[title]**An Anthropomorphic Vessel in the National Museum of Beirut**

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[A-head]Abstract

[abstract]

An anthropomorphic vessel depicting a young man wearing a *nebris* (fawn skin) is on display at the National Museum of Beirut (inv. 25422). The man also wears a torque adorned with a crescent pendant, a type of jewelry commonly found in Egyptian painted portraits of the Roman period. The large bead molding at the bottom of the vessel may also indicate that Egypt, and particularly Alexandria, was the place of manufacture. However, the hair and eye treatment suggest that it may have been cast in a Lebanese workshop.

[main text]

A bronze anthropomorphic vessel came onto the art market in Damascus in 1953. It was acquired by the late Émir Maurice Chéhab, then director-general of antiquities in Lebanon, who actively sought artifacts that had been excavated in his country and subsequently smuggled into Syria for sale. The vessel (inv. 25422) currently is on display at the National Museum of Beirut.

The Beirut vessel has been discussed in the writings of Frances F. Jones and Valérie Marti-Clercx. Jones compares it to a bronze vessel that the Princeton University Museum acquired in the late 1980s. The bust is one of a group of Roman representations of young men, some of whom wear a *nebris* (fawn skin) over their shoulders and a few of whom wear a torque with a pendant around their necks.[[1]](#endnote-1) In her thesis, Marti-Clercx provides a typology of these vessels.[[2]](#endnote-2) The bust in the National Museum of Beirut was cast from the same mold as three others: one of unknown provenance conserved in the Princeton University Art Museum;[[3]](#endnote-3) one in the Louvre;[[4]](#endnote-4) and one in Sozopol, Bulgaria.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Since the object’s location was unknown to these scholars, neither of them had access to the vessel’s complete documentation. This paper investigates the crescent pendant motif and the bead molding, which provide clues as to the date and place of casting.

[A-head]Description

*The Bust*. The elongated and narrow face, depicted off-center, possesses rough facial features (**fig. 28.1**). The prominent nose is rather geometric, with sharp edges, an effect formed by a chisel. The nostrils are subtly incised. The asymmetrical arches of the eyebrows reach the temples. The heavy lids of the small almond-shaped eyes are deeply incised to give them greater emphasis. Lines of incision also mark the eyelashes and eyebrows. The latter seem quite restrained and this accentuates the curved lines of this area of the face. The whites of the eyes show the remains of a different material, probably silver or paste. The thin-lipped mouth seems to have a faint smile and it is the same width as the nose. A gentle rounded curve constitutes the chin.

The head of the figure, which is raised slightly to the right, is crowned by a thick cap of hair composed of short, defined locks that hide the forehead, the ears, and the nape of the neck. They frame the face and give it a distinct presence. Although the locks of hair are irregular in direction, they are all pointed, striated, and more or less the same size. The front locks are in two rows. On the left side, the front row is directed back with only one pointing toward the cheek (**fig. 28.2**); on the right, only two locks fall toward the back (**fig. 28.3**). One elevated lock is positioned on either side of the round opening at the crown of the head, indicating where the hinges of the handle would have been. Curls of hair in low relief cover the remaining space around the rim opening (**fig. 28.4**). Below the crown, the strands gain volume and fall in wavy locks at the back of the neck. They are combed in different directions and untangle at the nape.

The young man wears a torque around his thick neck. Suspended from the torque is a crescent-shaped pendant. The crescent is open at the bottom and ornamented with three beads, one at each end and another in the middle, just at the level of the ribbed ring.

The shoulders and chest are roughly modeled, with the lower edge cut straight and delimited by a bead molding. The upper arms of the figure lie flush against the body. They are lightly indicated at the front.

The figure is draped in a *nebris*, the diagonal folds of which gather on the left shoulder, baring the right shoulder and nipple. One or two pairs of hooves fall across his chest and back, and rest near one another. The folds at front and back are almost identical and are decorated with hatching suggesting the texture of the fur. The right nipple is defined by an incised circle.

*The Vessel*.The 1980s reproduction of a photo from the 1950s shows not only a circular pedestal foot, but also a spout affixed to the top the head. This hexagonal faceted spout has thick molding at the base and a curved rim decorated with a bead molding at the top (**fig. 28.5**). A zoomorphic (lion?) handle was attached at the back. The pedestal foot and the spout are now detached from the bust and their present location is unknown. On the vessel currently displayed in the museum, there is no sign of an attachment for a handle; likewise the opening in the head shows no indication of hinges. The external black layer of the vessel is flaking and corrosion is present at the bottom.

[A-head]Making the Artifact

*Technique*. This bronze vessel was fabricated by indirect casting, using the lost-wax method. The bead molding at the lower part of the bust was added in wax to the model. It varies in thickness from 0.5–1 centimeter (1/4–3/8 in.). The interior and exterior surfaces of the head conform to one another (**figs. 28.6–7**). The outer part was polished after casting; the inner surface remains rough and uneven due to the movement of the wax during the casting process (**fig. 28.8**). The deeply undercut strands of hair and eyelashes were detailed in the wax working model. Brushstrokes are visible on the interior of the bust, and chaplet holes are present in the interior of the head and bust. In its current state, the vessel measures 18 centimeters high, 17 centimeters long, and 11 centimeters wide (7 x 6 3/4 x 4 3/8 in.).

