

## Hot Pursuit: Integrating Anthropology in Search of Ancient Glass-Blowers

By Alysia Fischer. Pp. xii + 190, figs. 42. Lexington Books, Lanham, Md. 2008. \$65. ISBN 978-0-7391-0960-1 (cloth).

Like the glass made by the glassblower, this admirable book and its author have many facets. Both archaeologist and glassblower, Fischer has undertaken an analysis of the glassblowing industry at Sepphoris in northern Israel from the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. in order to understand better the lives of the glassblowers and the traces they left in the material record. Also being an anthropologist and historian of technology, her work is an anthropology of craft that provides invaluable context for the myriad typological studies of ancient blown glass. Fischer adopts, and urges others to adopt, an integrated anthropological approach to the study of ancient technology, combining a variety of methods and concerns: ethnoarchaeology, archaeometry, experimental archaeology, and research into specialized skill acquisition and the physical effects of a craft on the craftsman. There is a lot going on in this book, and it should come as no surprise that a person with so many threads of experience—glass artist, crew member, moldmaker, anthropologist, archaeologist, teacher—has woven together a complex portrait of a technology both in a specific context and in more universal terms.

In the early chapters of the book, Fischer provides a concise and lucid treatment of the glassblowing industry at Sepphoris, setting it into a regional economic, cultural, and technological context with thorough and accessible treatments of the acquisition of resources, the two-stage manufacture and distribution of raw glass/glass vessels, the use of glass, and the reuse/recycling of glass. Equally clear and useful is her discussion (ch. 3) of the specific finds (other than vessels) from Sepphoris related to glassblowing: threads and droplets,

glass slag, ash, fuel remains (wood charcoal and burned olive pits), and furnace/workshop remains. All this is presented in a useful way to both the reader seeking general knowledge and the specialist with site-specific concerns. In addition, these sections should prove helpful to field archaeologists in making an initial identification of the traces of glass production and using those traces to reconstruct the nature of production at a site.

The experienced glassblower shines through when Fischer turns to experimental archaeology and ethnoarchaeology to get at particular questions about the choices glassblowers made in the construction of their furnaces, in their preferences for particular raw materials, and in the patterns they left in the archaeological record. In chapter 4, Fischer tells a lively tale of the trials, tribulations, and lessons learned from her efforts to construct and fire a working model of a Galilean glass furnace. Chapter 5 finds her on a whirlwind ethnoarchaeological tour of Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt in hopeful search of traditional glass workshops that will give her more insight into the methods of ancient glassblowers. Here, she encounters the forces of modernization at work (high-tech ceramic bricks, motor oil for fuel) as well as the familiar stories of craftsmen moving around in search of resources (and to avoid conflict), of indispensable ingredients shipped in from a distance (e.g., cobalt oxide from Germany), of small-scale production in family-based shops, and of fathers passing the craft to sons (although with increasing reluctance on the part of the sons). Despite the brief duration of her visits to each shop, Fischer's practiced eye, together with observations made by others in Syria, India, and Afghanistan, allows her to

generate a useful “series of general guiding principles regarding glass-working that should be true for most times and places” (113). There is a clear benefit to researching not only the general patterns left by glassworkers in the material record but also small lessons gleaned from observations of such items as sections of railroad track used for pipe supports, shock absorbers and vehicle springs used as pontils, and the broken mirror of a vain young glassworker. What would we make of those items if we found them in the archaeological record? Fischer’s interest in glassblowers as persons and the conditions under which they worked gives her writing a compelling immediacy. Her empathy is palpable in the final two chapters of the book, which focus on the ways in which craftspeople acquire and think about glassblowing skills and on the physical effects of glassblowing on the individual over a lifetime.

Although Fischer’s work is about the activity of glassblowing rather than the material itself, she clearly hopes that her approach to the craft can produce various salutary effects on more traditional specialists’ studies of archaeological glass. It comes as no surprise to those of us who have had to reexcavate glass finds from the dusty shelves of depots at various sites that archaeological glass has been undervalued by mainstream archaeology over the years. Getting important corpora of excavated glass studied at all has required much effort, and the specialization itself is rare in the United States. In the opening sections of her book, Fischer makes a strong case to project directors for the archaeological value of glass, not only as a dating method and a source of information about daily life but also as an extremely sensitive indicator of cultural change at a site. She calls for a constructive

reexamination of the whole enterprise of the specialist report, which, she asserts, often generates a fairly sterile typological accounting of finds without necessarily allowing “the glass data to play a major role in reconstructing past human activities at a site” (6). Far better, in her view, would be greater consideration of how to integrate the publication of glass finds with the study of the site as a whole from the inception of the project. She argues that in a perfect world, glass specialists should have some practical experience with glassworking. Despite the earnestly preachy tone of these sections of her book and the recurrent definitions, clarifications, and quotations that too often betray the origins of the work as a dissertation, Fischer makes her case convincingly (if a member of the choir does say so).

I began Fischer’s book with some concern for whether she could carry through on her many promises; I completed the book in a happy exhaustion, edified and enlightened about many aspects of the ancient industry of glassblowing that I thought I knew well. Whether she is discussing archaeological debris patterns, ancient furnace design, resource acquisition, or modern-day glass shops, Fischer pulls her reader into the heat, smoke, and glare of the glass workshop. She makes a good case for the utility of an integrated anthropological approach to the history of technology, and the resulting effort enriches our appreciation of the glass vessels we excavate, study, and admire by helping us catch a glimpse of the glassblowers who made them.

JANET DUNCAN JONES

CLASSICS DEPARTMENT  
BUCKNELL UNIVERSITY  
LEWISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA 17837  
JJONES@BUCKNELL.EDU