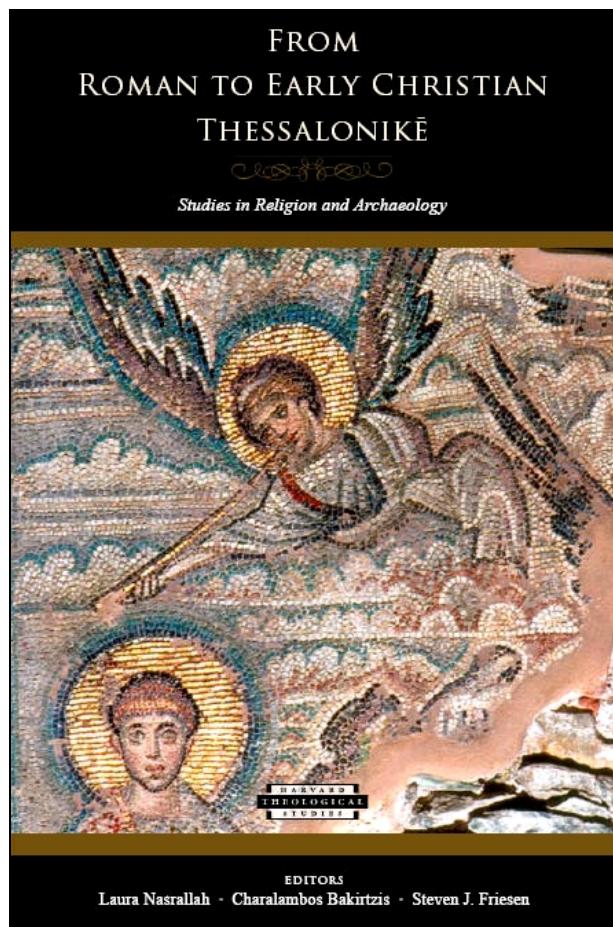


Glassware in Late Antique Thessalonikē (Third to Seventh Centuries C. E.)

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**From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē:
A Conference on Religion and Archaeology
May 2007**

**From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē
Studies in Religion and Archaeology
Edited by Laura Nasrallah, Charalambos
Bakirtzis, and Steven J. Friesen
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Thessalonikē was an important metropolis in the Hellenistic, Roman, and early Christian periods and beyond. This conference is an interdisciplinary venture, bringing together **Greek archaeologists and scholars of Thessalonikē** with scholars of the New Testament, early Christianity and the Byzantine world, and the religions of antiquity. It will include a photographic exhibit of archaeological evidence, entitled "Studying, Conserving, and Displaying Early Christian Thessalonikē." The new data and new interpretations set forth in the conference papers will be published as an edited volume.

Participants in the conference are:

Anastassios C. Antonaras, Richard Ascough, Charalambos Bakirtzis, Slobodan Čurčić, Steven Friesen, Me-

lanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Helmut Koester, Christine Kondoleon, Aristotelis Mentzos, Laura Nasrallah, Pantelis M. Nigdelis, Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzi, James Skedros, Thea Stefanidou-Tiveriou, Christine Thomas, and Christos Zachopoulos.

Anastasios Antonaras is an archaeologist-museologist at the **Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki**. His publications include *Roman and Early Christian Glass Objects From Thessalonikē's Region* and "New Glass Finds With Base Marks From Thessaloniki."

Anastassios C. Antonaras

**Glassware in Late Antique Thessalonikē
(Third to Seventh Centuries C. E.)
S. 299-331**

The **invention of glass** is widely known through what Pliny claims in his *Natural History*. Even if his story has been **proven technically impossible**, Pliny connects the invention of glass with the Phoenician coast and natron merchandisers, who sailed from Egypt. [Pliny, *Nat.* 36.190-192]

Today it is believed that **glass** - along with **faience**, the first artificial, human-made substance - was **probably invented in Mesopotamia around 2200 B. C. E.** [Oppenheim et al., *Glass and Glassmaking*, 4-101] **Colored glass** was already widely used in **Egypt** in the second half of the second millennium B. C. E. [Stern and Schlick-Nolte, *Early Glass*, 20, with exhaustive bibliography] For many centuries after its invention, **glass remained an extremely expensive material**, used only as semiprecious stone and later for production of special vessels found only in palaces and temples. [Ibid., 27-37, 44-53] From the classical Greek period onwards, small glass **unguentaria** [small glass bottles] became more widely available than earlier but were still products for the highest social strata. [Grose, *Early Ancient Glass*, 110-25; Stern and Schlick-Nolte, *Early Glass*, 37-44]

The invention of **glass blowing**, a technological revolution that took place around the early first century B. C. E. somewhere on the **Levantine coast**, led to a gradual fall in the price of glass vessels by the mid-first century C. E. and made possible their use by wider social strata in the eastern Mediterranean. [Israeli, "Invention of Blowing," 46-55; *ibid.*, "What did Jerusalem's First-Century B. C. E. Glass Workshop Produce?" 446-47]

Although **glass vessels** had functions similar to **pottery** ones, glass needs to be treated quite differently from ceramics, and any researcher should keep in mind a few basic differences while studying comparatively these two groups of finds.