The hatching technique employed to define the eyebrows and the fur, as well as the whitish coloration left in the eyes, are cold work.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The footed pedestal and the spout were also fixed after the casting. The former is attested on a few known examples,[[7]](#endnote-7) while the faceted shape of the spout is unusual; it was evidently soldered to the vessel. However, there is a group of anthropomorphic vessels that were cast with a short spout and two handles.[[8]](#endnote-8) In addition, oinochoai were commonly cast with a neck ending in a spout and a single handle. One anthropomorphic example was found in Banias (Syria) with a zoomorphic handle resembling the Beirut vessel.[[9]](#endnote-9)

*Iconographical Inspirations.* The young man is characterized by his heavy uncombed hair, hiding his forehead as well as his nape, and crowning his head. This style is common to anthropomorphic vessels that represent a certain type of young man, and was inspired by the hairstyle of Antinous, the deified favorite of the emperor Hadrian. The bust and the tilted face are characteristic of Antinous portraits, but not the facial features and the details on this Beirut vessel.[[10]](#endnote-10) Antinous was sometimes portrayed with attributes of the wine god Dionysos, particularly the *nebris*, which was worn by the god and by his followers. The *nebris* shown on some of these vessels is the only meaningful evidence of a Dionysian affiliation.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is depicted like the one associated with Antinous, one hoof falling forward from the shoulder.

Antinous is also sometimes portrayed with an amulet suspended from a torque around his neck;[[12]](#endnote-12)the torque is unknown as a Dionysian attribute. This type of jewelry is most commonly associated with barbarian tribal people,[[13]](#endnote-13) such as the Celts, Goths, and Thracians. The crescent-shaped amulet is found among artifacts of the latter tribe,[[14]](#endnote-14) but it is not exclusive to them. It is also linked to Eastern deities, as we will now see.

[A-head]Eastern Connections?

*Crescent Pendant.* The crescent is an ancient Near Eastern and, later, Hellenistic motif.[[15]](#endnote-15) It is the acknowledged symbol of two main deities: the Graeco-Roman Selene/Luna and the Anatolian god Men. In addition to the obvious lunar symbolism, the crescent may also represent the sky, especially when associated with a circular motif, which can be interpreted as the sun. It can also be considered a fertility symbol,[[16]](#endnote-16) or the symbol of the Phoenician Goddess Caelestis.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The crescent is attested in both the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. In Razgrad (Thrace), a female deity with possible connections to Atargatis or Dea Syria wears the lunar pendant.[[18]](#endnote-18) Examples have also been found in the Danube region dating to the second and third centuries AD,[[19]](#endnote-19) and in England in a second-century AD hoard.[[20]](#endnote-20) Further east, a goddess in Palmyra wears a prominent crescent;[[21]](#endnote-21) Nabatean deities and humans wear bead necklaces with lunar pendants;[[22]](#endnote-22) and crescents also feature on funerary stelae in South Syria.[[23]](#endnote-23) Crescents appear in the painted portraits of Roman Egypt, where the amulets have ball-shaped terminals like the one here.[[24]](#endnote-24)

In Lebanon, crescents with ball-shaped terminals have not yet been attested in jewelry, but some examples were discovered in a spring in the city of Baalbek/Heliopolis as votive standards.[[25]](#endnote-25) Children wearing torques with other amulets are known from the Beka’a plain.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Most of the anthropomorphic vessels like the one in the Beirut Museum have been found in the western part of the Roman Empire, and especially in the Rheno-Danubian region. Some scholars, however, do not exclude Alexandria (Egypt) as a center of production.[[27]](#endnote-27)

*Bead Molding*. The only other example of large bead molding occurring on anthropomorphic bronze vessels is a ewer with silver inlays. It depicts the head of a woman whose brow is adorned by two rows of beads; a third row is strung across her neck.[[28]](#endnote-28) It is part of the Esquiline treasure, consisting mainly of silver artifacts, found in Rome in 1793. The bulk of the treasure has been dated to the fourth or early fifth century AD. The ewer has not been given a precise date within the Roman period,[[29]](#endnote-29) but it seems that it cannot be older than the third century AD.

Bead moldings appeared on silver vessels by the mid-third century AD[[30]](#endnote-30) and were common during the fourth to the fifth centuries AD.[[31]](#endnote-31) The punch-and-die technique used on these vessels was different from bronze casting.[[32]](#endnote-32) Silver vessels with cast beads have been found in Nubia, in Tomb 37 of Ballana. They were discovered with objects decorated with depictions of Venus and Isis, and they date from the third to the sixth century AD.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The date of the Beirut vessel is probably no earlier than the third century AD, the earliest century in which cast bead molding is attested.

[A-head]Conclusion

This anthropomorphic bronze vessel with its footed pedestal reminds us of Roman portrait busts similarly placed.[[34]](#endnote-34) The production of this type of bronze vessel is concentrated in Germania, Bulgaria, and Egypt.[[35]](#endnote-35) It is plausible that this particular vessel was cast in Egypt because of the cast bead molding and the numerous crescent-shaped pendants depicted there, albeit in portraits. However, I would like to propose an alternative hypothesis, namely that it was cast in a Lebanese workshop. Numerous inscriptions found in a bronze workshop active for many generations in Rhodes indicate that it was founded by a family from Tyre.[[36]](#endnote-36) During the Roman period, the legate of Syria, Petronius, is known to have ordered a bronze portrait of Caligula from a Sidonian workshop.[[37]](#endnote-37) The site of another workshop has been excavated in Beirut.[[38]](#endnote-38) Thus it is quite possible for a local artisan to have cast this vessel, especially if a mold was available. The artisan of the Beirut vessel appears to have been unfamiliar with some aspects of his subject: for example, the fawn’s hooves are not sculpted accurately. He stressed the eyes by outlining the lid, a feature characteristic of Syro-Lebanese portraits.[[39]](#endnote-39) Finally, the young man’s locks of hair can be compared to a bust of Helios found near Sidon.[[40]](#endnote-40)

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