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# Jews and the Material in Antiquity

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**H**ow did Jews in the ancient Mediterranean engage, sense, and construct material entities, artifacts, bodies, buildings and more? How did those who were not Jewish perceive or represent the relationships between Jews and matter? How has the history of Jews and matter been reconstructed in modern scholarship and how might scholars approach the nexus of Jews and the material more productively?

These questions were the focus of the 2017–2018 Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies, which was organized around the theme “Jews and the Material in Antiquity.” Head Fellow **RACHEL RAFF NEIS** brought together a group of distinguished scholars from around the world with expertise in archaeology, art history, ancient history, rabbinics, early Christianity, and comparative and ancient religion. The group charted new ways of studying the interface of material culture, materiality, and Jewish history from the third century BCE to the eighth century CE and from Palestine to Babylonia. Learning and conversation was stimulated not only in weekly workshops, public events, and conferences, but also in the context of several hands-on workshops with curators, artists, and makers. The group modeled a comparative and collaborative approach to the study of antiquity and to Judaism.

Fellows approached the theme from a variety of perspectives. **DEBORAH FORGER** considered the variegated materialization of the divine in Second Temple Jewish authors, **TODD BERZON** worked to understand the ways in which Jews and Christians understood the materiality of language and tongues (literal and otherwise), and **CHAYA HALBERSTAM** read Second Temple and rabbinic sources through feminist materialist lenses to illuminate the complex relationships between partiality and justice.

Several fellows sought to understand artifacts and their vitality in ancient Jewish and Mediterranean cultures: **JUAN TEBES** considered Idumeans through the relationship between Jewish textual sources and the art, pottery, and porcine remains in the archaeological record; **RICK BONNIE** studied the use and sensory experience of synagogues and ritual installations, with very cautious use of textual sources; and **SEAN BURRUS** explored Jewish visual culture in Palestine and in the diaspora through a series of case studies across different media. Other fellows worked at the interstices of material and text: **MEGAN NUTZMAN** studied amulet inscriptions for healing and their use by Jewish, Christian, and other people in late antique Palestine; **MICHAEL SWARTZ** analyzed divination texts and artifacts alongside the performative and economic conditions of the professionalized liturgical poets; and **DANIEL PICUS** researched reading as a material practice among late ancient Jews and rabbis.

Finally, two fellows worked on ancient natural worlds: **C. MIKE CHIN** studied the world imagined by late ancient thinkers using an object-oriented approach, which reconfigures the intellectual history of late antiquity as a speculative environmental history of imagined worlds and **RACHEL RAFE NEIS** grappled with late ancient science through the theories of reproduction and generation of human and nonhuman species held by rabbis and others.

We hope you enjoy exploring these new dimensions of scholarship on Jews and material in Antiquity.

As a special gift to our readers this year, we invite you to challenge yourselves with the Activity Pages included as an appendix to this volume. We thank **C. MIKE CHIN** and **CHAYA HALBERSTAM** for their contributions to the editing process and for putting together the Activity Pages. ●





## JUAN MANUEL TEBES

# Pots

**T**he setting is known: Esau came back exhausted from the countryside and saw his younger brother Jacob cooking a stew.

So he asked Jacob to feed him with that red (*adom* in Hebrew) stew; Jacob agreed but only after trading the stew for Esau's birthright. This is why, the story goes, Esau was known as *Edom*. This seemingly common biblical family story, recounted in Genesis 25:29–34, attempts to explicate the origins of the name of the ancestor of the Edomites, people that inhabited southern Transjordan during the first half of the 1st millennium BCE. Was the *adom* stew a real meal known by the author(s) of the story—apparently prepared with lentils and accompanied by bread—or is just a literary device to make

a pun on Edom's name? We'll probably never know, but we know a lot about the pots with which Edomites and Judaeans cooked, ate, and drank.

*A bowl from Horvat Qitmit in 7th century BCE northern Negev*

A potter living in Horvat Qitmit, or at a nearby locale within the ancient kingdom of Edom, manufactured a fine globular bowl, using the whitish-green clay coming from the local loess so typical of the northern Negev. Its thin walls and painted decoration—including bands, lines, and dots in red, brown, and black—exhibit the potter's advanced skills. Bowls of this kind, and others with flatter or deeper bodies, were widely popular in Edom and the Negev during the 7th and first half of the 6th centuries BCE, especially in the Edomite city of Buseirah. Though seemingly mundane objects, they tell a profound story of how the persons who populated the ancient Mediterranean world—including those from Israel—appropriated, rejected, and even at times embraced aspects of neighboring cultures in order to bolster the cultural status of their own.

