

Bridges and Rifts in Roman Socioeconomic Strata: Analysis of Roman Lamps and a Decorative

Lamp Holder

Submission for the Jackier Prize



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AAPTIS 277: The Land of Israel/Palestine through the Ages

Section – 013: M. Kitsos

30 November 2014

Modern people often enjoy connecting our society with the Romans. Everything from our governing bodies, architecture, and art has tried to adopt some of the aspects of the vast Roman cultural collection. However, the fact of the matter is, our society is vastly different from the Romans. These differences are ever present in two ancient discoveries, which give insight into the subtle nuances of the culture and historical context of their time: a terracotta lamp and a bronze lamp holder with two bronze lamps. The terracotta lamp is decorated with a seemingly lewd sexual scene, which to the modern observer seems highly out of place on a “normal” domestic object. The second object, a bronze lamp holder with two bronze lamps, possesses intricate bronze craftsmanship that speaks of the refined metallurgical techniques that the ancients possessed, while the beautiful decoration and ornamentation of the object speaks of the refined and elegant culture of high Roman society. In this essay, I will analyze the manufacturing processes, use, and artistry of the aforementioned objects to compare and contrast both objects and to shed light on the cultural elements that stratified and unified Roman society. The two objects are clearly very different in their manufacture, ornamentation, and decoration; therefore, the two objects can be used to shed light on the cultural differences between various socioeconomic strata of the Roman world. While both objects are clearly different in appearance, they both share incredible insight into the religious and domestic aspects of Roman life – in essence, a shared characteristic of all socioeconomic levels in Roman society.

The people of the ancient world pushed for cultural and technological innovation, and at the forefront of this phenomenon were the Romans. Never before had there been a massive push to innovate and build, in order to, improve the quality of life for citizens at all strata of Roman society (Eliav, 2014.) The Roman Age – in the region of Israel and Palestine – is divided into 3 distinct periods. The Early Roman Period, which began in 63 B.C.E at the arrival of Pompey

Magnus in our region, and the replacement of the Maccabean kingdom with the vassal king Herod the Great. This period ended in 70 C.E with the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by the Flavians (Roman generals who would replace the Julio-Claudians as Roman Emperors.) The Late Roman Period began at 70 C.E and ended with Emperor Constantine's edict in 324 C.E – declaring Christianity s the official religion of the Empire - thus ushering in the Byzantine Period, which ended in 640 C.E at the fall of Jerusalem to the Muslim Arab army (Eliav, 2014.) Roman society was hierarchical and based on wealth and property ownership (Wikipedia “Social Class in Ancient Rome”). The various social strata – from senators and equestrians to the proletariat - portray their wealth and affluence through the decoration and ornamentation of their property (among other thing.) Therefore, studying these objects can give great insight into this facet of Roman life. The objects under inspection in this essay are most likely from the Early Roman Period. The Early Roman Period marks the point at which the empire solidified its dominance in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean after conquering both the Carthaginian Empire in North Africa and the old Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean (Wikipedia “History of Roman Empire”). What is unique about the relationship between Rome and its conquered – and often highly refined - provinces was the denizens' willingness to adopt and assimilate to the Greco-Roman culture. However, Roman culture is hardly a homogenous identity because the Romans were quick to adopt the “best” cultural aspects of their conquered provinces and mesh them with Latin culture. For example, Romans were quick to adopt many Hellenic cultural practices – theater, literature, and art (Lloyd, 2013, para. 3-4.) Therefore, Roman culture cannot be considered a single cultural entity, but rather a vast cultural amalgamation where the “best” aspects of each culture contributed to the cultural grandeur of Roman society. We admire Roman culture and society, however, their societal

norms and rules would seem very alien to us (Clarke, 2003, p. 14-15.) The Modern observer would most likely blush at the sexual freedoms that Romans possessed before the predominance of Christianity. For example, overt sexual expression was neither discouraged, hidden in the domestic spheres of life, nor confined between married couples (Clarke, 2003, p. 15.) Religion was an extremely important facet of everyday life for Romans of all socioeconomic strata, and for certain groups religion dictated everyday life (*Wikipedia*, “Culture of Ancient Rome”). For example, Jews could not tamper with their oil lamps after the Sabbath had begun (Westenholz, 2005, p. 14-15.) The everyday activities Romans performed were greatly governed by the presence of daylight - which is very unlike modern society - therefore; artificial light was a necessity for all levels of society (Bailey, 1972, p. 11.) The artificial lighting of choice for the ancients was the oil lamp, which was used to light both public and domestic places; however, like all objects even the oil lamp varied between the socioeconomic strata of Roman society.

