.⁶ An “askos” with a goat protome from Cilicia has been illustrated in the archaeological literature (Svoboda and Cončev 1956: 50 Note 163, Fig. 13).

Another four typological parallels to the example from Tarsus came from excavated contexts of some sites in Asia Minor. A black-glazed rhyton with added touches of white paint, shaped like a prancing horse (preserved H. 10.2 cm)



Fig. 7. A lion's-head rhyton in the Museum of Aydın in western Anatolia (photo E. Lafli, 2019).

6 A similar ceremonial vessel in the form of a fox (H. 16.5 cm, W. 15.0 cm), representing a Pergamene type, was found in Grave 13 of the necropolis of Aenus, eastern Thrace and dated to the early Roman period (Başaran 1988: 601, 617, Fig. 12).

was excavated in a domestic context at Kinet Höyük in eastern Cilicia, where the medieval occupants reused Hellenistic vessels, including this one (Gates 2004: 409, 415, Fig. 11. Accession no. KNH-1296 [02 Y 51 L.71]). A similar terracotta rhyton was found in a domestic context at Porsuk (or Zeyve) Höyük in southern Cappadocia in central Anatolia (Beyer et al. 2005: 302, Figs 9a–b). This piece is black-slipped and, according to the French excavators, its date is “Hellenistic”, because it was found with a typical Hellenistic unguentarium (Beyer et al. 2005: 297). The Porsuk find is similar in morphology to the one from Tarsus. The third parallel was discovered in the German excavations of the höyük (mound) site of Perge in Pamphylia (unpublished; M. Recke, Giessen, personal communication, 2008). The Perge piece is also Hellenistic in date and is slipped with white as well as rose engobe. Only a large fragment of this example is preserved, namely the mouth with the horns, that is, the upper hull. The German excavators have interpreted the find as a votive item in the form of a “Hohlterrakotta” rather than a functional cultic vessel because of the surface colours, which are neither red-slipped like the Tarsus rhyton nor black-slipped like the example from Porsuk. The last parallel originates from Kurul Kalesi, a Hellenistic mountaintop site that is located 13 km north of Ordu in ancient Pontus (northeastern Turkey). The elaborately ornamented, painted terracotta bull's head rhyton was found in 2017 in the sanctuary of Cybele (Şenyurt et al. 2019: 702, 706, Fig. 4). This spectacular and very well preserved vessel should be dated to the Middle Hellenistic period.

In morphological terms, a bull's head rhyton, which resembles most the one at Tarsus, was in the collection of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin before being lost during World War II. It was allegedly picked up in Istanbul by Martin Schede, the former director of the Abteilung Istanbul des Archäologischen Instituts des Deutschen Reiches, but it originates from Kütahya in Phrygia. It is known only from a poor illustration (accession no. 30949. H 19.5 cm, handle and horns missing).

Several rhyta with certain iconographic similarities and a strong animalistic taste are known from other sites and museums in and outside of Asia Minor [Figs 2, 7]. A similar one from the Roman period was published from Montirone, near Abano Terme in Padua, Italy (Lavizzari Pedrazzini 1993: 151). The position of the mouth and of the ring are comparable to the said rhyton and another one stored at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which was referred to in the same article.

As shown by the examples above, rhyta as burial equipment were not a rare find in Hellenistic and Roman graves in Cilicia (e.g., terracotta rhyton from a late Hellenistic burial in Gerasa, Jordan, Kehrberg 2004: 299, 301, Fig. 1). The example from Tarsus was probably deposited in a monumental grave during the late Hellenistic period and thus functioned as a burial gift.

Because of its elaborate form, this particular rhyton has almost no exact parallel, which makes its precise dating difficult; however, it may be dated to the late Hellenistic period as its decoration is typical of 1st century BC art.

CONCLUSION

The Tarsian rhyton is probably an outstanding example of late Hellenistic grave goods in Plain Cilicia, and demonstrates the penetration of the Dionysian cult in connection with oriental funerary rites into late Hellenistic Cilicia. However, Hoffmann was of the opinion that animal heads were chosen for rhyta because of their sculptural and decorative qualities

rather than any specific cult associations (Hoffmann 1989: 131).

The bull's-head rhyton from Tarsus could be a product of workshops from northwestern Syria, most probably the region of Antioch-on-the-Orontes. It will be interesting to know if this kind of rhyta exist in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Hatay in Antakya.

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