

DECORATED JEWISH OIL LAMPS FROM THE FALL OF THE
SECOND TEMPLE TO THE REVOLT OF BAR KOCHBA

by

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This book deals with the oldest type of ornamented Jewish oil lamps. Lamps of this kind are known to have existed before the period treated here but not in such large numbers nor as richly ornamented as the ones described in Varda Sussman's book. Judging by their shape, these lamps are considered to be late Herodian and since they were found in the south they are also known as southern lamps. The population of the south and of the Hebron hills were known for their Jewish consciousness, and political unrest in that area must have set off the Bar Kochba war. These lamps are evidence of constant Jewish habitation in these parts following the destruction of the Temple, a view which is also supported by more recent archaeological finds there.

The time from the destruction of the Temple to the end of Bar Kochba was hitherto considered archaeologically meagre, and consequently every archaeological find is of particular significance with regard to throwing some light on that period.

The book is intended for a wide reading public, for people interested in the archaeology of Palestine and the art of the period, particularly Jewish oil lamps. It begins with a short survey of the general development of oil-lamps. There is no room, however, for details, and likewise it has not been possible to categorise them according to types. Only the most important features regarding form, material and ornamentation are dealt with.

Through the selection of relevant samples from among the hundreds of lamps, we are presented with a complete picture of the ornamentation, symbols and shapes. This new material can be of use elsewhere too, since these lamps make a considerable contribution to our understanding of the everyday life of their time, particularly in the areas of religion, art and agricultural usage.

In the Jewish world, lamps were known to be used in the Tabernacle as the *Ner Tamid*, the eternal flame, and later on we find lamps in the Temple. There are seven lamps of gold on the seven branches of the Me-

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norah candelabrum, and there are Sabbath lamps and holiday lamps such as the Chanukkah candelabrum. Lamps and candelabra are frequently mentioned in the Psalms and Proverbs and are sometimes referred to as the light of God before the people. The seven-branched candelabrum later became the symbol of the Jewish people and has remained so.

Specifically Jewish lamps, that is to say lamps that can be differentiated from those of other nations, first make their appearance in the Hellenistic period. The Hellenistic lamps bore depictions of heads and marks which would have been unacceptable to the Jewish religion. The Jews, on the other hand, expressed their protest against the foreign culture with their Hasmonean lamps. When Palestine was overrun by the Romans, they brought with them Roman lamps that were equally unacceptable to the Jews since they bore images in mirrors of gods and of caesars in the form of gods, etc. There are a great many lamps whose mirrors have been broken and this might well be an expression of the Jewish reaction. At any rate, locally produced lamps then begin to appear, which are a direct offshoot of the Hellenistic tradition. These lamps are known as Herodian lamps and bear no ornamentation, and existed up to the second century A. D., until the end of the Bar Kochba war. They are made on a wheel and the beak or neck is scooped out with a knife. Most of them have no handle, and sometimes they have more than one lip. What is amazing is that side by side with these simple unadorned lamps, ornamented ones make their appearance for the first time in Jewish history. They are made according to one model and are like the Roman ones in shape. The mirror has disappeared and the main ornamentation is on the neck and on the edges which are broader than hitherto. The neck on these lamps is rather different from that of the Herodian ones, being broader and with wings. On the tip of the lip one frequently finds two circles, as on the Herodian ones. The base is different and consists of from one to three rings which also serve to make it more stable. They all have a small handle which is part of the basic shape, either pierced or intended. These lamps are mostly made of pink clay; they are thin, well-baked, light in weight and always unpainted. A small number have a closed disc, and like the Roman lamps, these have a short neck. Many are square and some have numerous lips. The shape of the square ones resembles that of ossuaries. Scholars estimate that they date from 70 to 135 A. D. They have been found in the caves around the Dead Sea and beneath the encampment of the refugees who had escaped from the Bar Kochba revolt. Other archaeological finds have confirmed this date. They have not been found in the graves of the Second Temple period, nor on Massada, and this is proof that they were not made before 70 but were made at a time of oppression which found expression in creativity. The lamps have been found in the Hebron hills, the main centre of Jewish settlement after the destruction of the Temple. They have usually been found

together with ossuaries and Herodian lamps, which clearly indicates that they must be Jewish lamps.