The terracotta lamp is most likely from the first century C.E, and is of Roman design. We can extrapolate this information from looking at a few key characteristics of this lamp. The erotic scene on the lamp’s discus, a Roman design element, and the use of hollow-mold manufacturing technique points to the time and place of this object. “With the adoption of a large discus, or concave upper surface, as a standard feature of pottery lamps towards the end of the first century BC” (Knell, 2008, para. 3-4,) we can confidently place this lamp within the first century CE. This lamp was likely found in the ancient, preserved city of Pompeii. The city and its objects were well preserved under the volcanic ash and pumice from Mount Vesuvius, therefore, thousands of lamps of terracotta and bronze have been found during excavations of the city (Connolly, 1990, p. 44.) Also the city was destroyed in 79 CE – right after the end of the Early

Roman Period - after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which fits well into the timeline derived from the lamp's physical characteristics.

The artistic process of manufacturing the lamp shines light on the Roman trend to refine everyday objects into sophisticated pieces of art. The lamp's elegant design and near-invisible seam along its midsection are attributes of a process – popularized in the third century BCE in Greece – called “hollow-molding.” Hollow molding consists of using a Patrix (mould) of plaster or stone (in Roman times) to give shape to the clay. There would be two moulds, one for the top and one for the bottom, the wet clay would be pressed into the respective patrix and the two patrix were pressed together and fired in a kiln until hard (Bailey, 1972, p. 13-14.) Once the mould had cooled the lamp would be removed, revealing a beautifully formed lamp with an intricate sexual scene.

Although the design and manufacturing of this lamp led to a highly refined product, the use of this lamp was simple. The lamp possessed two holes, and needed a wick and oil (most likely olive oil) to operate (Bailey, 1972, p. 9.) The Romans further advanced the pottery lamp by closing the oil reservoir to prevent any loss of oil (which was expensive and often imported,) and by “pinching the rim” to create a “bridged nozzle” which created a small reservoir for the wick, thus only the end of the wick would appear from the wick hole allowing the flame to be tamped down to create – for the first time – virtually smokeless light (Baily, 1972, p. 9-10.) The second hole was used to pour oil into the lamp's reservoir (Westenholz, 2005, p. 11.) The concave surface over the oil reservoir on which the design appears was called a discus, and is indicative of the Roman style of lamp production, which replaced the Greek style after the Roman Conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean and Hellenistic World (Westenholz, 2005, p. 12.)

The vast use of oil lamps in all strata of Roman society gives incredible insight into the socioeconomic nuances of the culture. Although this lamp was intricately designed and decorated, the reality is that “mould-made” lamps are a hallmark of the lower strata of Roman society, while the upper echelons preferred “metal-made” lamps (Bailey, 1972, p. 11.) However, the fact that the lamp is decorated shows that even the lower economic strata of Roman society could afford decorated objects. Thus, oil lamps were status symbols, and a homeowner’s ability to light his house was a direct correlation to his economic status in society. The presence of a prominent base “allowed the lamp to stand steadily,” (Bailey, 1972, p.11) thus the lamp is well suited for practical domestic use. The various religions that peppered the Roman sphere made use of the massive production of pottery lamps in the Roman Empire to light the vast number of shrines and temples within the Empire and to conduct the countless ritualistic ceremonies. It is unlikely that this lamp was used in religious ceremonies, although, the Judeo-Christian tradition would often like to portray the “pagan” Romans as lewd and licentious, thus attributing the sexual scene to religion. The copulation scene is also not telling of the lamp’s place in Roman social strata because fertility was an important aspect of domestic life in the ancient world, and sexual overtness was not pushed onto any one socioeconomic group (Pisani, 2012, para 2.) In addition, sexual scene were commonplace in the ancient roman household, and all members of society used sexual motifs to decorate their homes (Clarke, 2003, p. 35.) This tradition continued until the third century with the edict of Constantine, and the dominance of Christianity over the old religious traditions, which attests to the fact that this lamp is from the first century CE. Therefore, only the material and method of the lamp’s production is telling of that it would likely be found in the homes of the commoner economic strata. It is also clear that cultural motifs were common between different socioeconomic groups in the Roman Empire.

