

## Roman Lamps

Amy Nicholas, '11



The University of Richmond's Ancient World Gallery contains six ancient Roman lamps. One was donated to the Richmond College Museum in 1885 by Colonel J. L. M. Curry, Confederate soldier and congressman, U.S. Minister to Spain, Trustee of Richmond College, and an ardent collector. Another was donated to the Ancient World Gallery in 1980 from the estate of Mae Keller, the first dean of Westhampton College. In 2008, Gertrude Howland donated a Late Roman lamp which she had acquired while traveling in Jordan in 1963. The others probably come from the original collection of the Richmond College Museum, but their donors are unknown. From various time periods and locations, these objects have come together to form a small, but diverse collection of ancient Roman lamps that exemplify a variety of shapes, sizes, and decorations.

Oil lamps, some of the most common household items of the ancient world, were used as early as the Stone Age. Usually made of stone or clay, they were the main source of light in ancient times. Indoors, they provided general lighting throughout the household and also in workshops and enterprises. Lamps were also used outdoors at games or religious festivals and have even been found in mass quantities along streets and above doors, where they must have provided street lighting. Used in temples, they served as both sanctuary decoration and votive offerings to gods and goddesses. The main sources of lamps in modern collections, however, are from tombs. As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, lamps were placed in tombs along with other pottery and jewelry. While they may have been included as property of the deceased, they may also have served some symbolic function because many lamps found in tombs show no sign of having been burnt.

Ancient terracotta lamps were commonly made from a two-part mold, in which damp clay was pressed into the separate halves and then joined together. When partially dry, the air and filling holes were hand pierced and then the lamp was fired in a kiln. The oil used as fuel in the ancient Mediterranean was primarily olive oil, but other possible fuels included sesame oil, nut oil, castor oil, and other plant oils. Wicks were made out of a variety of fibrous materials including linen, papyrus, mullein, and oakum. The fuel was poured into the body of the lamp through a filling hole and the wick was placed in the body of the lamp. When the wick was lit, the oil burned and a flame was produced out of the hole in the nozzle. Early Roman lamps were fairly simple and undecorated, but over time they became more decorative through the use of glazes and molded designs. Decoration could range from repetitive designs to divine representations such as Zeus with his thunderbolt or Apollo with his lyre. Religious depictions such as sacrifices and libations appeared on lamps as well. Additionally, scenes of everyday life, such as hunting and washing, decorated some lamps, along with events such as chariot races and gladiatorial fights. Images such as animals, cups, rosettes, and wreaths appeared as decorative features as well. The bases

of lamps were often engraved or stamped with potters' marks, which were usually symbols or names specifying the workshops in which the lamps were created. While letters were common in the Roman period, other symbols like the footprint were also very popular. Since lamps were manufactured on a large scale and were widely exported, potters' marks are helpful in identifying where and when a lamp was made.

### **For Further Reading**

Bailey, Donald M. *A Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum Vol 2: Roman Lamps made in Italy*. London: British Museum, 1980.

Bailey, Donald M. *Greek and Roman Pottery Lamps*. British Museum: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1963

Eckardt, Hella. *Illuminating Roman Britain*. Montagnac: Instrumentum, 2002.

Knell, D. *Ancient Lamps*. RomQ Reference Collection (<http://www.romulus2.com/lamps/index.shtml>).

Lorenzi, R. "Ancient Roman Oil Lamp 'Factory Town' Found." *Discovery News*, Dec. 5, 2008 (<http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2008/12/05/roman-oil-lamps.html>).