Pot Detectives

Each student in ANT 256: Old World Material Culture (DePaul University) was assigned a tomb group. Following up on Nancy Lapp’s 1981 inquiries, the students contacted the institutions to assess current locations to determine if the artifacts were on display, and if they are used in teaching or for research purposes. The results are mapped below and on tomb group information sheets, which will be added to the Follow the Pots website. With an ASOR Study Collection Fellowship, Kersel also tracked tomb groups.

Why follow pots?

The controlled distribution of tomb groups allowed the Jordanians to decide how and where their cultural heritage was displayed in the public domain. The ability for educational institutions to curate this material responsibly, at a reasonable cost, with the imprimatur of archaeological expertise.

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Images © Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain and Follow the Pots Projects

Sample of tomb group research carried out by DePaul ANT 256 student Nicole Nitti

Current Location and Status of the Original Lapp Tomb Groups

For anywhere between $100 and $1500 USD ASOR institutional members were offered tomb groups from chambers and charnel houses. Twenty-four institutions received tomb groups and a total of 1186 pots and 10 basalt bowls were distributed throughout Australia, Canada, and the United States. Generating almost $14,000 ($56,480 adjusted for today’s dollar value) in income, proceeds from the pot allocation were to be used to fund future publication and excavation at Bab adh-Dhra’, small projects conducted by ACOR, and other ASOR initiatives.

One of the provisions in the original distribution required that the tomb groups should remain intact and without further divisions. In 1981 Nancy Lapp followed up with the various institutions confirming the locations and conditions. As an element of the interdisciplinary Follow the Pots project we continue to track these pots (and others). Today, 23 of 24 tomb groups remain in their original institutions. In 1989 Tomb Group A 66 was transferred from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (Christ Seminary-Seminex) to the Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology at the Pacific School of Religion after the Christ Seminary-Seminex closed. We are also recording if the pots are on display and used for educational purposes.

The Early Bronze Age storage dilemma led the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and ASOR (the Lapp excavation sponsors) to propose an innovative initiative. Tomb groups would be distributed to interested ASOR member institutions for the purposes of display, research, and education. The objects would act as ambassadors of Jordan—when people saw the pots they would want to visit or to start excavations in the country in cooperation with Jordanian colleagues. The pots would also be available to R. Thomas Schaub and Walter Rast charged with the publication of the Lapp excavations.

It began with a single pot

In the mid-1960s Paul Lapp, then director of the W. F. Albright Institute in Jerusalem, was shown a pot with an unusual decoration on the rim. Following this single pot led Paul to Bab adh-Dhra’, an Early Bronze Age (c. 3600-2000 BCE) cemetery and town on the eastern side of the Dead Sea in Jordan. Between 1965 and 1967 under the auspices of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) Lapp and his team, including Susan Cup, Howard Jamieson, Nancy Lapp, Walter Rast, R. Thomas Schaub, Marilyn Schaub, and Fouad Zogbi, carried out salvage excavations of tombs and charnel houses.

Too many pots?

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