It's not difficult to guess why these fine bowls enjoyed such popularity: they are aesthetically appealing and performed their function as serving

*"Edomite" painted bowl from Tel 'Aroer in the northern Megev.*

*Courtesy of Hebrew Union College*



and drinking vessels for the table quite efficiently. Yet there is a deeper social (and political) aspect to consider: these bowls bear a striking resemblance to contemporary fine carinated Assyrian vessels, known by their revealing name of “palace ware” and associated with elite drinking rituals. This is a perfect example of what anthropologists call elite emulation and conspicuous consumption: in short, the use of food consumption to imitate the ethereal power emanating from the power centers of civilization. “Edomite” bowls performed this function extraordinarily well. These open and shallow pots highlighted the display of high-valued food among guests. Their polychrome painted and molded decoration appealed to the eye while their delicate surface texture, hardness, and profile caressed the hands, thus establishing social bonds of solidarity between peers while at the same time maintaining unequal relations of status and power.

#### A cooking pot from Tel Malhata in 7th century BCE northern Negev

A domestic potter living in Edom or the eastern Negev manufactured a different pot with the clay from the local Nubian sandstone typical of the Petra region, in what is Jordan today. He made it open and neckless, although at other times he prepared cooking pots with a short neck. The remarkable thing is that someone—probably the potter or another villager or pastoral nomad moving between Edom and the Negev—transported it to the Judean town of Tel Malhata, a distance of about 37 miles as the crow flies.

Why would someone take the trouble to carry a bulky casserole-like dish across a desert landscape when similar pots were available at the destination point? We know that cuisine is one of the most traditional aspects of culture, so it's possible that

this “Edomite” potter, and others like him, deliberately manufactured their pots with characteristics different from those in use in the Negev Judean sites. In doing so, they created and maintained social boundaries with their western neighbors.

“Edomite” casserole-like dishes presented a wider orifice than did their Judean counterparts, making it easier to insert and remove food and, most importantly, allowing a greater evaporation of liquids. This gave the resultant food a different, “drier” taste. Flavor was also manipulated by the use of sandstone clays; these clays contain a high proportion of quartz particles that decrease shrinking during firing, thus permitting higher temperatures and contributing to a more “burnt” effect in taste. Meals cooked in a casserole-like dish such as these tasted differently than those prepared in the Judean pots.

#### A holey bowl from Tel Maresha in 2nd century BCE Idumaea

Five centuries later Edom was gone, but its culture survived in Idumaea (the Greek name for Edom), a heavily Hellenized territory in the Judean mountains. A potter living in Tel Maresha, the most important Idumaeon city, was adamant about producing very peculiar vessels: bowls, plates, and jugs with one, two, or more holes in the bases and under the handles. What was the rationale in puncturing vessels after firing, turning them into earthenware that was not functionally usable, a phenomenon also present in pottery found at other contemporaneous sites?

Scholars have long debated the meaning of this practice, but the current consensus suggests possible ritual significance. Jewish notions of purity and impurity, which we know of from much later-dating

Mishnaic sources, may be at play. If this is the case, then the holes were likely meant to prevent the reuse of the vessels. This would render the vessels pure, or preclude them from being defiled. If our potter and his clients from Maresha were following early precedents of the *halakhic* rules, then the Idumaeans' forced conversion to Judaism, as described by Flavius Josephus, would have been easier than usually assumed.

Bowls, cooking pots, and other seemingly common vessels tell a long story of ethnic boundaries, social hierarchies, and class camaraderie, but they also reveal shared ritual values across different ethnic communities in ancient Edom (and later Idumaea), and their ancient Judaeans (and later Jewish) counterparts in the Negev. It may be that Judaeans and Edomites could finally share a bowl of a good lentil *adom* stew. ●



TODD S. BERZON

## Monuments

**T**he Statue of Liberty. The Taj Mahal. The Pyramids of Giza. The Colosseum. The Great Wall of China. These massive structures are enduring symbols of cultural power, social bonds, natural resources, and political values. They were celebrated monuments of their time, and continue to inspire reverence and awe to the present day. There is one monument, however, that stands in stark opposition to this list of magisterial achievements. It is a monument that was never completed and likely never existed. It was built as much from pride and hubris as it was from brick and mortar. For that very reason, it is perhaps the most consequential monument never to have existed: it is the biblical tower of Babel.

According to Genesis 11, a linguistically united and ambitious human race decided to build a city with a tower that would reach heaven so as to “make a name” for itself; “otherwise,” the inhabitants of Babel feared, “we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gn 11:4 et seq.). God, evidently fearing the power of a unified and motivated human race—“look, they are one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them”—halted construction of the city by confusing humanity’s singular language. God further concretized this linguistic chaos by scattering humans across the earth. The tower of Babel is the Bible’s explanation of linguistic and national diversity. It is a story of human difference.