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An Abbasid-Period Stone Mold with an Engraved Kufic Arabic Inscription from the Giv'ati Parking Lot excavations, Jerusalem

Michael Chernin, Oscar Bejarano, Yuval Gadot and Yiftah Shalev[1]

Excavations in the Giv'ati Parking Lot in Jerusalem uncovered extensive architectural remains dating from the Iron Age to the Early Islamic period, the latest dating to the Abbasid period. The remains from the Abbasid period comprise a large commercial area where a metal industry operated. This paper presents an Abbasid-period stone mold for casting metal artifacts engraved with an Arabic inscription, whose purpose and meaning are discussed by the authors based on parallels from material finds and written sources.

Keywords: Abbasid Jerusalem, marketplace, Kufic, Arabic inscription, talisman

Introduction

The excavations at the Giv'ati Parking Lot uncovered extensive architectural remains of ancient Jerusalem from several periods, covering a timespan from the Iron Age to the Early Islamic period (Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets 2020; Shalev et al. 2020). Although sporadic activity dating to the Fatimid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods was attested, the latest substantial settlement layer represented at the site dates to the Abbasid period. The remains of this period indicate that a large commercial area, probably a large marketplace, was located here (Amichay et al. 2019). This article presents a recently discovered, Abbasid-period stone mold for casting metal artifacts engraved with a Kufic inscription. The mold with its inscription—a modified version of the renown Islamic creed (*shahāda*)—is of great importance, as it indicates the mass production of cultic artifacts in this area, just south of the Temple Mount/Ḥaram el-Sharif.

[1] Michael Chernin, Oscar Bejarano, Dr. Yiftah Shalev, Israel Antiquities Authority; Prof. Yuval Gadot, Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.

The Archaeological Context

The Giv‘ati Parking Lot excavation area is located on the northwestern edge of the southeastern hill of Jerusalem, in the area known as the City of David (Fig. 1). While this area certainly lay outside the city walls encountered by the Crusaders in 1099 CE, it is not clear when the Byzantine–Early Islamic city walls fell out of use, and whether this area was located within or outside the walls in the tenth–eleventh centuries CE (Weksler-Bdolah 2011:422; Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets 2020:705). The 2007–2015 excavations, directed by Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets, uncovered the remains of three building strata from the Abbasid period. The earliest Stratum III (eighth–early ninth centuries CE) was characterized by dozens of refuse pits; Stratum II (ninth–tenth centuries CE) saw the construction of a commercial quarter comprising workshops and dwellings; and Stratum I (late tenth–early eleventh centuries CE) presented a limited occupation and a decline in the importance of this area within the urban layout. According to the excavators, in Stratum III there was probably a large open market here with temporary stalls selling food and craft items, and in Stratum II, the area developed into a well-planned industrial and commercial quarter (Ben-Ami 2020; Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets 2020; Tchekhanovets 2022). The small-scale industries and crafts included the manufacturing of metal and bone artifacts, textiles and jewelry (Ben-Dov 2020; Dan-Goor 2020; Segal 2020; Shatil 2020; Tchekhanovets 2022).