During the entire period under consideration, glass was thoroughly recycled. Glassblowers' kilns melted all evidence of the true quantitative distribution and the diversity of original forms. Also, it should be kept in mind that all didactic parts of vessels, like **rims, han-**

dles, and bases, weigh the most and therefore were collected and recycled most consistently, leaving mainly smaller, noncharacteristic fragments on site.

Abb. 2011-1/286
Mid 3rd century - 4th century Tableware / Unguentaria
Drawings by A. C. Antonaras, 2007, S. 303

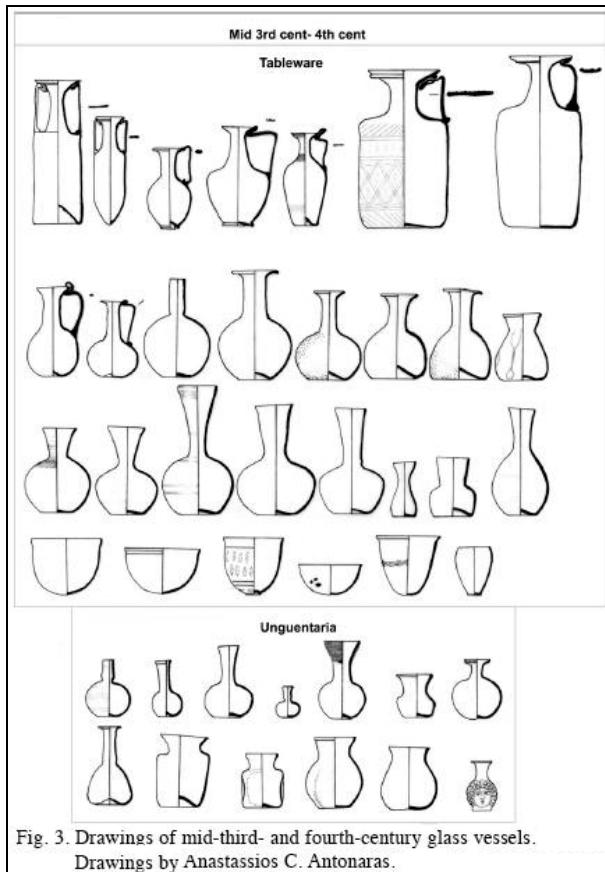


Fig. 3. Drawings of mid-third- and fourth-century glass vessels.
Drawings by Anastassios C. Antonaras.

Thus **archaeological finds do not reflect the everyday life** of the period or area under consideration. Rather, they reflect the consistency of recycling. The only exceptions come from undisturbed strata of abruptly destroyed and/or abandoned sites, which unfortunately are not the case with the finds from Thessalonikē. **Grave goods** do offer an undisturbed picture of the past, but unfortunately reflect only the burial habits of society and not necessarily everyday life. In addition, because the vast majority of excavations conducted in Thessalonikē are salvage operations, we glimpse the always already obscure past through a deforming prism created by the fragmented and circumstantial character of the excavated finds. Furthermore, we must also stress that glass objects were found almost exclusively in graves; therefore they only represent part of the repertoire of the

vessels and objects used in burial and memorial rituals and as grave goods.

[...]

As far as glassmaking and glass products in Late Antiquity are concerned, **Thessalonikē** presents a quite common case, which is not distinguished at all from other contemporary, major Mediterranean urban centers. Glass was used in Thessalonikē by builders for **glazing windows and for decorating the walls of public buildings**. Glass was also frequently used in the form of **lamps** to light the interiors of both public and private spaces. Thessalonians of almost all social strata used glass articles to adorn themselves or their possessions.

But most of all, glass in the form of **vessels** found its place in their households: on the table, not only to pour and to drink, but also to transport and to preserve holy substances, medicaments, cosmetics, and ointments.

Glass, in one or another form, was used by increasingly greater segments of Thessalonikē's society, as its price was quite low and local workshops were active, covering partly the needs of the local market. **In Late Antiquity, glass products reached a degree of distribution which was not surpassed until the advent of the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution** or the cataclysmic social and economic changes in the lifestyle of southeastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.

To conclude this overview, the most tantalizing fact, at least for archaeologists, should be emphasized. We must be aware that the exact **dimensions of the use of glass will never be revealed**, as the vast majority of the evidence is lost forever. These were **recycled in the form of cheap glass shards**, easy to obtain and to melt, which found new life within glassmakers' voracious melting pots.

C. E. = Common Era / n.Chr.

B. C. E. = Before Common / Christian Era / v.Chr.

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