The potters and artists were beyond all doubt Jews who were acquainted with Jewish art from the Second Temple. Some of them also remembered the holy utensils which had been used in the Temple. They belonged to the generation that had witnessed the Temple's destruction and had participated in the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The holidays and many of the customs of the time of the Temple continued even after its destruction, thus the following generations too were familiar with them. The artist considered it essential to decorate the lamps with motifs that were popular with the people and which expressed their longing for the Temple. The form and technique used in decorating the lamps indicate that these artists were very aesthetically gifted people. It is very possible that the artists who made these lamps were the same people who carved the rosettes and other ornamentation on the stone of the ossuaries in the Jerusalem graves of the Second Temple period. These artists had been exiled to Hebron from Jerusalem and could not return to the city of the Temple. This exile nurtured in them a longing for everything connected with the Temple, including the holidays and utensils, and was the source of a Jewish folk art even outside the land of Israel. This art is evidence of their Jewish consciousness and their attachment to the laws and traditions of the Torah. Drawing on two sources of inspiration, the Jewish world and the Roman world, these lamps are a magnificent artistic achievement with the technique being an outcome of the Roman world while the motifs pertain to the Jewish world.

The Roman lamps that found their way to Eretz Israel bear official motifs. Their purpose was to glorify the Roman caesars as gods. They also bear motifs from mythology, symbols, battle scenes, scenes from everyday life and from the world of plants. The Romans probably influenced the Jews to decorate their lamps similarly. Because of political and cultural unrest the Jews wanted to compete and not to copy, and this gave rise to a new art form. The Jewish potters were limited in their motifs, however. They were forbidden to depict people or live creatures, for it was a law of the Jewish Torah and confirmed by the rabbis that Jews were not to make likenessness or images. The prohibition regarding images is the principal difference between the Jewish and pagan lamps. The Jews wanted to depict their world and work but they had to omit the people. Instead of a man using a harrow, as found on Roman lamps, the Jews depicted the harrow alone. Instead of warriors, we find some of the weapons and articles used by them. The prohibition regarding human likenesses was absolute. That regarding creatures 'of the heaven, the earth and all that is in the sea' was not entirely complied with, however, and one occasionally finds a fish or a dove.

Fish was the festive food the Jews ate on the Sabbath and on holidays, and doves were sacrificed in the Temple by women who had given

birth. Even depiction of these, however, was too much for some zealous Jews, and some of the lamps bearing fish or doves have had holes pierced through them. The idea was to make the image look like grapes, but at a closer scrutiny one can see the original fish or dove. Something similar occurred regarding the Menorah candelabrum; people were reluctant to depict the Menorah in its exact form, as it had been in the Temple, and so they made some changes, depicting it with additional arms. All this indicates that they were extremely zealous and law-abiding Jews. The artists, however, were determined to create this symbol of Judaism. They also depicted other articles used in the Temple – the sacred Ark, various Temple utensils, symbols of the Jewish holidays, the Feast of Tabernacles, the harvest festival and Passover. They also depicted articles used in daily living, particularly agriculture; some of the plants thus depicted appear also on pagan lamps, but the Jews always found a way that differentiated them from the pagan lamps.

The most characteristic feature of these lamps is the artists' desire to focus the viewer's attention on one main symbol, and most of the ornamentation consists of one single symbol. At this time, unlike the later period, the Menorah is not shown in combination with other Temple utensils. The most prominent part of the lamp, which was usually the flat part of the neck or the side of the lamp, was used for these ornamentations. The rest was often not decorated. A rare phenomenon for eastern artists, they were not afraid to leave empty spaces. On some lamps we find ornamentation of lesser importance too. Here they start off from the handle and go toward the main symbol, and seem to be there for purely decorative purposes. As a rule the symbol is seen from the vantage point of the handle, that is to say, it is seen by the person carrying the lamp. Even where there are geometrical forms, the design is not crowded and it is clear that they were not concerned with filling up every tiny cranny. Where there is more than one symbol on a lamp it is not always clear whether a connection exists between them. The motif is drawn into the lamp with thin lines, usually not a complicated form, freely drawn and with a circle drawn around it.

This portion of the book consists of approximately fifty pages, with copious footnotes. There follows a catalogue of all known lamps of this period. There are illustrations and descriptions of 221 lamps in all.

Reviewed by Michael Krupp