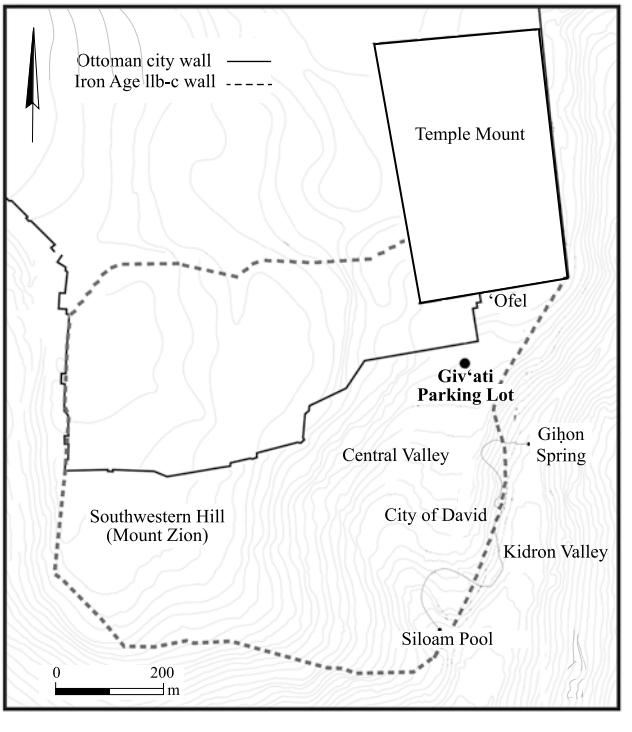

Fig. 1. Location of the Giv‘ati Parking Lot excavation area, south of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem.

The eastern, southern and westernmost areas of these Abbasid strata were subsequently excavated by Gadot and Shalev in the renewed excavations between 2018 and 2022 (Fig. 2: Areas 35, 60, 65, 70; Shalom et al. 2021; Shalev et al., forthcoming).[2] The excavation

