Terracotta Figurine of a Boy with Jug in the Kelsey Museum

Seleucia on the Tigris, Iraq, 143 BCE–70 CE  
Head and bust: semidraped boy with jug  
Terracotta with buff slip, 5.8 × 5.0 cm  
University of Michigan Excavations, Kelsey Museum 33701

Seleucia on the Tigris hosted the caravans and merchant ships that brought food, drink, artistic traditions, and religious practices from as far as Italy, Greece, Africa, India, and China. The city was founded in ca. 307 BCE by Seleucus I and thrived under Parthian domination until ca. 227 CE (Invernezzi 1996, 235; Savage 1977, 6–7). The University of Michigan excavated at Seleucia, eighteen miles south of Baghdad, for six seasons in 1927/8–1931/2 and in 1936/7 (Savage 1977, 6; Waterman 1931; 1933). Among the approximately 3,000 figurines found during the Michigan excavations is a terracotta image of a boy cradling a jug on top of his shoulder in the Kelsey Museum.¹

The boy extends his right arm over his head to grasp the handle of the jug, while his left arm props up the base of the vessel. The coroplast has deftly crafted details on the palm-sized image such as the youngster’s wide, open eyes with thick eyelids, a large right ear with prominent earlobe, closed lips, flat nose, and short hair parted down the center. His features all combine to create an endearing image of a child busy in his task. A chamblys, or Parthian cloak, gathers in folds around his neck and cascades diagonally across his torso to reveal the boy's chest. The vessel that rests on his shoulder resembles the pear-shaped, one-handled jugs found on all levels of the Michigan Seleucia excavations used to transport water or other liquids (Debevoise 1934, 62–75; Valtz 1984, 43–44; 1993,172). In profile the figure appears slightly bent, straining from the weight of his burden.

¹ The Seleucia figurines from the 1920-1930s excavations are in the collections of the Kelsey Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Toledo Museum, and the Baghdad National Museum (Savage 1977, 26; Van Ingen 1939, vii, 5). The figurines in the Kelsey Museum are from the first five seasons, 1927/8–1931/2. Italian archaeologists from the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino peril Medio Oriente e l’Asia eventually resumed excavations at Seleucia in 1964 and continued their work until 1989.
The hollow terracotta figurine was created by pressing wet clay into two separate molds, removing the clay impression, and joining the two halves at a seam that was later pared down (Allen 1980, i). Smaller details like the part in the hair were added after the object was separated from the mold. A portion of the vent hole, which was carved out to prevent the clay from warping or bursting, appears on the back of the figurine (Van Ingen 1939, 11, 205). Brush marks from the buff slip (i.e., liquid clay) painted on before firing are also visible on the terracotta (Van Ingen 1939, 205).

More than thirty terracotta representations of boys and young men carrying jugs found in all of the excavated levels of the site attest to the popularity of this motif throughout Seleucia’s history (Van Ingen 1939, 201–206). None of these are exact duplicates, as revealed by variations in facial features, hair style, dress, pose, vessel shape, and overall size. Many of the intact figurines illustrate boys seated on cone-shaped bases, while a few depict standing males (Van Ingen 1939, 201–206). Several of the youngsters also carry ladles, suggesting their role in dispensing wine. The meaning of and purpose for these figurines, however, remain uncertain.

Our terracotta boy, along with many similar figurines, was found in Trial Trench 4, most likely a temple precinct or possibly a heroon (shrine) dedicated to the Seleucid kings at its earliest stage (Van Ingen 1939, 5, 201–206; Hopkins 1972, 13). The Kelsey figurine was arguably a votive dedication in this temple complex, rather than a toy, house decoration, or a mortuary object (see, generally, Higgins 1967, 9). A reservoir located in this temple compound was used to provide water to worshipers (Hopkins 1972, 23); the presence of this reservoir may elucidate the significance of the terracotta. The hydriaphoros, or water-bearer, was a common motif in earlier Greek art in large-scale images such as the frieze of the Athenian Acropolis (ca. 440 BCE), Classical Greek vase paintings (Hannested 1984, 252–255), and small-scale terracottas (Merker 2000, 24, 38–42).

The act of carrying water was considered a lowly task in the Greek world, with the exception of ritual contexts (Merker 2000, 24 n. 6), and the religious find spot may suggest that our figure is a temple servant. Alternatively, the figurine may represent a mythological character such as Ganymede, who was abducted by Zeus and served as the Olympian gods’ cupbearer (Beazley Archive 16200). The motif of carrying a jug on one’s shoulder is also prevalent in terracotta figurines of seated and standing grotesques with phallic imagery (Himmelmann 1983, fig. 34[b]; Kaufmann 1913, fig. 85) that may illustrate silenoi, or members of Dionysos’s retinue. But note also a similar terracotta from Myrina from the early second century BCE, which depicts a boy who heaves a large perfume bottle over his shoulder (Webster 1950, 26, fig. 47).
The figurine may represent more than just a whimsical image of a child laboring to hold onto a vessel. Given the high infant mortality rates of the period, a dedication in the religious context of an image of a well-nourished and strong boy may have represented a wish for healthy male children. Likewise, the depiction of the jug, often a symbol of fecundity and abundance in earlier Greek and Hellenistic traditions, possibly signified either ritual purification or agricultural fertility.

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Works Cited