Although the lamp body is important, it is rendered useless without a wick or oil. Wicks of flax were favored during the Roman period because it could be made by “twisting and singeing old clothing” (Westenholz, 2005, p. 12.) However, papyrus, linen, or any other fibrous materials could be used to produce a wick (Bailey, 1972, p. 9) because the sole purpose of the wick was to pull the oil from the reservoir up to the flame in order to fuel the flame. In the Mediterranean, olive oil was the principal source of fuel and the oil was exported to regions where olives did not grow (Bailey, 1972, p. 10.) According to Bailey (1972) “only societies producing a food surplus could afford to use lamps extensively, and areas that had to use edible oils would be inclined to use them for cooking rather than fuels” (p. 11.) Therefore, the existence of oil lamps across the Roman Empire – including provinces lacking a Mediterranean climate and olive tree – is telling of the existence of a vast and advanced trade network within the Empire. In addition, the fact that oil lamps were used within all socioeconomic strata indicates that even the lower classes participated in interregional trade, which had traditionally been confined to the upper echelons of society.

The use of the oil lamp was commonplace amongst all socioeconomic strata of Roman society, however, the elites of the Roman World were quick to distinguish themselves from the proletarian masses through the ornamentation and decoration of everyday, household items, which would be used – in some form – at all levels of society. This idea is best conveyed in the ornate bronze lamps and lamp holder of the second object. The terracotta lamp and the bronze lamps are both similar in form and usage, the heightened complexity and opulent ornamentation clearly shift this discussion to the upper levels of society. The terracotta lamp and infinitely more luxurious and refined bronze lamps share several similarities: a filling hole, a wick hole, a nozzle, and an oil reservoir. However, functional and aesthetic adornments clearly convey a

sense of refinement that would convey a sense of understanding of both the use and ownership of such a beautiful artifact. One noteworthy difference is the presence of two mouths, thus allowing two wicks to be lit simultaneously in order to “increase the amount of light supplied” (Knell, 2008, para. 5.) These lamps are accompanied by an ornamental lamp holder, which takes the form of a leafy tree. The lamps could be “suspended by chains” and hooked onto “pierced lugs” attached to an ornamental bronze leaf on the branches of the lamp holder (*Lamp holder with hanging lamps*, 2014.) Another testament to the heightened use of ornamentation and decoration of the elites in ancient roman society is portrayed by the use of decorative mice plugs to cover the “oil hole” in order to prevent spilling. This is clear evidence of the heightened sophistication of seemingly utilitarian objects within the upper strata of roman society.

In addition to the mice plugs, the lamp holder is decorated with an owl, a pheasant, and frogs that form the base of the lamps – all cast in bronze as well. This ornamentation is telling of the obsessive need of roman elites to decorate and enhance the aesthetic of their possession to convey a sense of importance and place in elite society, but these figures are also extremely telling of the culture of the elites. The bronze owl was incredibly manufactured with great care; however, the owl is not a motif that Romans often used. Romans preferred the Eagle as the symbol of their Empire (Wikipedia “Aquila.”) Instead, the owl is a symbol of Athens – the great educational and cultural center of the classical world – (Lydian Mint, 2014.) Therefore, we can extrapolate that the presence of the owl is used to portray the owner’s refinement and knowledge of Greek culture. The bronze pheasant is also telling of Roman elite society, specifically in the realm of dining. One way that Roman elites portrayed their wealth was through feasting and dining. Depending on the economic ability of the host, meals would include exotic ingredients and game from all regions of the Empire, one such gourmet fowl was the pheasant. Thus, the



presence of the pheasant on the lamp holder in telling of the wealth of the owner, and the vast trade network that could supply elite Roman society with the exotic game and ingredients they desired for their lavish dinner parties (To Roman Cooking, 1996-1998, para. 5.) The use of the cast bronze frogs as the base of the lamp holder shows the heightened sophistication of this object (but maintain the utilitarian use of the lamp holder by creating a wide base for which the stand can firmly stand on,) therefore, it is clear to see that an elite Roman would prefer a decorated lamp holder as opposed to an undecorated piece. Using the ornamentation on the lamp we can see that the upper echelons of Roman society enjoyed portraying their cultural superiority over the proletariat masses through the artistry of their objects. Therefore, we can conclude that ornamentation was not used only for the sake of ornamentation, but also to exemplify the cultural refinement of high Roman society.