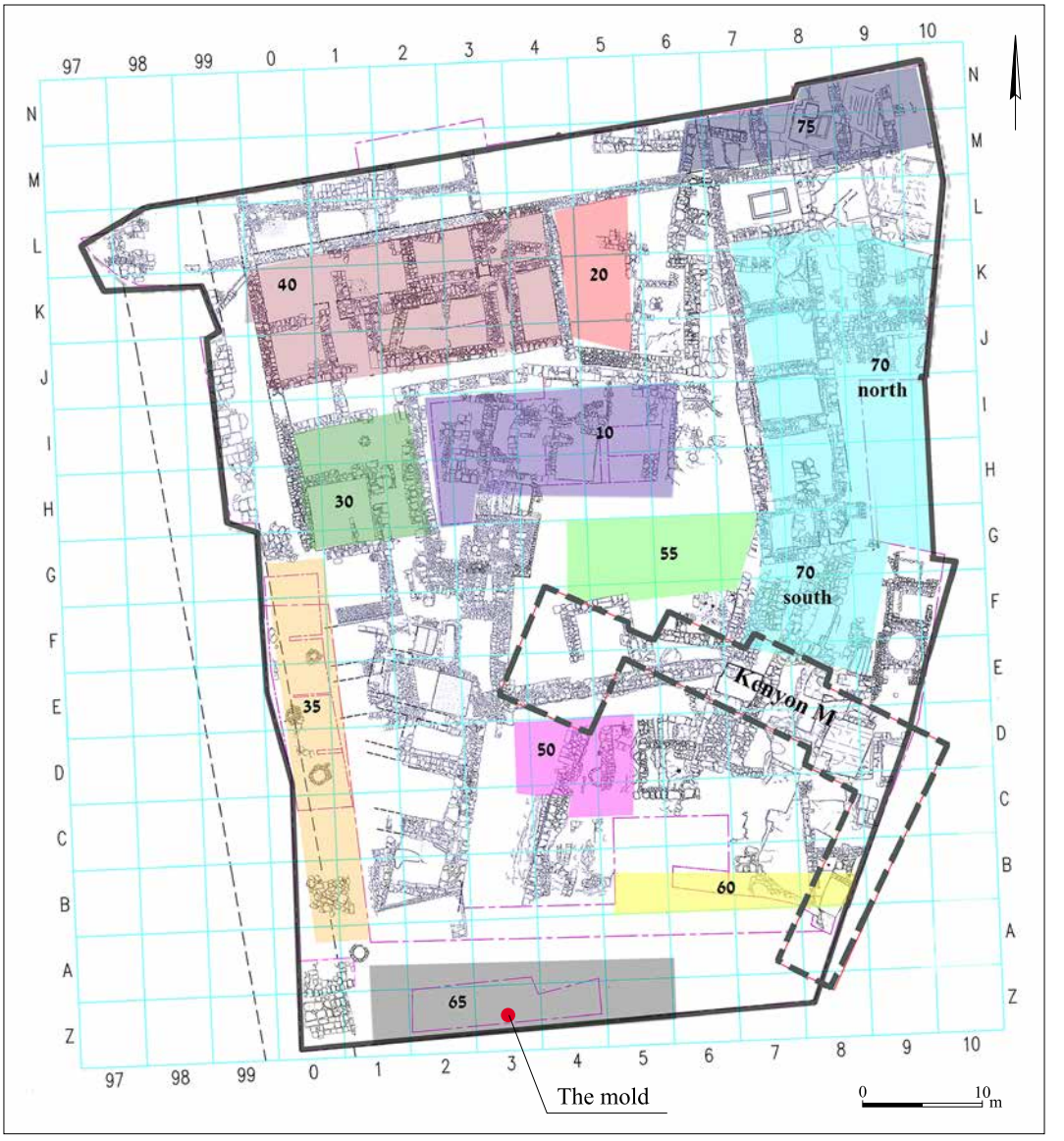

Fig. 2. Location of the excavation areas in the Giv‘ati Parking Lot.

[2] The renewed excavations at Giv‘ati Parking Lot (License Nos. G-71/17, G-11/18, G-10/19, G-11/20, G-3/21, G-1/22) are conducted on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Tel Aviv University, and funded by the El‘ad ‘Ir David Foundation, under the direction of Yuval Gadot and Yiftah Shalev. Of assistance were Efrat Bocher and Nitsan Shalom (area supervision), Vadim Essman (surveying), Argita Gyrman-Levanon (artifact drawing) and Dafna Gazit (laboratory photography, Reflectance Transformation Imaging [RTI] modeling). The Abbasid-period remains were uncovered in the areas supervised by Helene Mechlin, David Gelman, Marion Sindel and Oscar Bejarano.

exposed several refuse pits, and in the southeastern corner of Area 60, a structure comprising a rectangular room with two superimposed plaster floors. Three small installations with keyhole-shaped sockets were embedded in the earlier plaster floor; their function was not clear, but one, containing ash and charcoal, was possibly the remains of a *ṭabun*. These finds seem to substantiate the previously defined stratigraphic sequence of pits in the early phase (Stratum III) and structures in the later one (Stratum II).

The excavation in the southernmost Area 65 exposed a thick fill layer (L6574; Fig. 3) to the west of the above-mentioned structure and below its foundation level, overlying two small refuse pits. The fill layer (L6574), a secondary deposition, contained large quantities of pottery sherds—some from the Byzantine period, but most dating to the Abbasid period—and a fragment of a stone mold bearing an Arabic inscription. An ash layer (L6546) uncovered next to one of the two refuse pits (L6540) and below the fill layer, was possibly the bottom of a third pit (Fig. 3). This ash layer contained several burned potsherds, whose interior surfaces exhibited the remains of a glassy reddish waste, probably the remains of industrial slags. A similar phenomenon was observed in an Abbasid-period pit exposed in the previous excavations, where the remains were identified as a pottery crucible used in the local metal industry for smelting metal alloys (Segal 2020).

Fig. 3. Pit 6540 and an ash layer, probably of another pit (L6456), looking west; the overlying fill layer (L6574) is visible in the background.

The Stone Mold and the Inscription

The stone mold fragment (width 50 mm, extant length 125 mm, depth 20 mm), made of soft white chalkstone, was the upper part of one half of a double-mold, probably intended for the casting of metal artifacts (Fig. 4). As the lower part of the mold was broken, it was not possible to reconstruct its original length and the complete form of the artifact to be cast.

