

A *Theotokos* lamp from Antioch-on-the-Orontes in the Archaeological Museum of Hatay (southeastern Turkey)



Abstract: Pilgrims returning home during the early Byzantine period carried with them numerous objects with sacred inscriptions. In Jerusalem—and in Syria—terracotta oil lamps were made with a specific formula of blessing mentioning both the Blessed Virgin as *Theotokos* and a certain John whose identification either with a saint or the manufacturer of these lamps remains unclear. The Archaeological Museum of Hatay in southeastern Turkey holds a lamp of this type, probably dating to the 6th century AD or shortly thereafter.

Keywords: Eulogistic oil lamps, blessing formula, *Theotokos*, early Byzantine period, Antioch-on-the-Orontes, Hatay, southeastern Turkey

Late Roman and early Byzantine lamps from southeastern Turkey have not been published extensively. Although there are several valuable publications on excavations in Turkey (e.g., Antioch, Tarsus, Pergamum and Amorium), a comprehensive overview of the lamps is still lacking, particularly with regard to the territory extending from Turkey to the northern part of Syria. International museum collections are hardly a reliable source of information on findspots since, far too often, the provenance of the specimens remains obscure, whereas the collections of Turkish museums are not well known because hardly any of the many museums have published catalogs.

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Numerous ancient lamps, in terracotta and in bronze, bear Christian symbols and the most important lamp catalogs usually include at least a few examples. They are fairly conspicuous as a rule and are easily distinguished from specimens carrying only inscriptions. The cross was the commonest and the most prominent symbol present on oil lamps even after the Muslim conquest in the 8th century AD.

More than a hundred bronze lamps have a cross-shaped ornament over the handle. Lamps of bronze were items of luxury in affluent households, kept for a long time because of their intrinsic value. They also decorated religious spaces, such as churches or wealthy tombs. It is generally accepted that the model with a cross ornament was introduced mainly in the eastern Roman Empire in the 5th century AD (on the subject, see Xanthopoulou 2010; and for this area, see Laflı and Buora 2014).

Of the numerous lamps with Christian inscriptions, in Greek but also in other languages, only a small part bears non-Judaic symbols. Iwona Modrzejewska-Marciniak (now Modrzejewska-Pianetti) notes that “according to the type of inscription, the abbreviations or the letters, one can identify both the center from which a lamp came from, and the spread of a given type in the various areas of the empire” (Modrzejewska-Marciniak 1983: 135). Stanislaw Loffreda devoted a study to these lamps and published many of them (e.g., 1989: 125–128).

The lamp of the Loffreda L 25 type, which is the subject of this paper, bears a blessing formula of type C2.5 [Fig. 1 and catalog]. It has a circular biconical body, topped with a biconical dome and pierced

by a large central filling hole surrounded by a ridge (see Loffreda 1989: 125, 209). This kind of lamp, made probably in Jerusalem (or in Syria; Loffreda 1989: 125–126) was widespread in the Eastern Mediterranean. Even though most of the finds of this type come from the Holy Land, they were also present in Greece and even in Sicily (Chrzanovski 2015: 149). A very similar lamp, with the same inscription, was published in 1900 and 1929 (Jalabert and Mouterde 1929: 119, No. 218).

The variety of the lamps with regard to size (diameter from just 7 cm to a maximum of 9 cm, the average being 8.2 cm; height between 2 cm and 4.34 cm), shape, type of inscription and fabric attests to numerous workshops likely located in multiple locations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

One of the distinguishing features is the number of wick holes, ranging from just one, as in the discussed example, to as many as seven in lamps pertaining to the Jewish tradition. With regard to the latter examples, Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom (2009: especially 203*–205*) has noted that, in the ancient world, the number seven was quite common in other types as well, especially in the Hellenistic period, due to its symbolic connotations. The actual number of holes seems not to have been predetermined. At first there was one hole and subsequently more holes were pierced at the expense of the inscriptions.

Two variants of the form of the inscription are known: Θεοτόκου or Θεοτόκου. As for lamp shapes, one is hexagonal in section and the other cylindrical with no marks on the bottom.

Some of the lamps that are in circulation, even some in museum displays, may well come from illicit sources.

THE TITLE *THEOTOKOS*

Theotokos lamps are considered as a devotional object or a “souvenir” of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Witt 1998: 108), to the tomb of Our Lady in the Valley of Joshaphat, to the Kathisma or to the Nea (Shoemaker 2004: 113–114). The term, a title of Mary, Mother of God, has a clear theological connotation and was particularly favored in Eastern Christianity. The typical Latin translations, *Dei Genetrix* or *Deipara*, are given as “Mother of God” or “God-bearer”. The title *Theotokos* (“Mother of God”) was

used in the 2nd century AD by Aristides and in the 5th century in Constantinople (*Apologia*, 4, see Sofronio di Gerusalemme 1991: 63). It is used in a letter of AD 320 from Alexander of Alexandria to Alexander patriarch of Constantinople, announcing the deposition of Arius (Haffner 2004: 110). The term *Theotokos* was employed without hesitation by the Alexandrian school of theology as well as that of the Cappadocians, which was theologically close to Alexandria, but “the term was conspicuous by its absence from Antiochene litera-

