

Domestic Devotions in Late Antique Beth Shean

BY JORDAN PICKETT

A variety of objects found in the residential quarter testify to the expression of the Christian religious identity of the inhabitants, ranging from cross-shaped doorknockers to modest jewelry embellished with Christian symbols. Most intriguing are the souvenirs from pilgrimages to holy places, which would have figured into daily devotions or rituals of healing. Both the Penn Museum team and Israeli excavators discovered devotional objects in domestic contexts at Beth Shean.

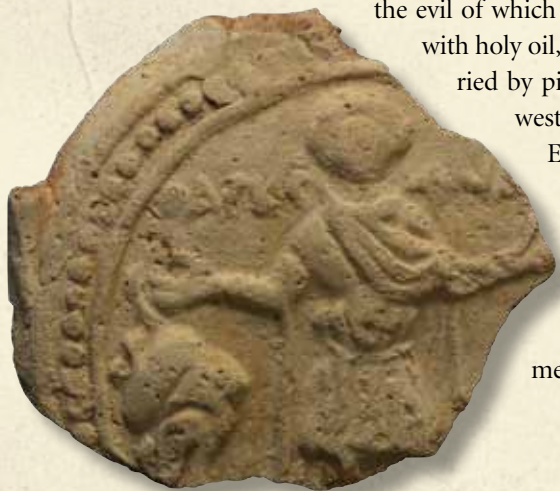
A bronze doorknocker, like this one found in the residential area of the lower west terrace of the tell, would have identified the house's occupants as Christian. LTW (Lower Terrace West) room 171, Museum object #29-108-106, UPM Image #238297.



IN THE LIFE OF THE Syrian pillar-dwelling saint Simeon Stylites, a man brought his sick son to the foot of the saint's pillar, and was given a small clay token impressed with Simeon's image. Simeon told the man, "the power of God...is efficacious everywhere. Therefore, take this *eulogia* [literally 'a blessing'] made of my dust, depart and when you look at the imprint of our image, it is us that you will see." Though *eulogiae* in the 4th century are described as actual experiences at the Holy Places (like being baptized in the Jordan River or eating a meal in the place of the Last Supper), by the 6th century *eulogiae* had become physical objects sanctified by contact with the divine, given or sold to pilgrims to take home, somewhat akin to souvenirs. But *eulogiae* did more than induce a traveler's memory: by virtue of the concentrated holiness they contained, *eulogiae* could miraculously heal the sick or calm a stormy sea. *Eulogiae* took the shape of pressed-earth seals or tokens (*sphragidia*), lamps, flasks for oil or water (*ampullae*), or even ribbons and pieces of cloth (*brandaria*) that had touched a saint or holy place. Many *eulogiae* were a sensory multiplex of material, inscription, and image. In addition to fostering or even creating memories of the *locus sanctus* (holy place) from which they came, *eulogiae* ensured that the salvific, curative power of the saints was accessible no matter the distance from their shrines.

A fragmentary clay ampulla recovered by the Penn Museum excavations in 1921 came from the shrine of St. Menas in Egypt, located some 60 km west of Alexandria. An ascetic and martyr who died early in the 4th century, Menas's tomb became the object of imperial patronage and was well known across the Mediterranean. A Coptic text describes how pilgrims "suspended a lamp before the grave [of St. Menas].... It burned day and night, and was filled with fragrant oil. And when anyone took oil of this lamp...and rubbed a sick person

with it, the sick person was healed of the evil of which he suffered." Filled with holy oil, ampullae were carried by pilgrims returning to western Europe, Sudan, Eritrea, Asia Minor, the Balkans, and the Near East, where they have been found in Late Antique and medieval contexts.



Above, a view of the excavated cistern and conduit in LTE House III from which the Menas ampulla was recovered. UPM Image #238274. Below, Fisher's team excavates the houses in the lower terrace, where many of the ceramics, lamps, and chandeliers were found, August 1921. LTN House IV, UPM Image #29895. Below left, the fragmentary St. Menas flask, or ampulla, found in a cistern of one of the houses, shows the Egyptian saint praying while a camel kneels at his side. LTE House III Cistern I, Museum object #29-102-176, UPM Image #238298.



The Menas ampulla was recovered in a domestic cistern on the tell's lower eastern terrace. Constituting about two-thirds of one side of the two-handled flask, the fragment is molded with a beaded border encircling an image of Menas in *orans* pose (praying), flanked by bowing camels. An identifying inscription, "Hagios Menas," is partially preserved above him. The ampulla is characteristic of a type usually dated to the 6th or 7th century. Clarence Fisher's diary provides the context for the find: "In one of the rooms of III was a well [properly a cistern] with a stone top piece, apparently made from a column drum. On one side was a byzantine cross. Around it was a stone paved area [opening onto several small rooms]." The arrangement was typical of the neighboring houses, which were all three- or four-room affairs grouped around small courtyards with cisterns. Fisher grouped these houses together into the "Roman Stratum," but the architectural features and small finds indicate continuing occupation until sometime in the late Umayyad or early Abbasid period. For example, a crisply carved vessel found in one of the houses is decorated with crosses set under arches. Although the subject matter is Christian, the so-called Kerbschnitt technique would date it to the early Muslim period.

During the 1990s, the Hebrew University teams at Beth Shean recovered eight clay sphragidia-type eulogiae. In addition to the earliest known image of the Virgin Falling Asleep, or Dormition (Koimesis), these small tokens are stamped with images of the Women at the Tomb, the Ascension, and the Adoration of the Magi, as well as simple nimbed or haloed



The crisply carved ceramics recovered from lower terrace houses indicate the continued occupation of the area by Christians well into the early Muslim period. UPM Image #238271.



A pilgrim's token, found in the Israeli excavation, shows a unique image of the Dormition of the Virgin; it was used in private devotions in a domestic setting.

figures without legible inscriptions. Though two tokens may have been heirlooms, found "out of context in Abbasid and Mamluk deposits," the majority were found lying on the mosaic floor of a large mansion, in situ alongside coins of Justinian II (669–711).

The healing, protective power of the Beth Shean eulogiae came from being seen, touched, and—as light cut-marks on the sphragidia probably indicate—sometimes even ingested. Small-scale eulogiae may have been produced and sold to pilgrims from church-shrines, but their use was primarily domestic and private. Kept in the home or worn on the body as an amulet, they made divine power present for their possessor. Just as Saint Menas models an attitude of prayer, the Virgin Mary at her Dormition is represented at the moment of her death, lying on a bier in her home. As the domestic contexts and images of the Beth Shean eulogiae bear out, these objects were the accessories of private devotion, adopted according to an individual's own concerns, in their own hour of need. 🏠



JORDAN PICKETT is a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Group in Art and Archaeology of the Mediterranean World, University of Pennsylvania.

For Further Reading

Rahmani, L. Y. "Eulogia Tokens from Byzantine Beth-She'an." *Atiqot* 22 (1993): 109–119.

Vikan, G. *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, revised edition, 2010.