A short, funnel-shaped carved sprue channel led down from the top end of the mold to facilitate the casting. The sprue channel led into a semi-ellipsoidal cavity that resembled a sword pommel, and a very short narrow channel led from the central base of this cavity into a triangular-shaped cavity. From the base of the triangle, a long shallow band or strip was

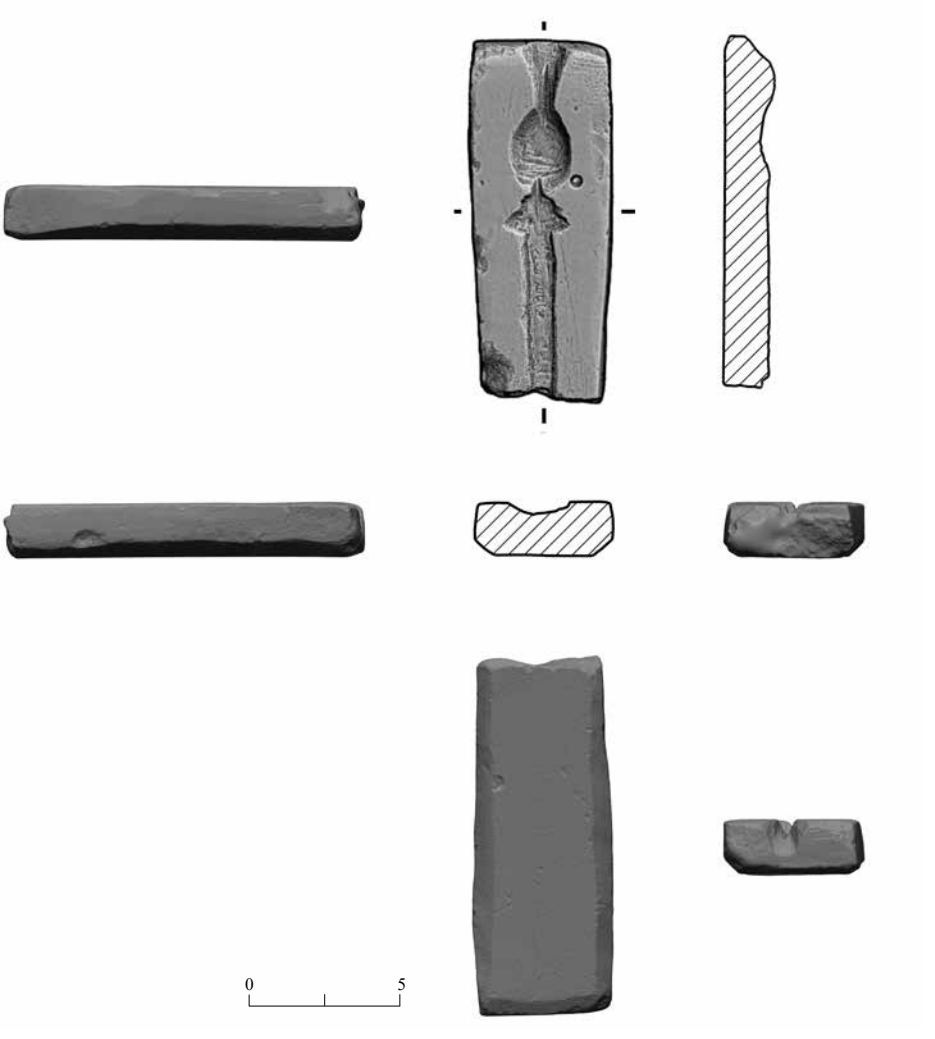

Fig. 4. The chalkstone mold (L6574, B66101).

carved (width 8 mm, extant length 55 mm, depth 3 mm), and two shallow incised horizontal lines were visible next to the broken end of the mold. These lines may indicate a widening of the mold to the sides (into a blade-like feature?). The extant length of the carved artifact, without the sprue channel, was 95 mm. To the right of the ellipsoidal cavity, a small hole was carved, probably to pin the two halves of the mold together before casting. A short inscription was carved inside the band.