A *Theotokos* lamp from Antioch-on-the-Orontes

Dimensions: H. 4; Dia. body 8.2; Dia. central hole 2.2; Dia. wick hole 1; H. letters 0.8 cm

Findspot: Antioch-on-the-Orontes(?) or elsewhere in the province of Hatay, southeastern Turkey. Today in the Archaeological Museum of Hatay in Antakya

Fabric: Reddish fabric and purple-brown slip



Fig. 1. *Theotokos* lamp from the Archaeological Museum of Hatay, accession No. 9159 (Drawing G. Kan Şahin, 2005)

Type: Bagatti 1964: No. 3; Kennedy 1963: No. 28; and Loffreda 25

Description/state of preservation: Biconical body, conical handle, now lost. Large central filling hole, surrounded by thin groove, no protruding nozzle.

Inscription: Greek inscription in relief in two concentric circles. Outside: ΕΥΛΟΓΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΥ ΜΕΘ' ΗΜΩΝ (the last two words are not clear). Inside: ΕΠΙΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ. Cabrol saw in this inscription an indication of the name of the manufacturer; other researchers opted for a community of followers of a John, to be identified perhaps with a bishop who died in AD 538 (see Modrzewska-Marciniak 1983: 138; Witt 1998: 108).

Note the shape of the letters A and Γ: the P is in retrograde, the C is moon-shaped.

It is general knowledge that the term *eulogia*, with the meaning of “blessing”, applies to various forms of consecrated objects.

Dating: 6th to 8th century AD

ture” (Nitowski 1986: 23; Haffner 2004: 113). Nestorius and the Nestorians raised various objections, arguing that the expression was not biblical and had not been used by the Council of Nicaea, that it had a pagan meaning (as if the Virgin was a goddess) and that it would have been opportune to replace it with *Christotokos*. It was only at the Council of Ephesus on 22 June 431 that Mary was proclaimed Mother of God.

With this in mind, the central position of the term *Theotokos* on the said lamps is to be seen as a profession of faith. This assumption is further supported by the fact that it does not appear on lamps from Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor. In this context, the lamp from Hatay, of rather uncertain provenance, could actually have a Christian background. Of the 30 examples known, less than half have a certain or probable origin (several maybe from illicit digs). Nearly half comes from Jerusalem, which even if it

was not a lamp production center itself, must have had places where pilgrims could have purchased these lamps [Fig. 2].

THEOTOKOS LAMP CHRONOLOGY

As argued above, *Theotokos* lamps should be dated to the advanced 5th century AD, although there are some grounds to believe they continued in use as late as the 7th or even 8th centuries, whereas there is no reliable stratigraphic data for this statement. Nevertheless, the dating of the discussed specimen matches that assumed for other “à galette” lamps from Cyprus and, in general, from the Near East.

Rosenthal and Sivan noted that the declared findspot of many examples in the Hebron area may well have been a fashion on the Israeli antiquarian market and does not necessarily indicate local production (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 142, No. 580).

APPENDIX

The following is a list of known *Theotokos* lamps to which one should add the specimen from the Archaeological Museum of Hatay:

- 1–7. Jerusalem, seven examples in the Franciscan Collection (Loffreda 1989: 125–128)
8. Jerusalem, Israel Museum (Israeli and Avida 1988: 172, No. 488)
- 9–10. Jerusalem, The Schloessinger Collection (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 142, Nos 580–581)
11. Aleppo, The National Museum of Aleppo (Leclercq 1927: 1198, No. 1241, Fig. 6721)



Fig. 2. Distribution of known finds of *Theotokos* lamps in the Eastern Mediterranean (Map S. Pataci, 2018)

12. “From Hebron” (Bagatti (1964: No. 112); the findspot may have been made up by the seller to camouflage the actual provenance (see above).
13. Bet Shean (Kennedy 1963: Fig. XXX, 74, 113)
14. Bethany (Saller 1957: 178)
15. Damascus, The National Museum of Damascus (Modrzewska-Marciniak 1983: Fig. 1)
16. The Museum of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, Berkeley, CA, purchased from a dealer of antiquities, with claimed provenance as Syria (Fulco 1979: 27–28 =SEG 29, No. 1601)
17. Zediye in north Syria, kept in the Collection Laudien (Jarry 1970: 212, No. 61)
- 18–19. Toronto, Anawati Collection (Djuric 1995: Nos 247–248)
20. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, from Asia Minor (Wulff 1909: 246, Pl. 59; Leclercq 1928: VIII, 1, 1198, Fig. 6721,8)
21. Germany, private collection (Witt 1998: 108)
22. London, The British Museum, accession no. 1987, 0401.3, purchased in 1987 (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.as)
23. Los Angeles, CA, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Inv. No. 83.AQ377.326 (Bussière and Wohl 2017: 402, No. 548)
24. Jerusalem and Pez, Venus Galleries (<http://www.trocadero.com/stores/biblicalartifacts/items/1323052/RARE-BYZANTINE-OIL.LAMP>)
25. Greece (Chrzanovski 2015: 149)
26. Sicily (Chrzanovski 2015: 149)
27. Northern Syria (Touma 1984: Figs 133–134)
28. Holy Land (Sussman 2017: 107, classified as “Syrian”)

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