The intricate design and incredible sophistication of the aesthetic elements of the bronze artifacts are a testament to the refinement of metallurgy during this time period and the skill of Roman manufacturers. The Greco-Roman bronze smiths replaced the traditional hollow-molding technique with the lost-wax technique of casting bronze. In this method a bronze template was created, that would be reused to create uniform bronze items (Connolly, 2003, p. 424-433.) Bronze vessel production began with the creation of a “clay or plaster” model, and then the artisans took “piece casts,” which would be lined with a thin layer of wax, the wax pieces were removed and assembled with the others to create a “hollow working wax model” (Connolly, 2003, p. 424-433.) This process was incredibly vast and intricate, and required the many different specialized laborers and artisans to operate, which is depicted at the excavated bronze workshops of Olympia, Athens, and Corinth (Connolly, 2003, p. 424-433.) The exceptionally more intricate manufacturing process of bronze lamps, opposed to terracotta lamps, in the

Roman Empire is an explanation - along with the higher cost of bronze than clay – as to the expense of producing bronze lamps. Therefore, it is clear that Roman elites would have preferred to use bronze lamps because it would have been a subtle, but clear method for flaunting the wealth of the owner. This would be especially true if the owner possessed many bronze lamps – a clear status symbol in the ancient world (Bailey, 1972, p. 10.)

Bronze lamp holder and lamp stands were commonplace among the homes of wealthy Romans across the Empire (Kelsey Museum information, 2014.) Using the size of the lamp holder we can derive the type of household this particular object would have been found in during the first century CE. We know that elegant lamp holders were often so large that they had to be carried in both hands (Westenholz, 2005, p. 13.) Therefore, it is fairly clear that slaves in a wealthy household would have carried this particular lamp holder. However, it is hard to pinpoint the location of this lamp holder because elites across the Empire used lamp stands; however, the incredible detail and exceptional craftsmanship points that this lamp holder was likely from the Imperial core of Italy, where the wealthiest Romans resided. The “leafy-tree” design of the lamp holder is common to those found in Pompeii (Lamp Holder with hanging lamps, 2014.) Since Pompeii was a wealthy city on the Italian Peninsula during the Early Roman Period and many of Rome’s wealthier residents lived there with their multitude of slaves, we can say with fair confidence that these artifacts are from Pompeii.

Till this point, I have used the differences in manufacturing and aesthetic of the two artifacts to display the clear differences between Roman the various socioeconomic strata of Roman society. However, from this point, I will discuss the similarities between these two objects within Roman society by looking at the facets of religion and the home.

Religion is a common denominator between various social strata; however, there were many religions within the Roman Empire. But as far as lamps are concerned, the funerary practices of the various religions within the Roman Empire are fairly similar. The use of lamps in funerary rights of the ancient Romans was very common, and a major facet of the lamp production in the ancient world went to producing lamps for this purpose (Bailey, 1972, p 12.) In addition to religion, the use of the lamp was ubiquitous with lighting the home. The oil lamp was one of the only methods of providing artificial light during the ancient world, and regardless of the differences between luxury and common variety oil lamps the role remained the same. For the ancients the lamp could be seen as the soul of the family and the home (Westenholz, 2005, p. 20.) Therefore, regardless of socioeconomic status the oil lamp was an important facet of ancient Roman households.

This essay has examined two objects: a terracotta roman oil lamp and two bronze roman lamps paired with an intricate bronze lamp holder. The refinement of these two objects indicates an increased level of cultural refinement in the Roman world. It is clear that the Romans were able to achieve a point of cultural preeminence when even utilitarian objects used in all households were elevated using elegant craftsmanship and artistry. However, the two objects differ in their manufacture and level of luxury craftsmanship, thus illuminating the cultural differences between the various socioeconomic strata of the Roman society. However, religion and domestic motifs of these two objects clearly unify the strata of the Roman society into a fairly homogenous cultural group.

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