The inscription reads:[3]
لا ا[له] ا[لا] الله محمد

Transcription: lā ’i[lāha] ’i[llā] ’Allah Muhammad

Translation: There is no deity but God. Muhammad

The inscription (Fig. 5), written from left to right in Kufic script, was carved in the mold in the positive. It is an abbreviated version of the Islamic *shahāda* (creed): *ašhadu ’an lā ’ilāha ’illa -llāhu, wa-’ašhadu ’anna muḥammadan rasūlu -llāh* (I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God). The carving of the text in square Kufic script provides a *terminus ante quem* in the early eleventh century CE, as by the end of the tenth or the early eleventh century CE, there was a gradual transition from the exclusive use of Kufic script for copying the sacred Qur’anic texts to the adoption of “round” types of Arabic script, until then only used in administrative contexts (Blair 2006:143).

Fig. 5. The Kufic Arabic inscription in the positive on the mold.

[3] The correct reading of the entire inscription, with a high degree of certainty, was only possible after it was expertly scanned by Dafna Gazit using the Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) technique.

Interestingly, the text of the *shahāda* using initials is unknown from other writing materials. A brief survey of such inscriptions on coins dating from the seventh to the tenth centuries CE produced the following three formulas (*BMCO* I:1, 3–4):

(1) لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله. There is no deity but God. Muhammad is the Messenger of the God.

(2) لا اله الا الله وحده محمد رسول الله. There is no deity but God alone. Muhammad is the Messenger of the God.

(3) لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له محمد رسول الله. There is no deity but God alone. He has no associate. Muhammad is the Messenger of the God.

Although the complete form of the stone mold is lost, the extant part bearing the carved inscription suggests that it was used for the mass casting of metal talismans. The tradition of talismans bearing Qur'anic texts was prevalent in the Islamic world at least since the tenth century CE. The evidence of "licit magicians" who constrained the spirits by obeying and supplicating Allah appears in the work of the Arab medieval bibliographer, Ibn al-Nadīm, who died around 995 CE (Dodge 1970:726). Metal talismans of various forms, for example, in the form of a circle or an oblong hand, were known in the traditional Arabic talisman category under the name *māskeh* (plural *mawāsik*), coming from the Arabic root مسك, meaning "to hold". Such talismans were mainly intended for pregnant women to help them hold onto their unborn and protect them from miscarriage (Canaan 2004:126).

If this understanding is correct, it may also explain the fact that the inscription on the mold was carved in the positive, although it was intended for casting artifacts. A similar phenomenon is observed on some talismans of this period that exhibit inscriptions in the negative, for example, a round silver *māskeh* amulet, where a quote from the Qur'an was written from left to right (Canaan 2004:132), or amulets bearing texts from the Qur'an in the negative (Porter 2004:186). It is possible that the phrases from sacred texts and prayers appearing in the negative and not the positive had some mystical significance for the creators of traditional medieval Arabic amulets.

Based on the general appearance of the inscription in the mold, its modified phrasing, and its positive writing, one could suggest that this was a rudimentary effort to write the holy names on an object, or even a simple attempt to practice writing on molds. However, the few parallels of negative inscriptions on amulets suggest that the inscribed mold was a finished product rather than an amateur undertaking.

Conclusions

The excavations in the Giv'ati Parking Lot yielded a rich array of raw materials, crucibles and production waste, supporting the existence of a metal industry in the area in the Abbasid period. The chalkstone mold provides additional evidence for a metallurgical workshop and for the variety of items it produced. The mold was probably used for the mass production of religious objects, such as amulets or talismans, as is evidenced by its inscription: a modified version of the Islamic *shahāda*. The engraving of the inscription on the mold in the positive

supports this understanding, as several talismans bearing Qur'an texts in the negative have been found.

The mold was found in a secondary fill context, but it probably originated in the earlier phase of the market rather than in the later, well-planned phase. This is suggested by the ash layers found below the fill, containing charred materials and pottery sherds with production waste (slags) still covering the inner surface. It therefore seems that the fair-like market located just south of Ḥaram el-Sharif, produced everyday products, such as foods and craft items, and also religious and cultic artifacts, such as amulets and talismans.

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