BOOK REVIEW


Maurice Bouvier was an esteemed professor of law at the University of Alexandria, and in this capacity, resided in Egypt for over 30 years where he acquired several hundred ancient oil lamps – The Bouvier Collection. Laurent Chrzanovski has expertly analyzed, identified, and assembled these lighting vessels in this handsome volume. Honestly, it is one of the largest and finest collections of Egyptian and Near Eastern lamps I have encountered, and made accessible and affordable through Chrzanovski’s publication. The volume presents 795 oil lamps molded or wheel-thrown in clay, cast in bronze, and carved in stone. The lamps were manufactured in various workshops and production centers located in Egypt, Tripolitania, Tunisia, Cyprus, Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor. The collection’s lamp groups reflect a wide chronological range as well: the Pre-Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. Plastic-figurine lamps, lamp parts (e.g. handles and triangular reflector shields), multi-nozzle rectangular candelabra, and lanterns are also included. Each lamp catalogue entry includes a thorough macroscopic description, provenance, date, and parallels.

Chrzanovski’s catalogue substantially expands the global corpus of published collections of ancient lamps and our knowledge of the various types, especially the Egyptian lamps originating from Alexandria and the Fayoum. One exciting aspect of this assemblage is the rare and sometimes never-before-seen lamps and lamp scenes. The “frog” lamp portraying a barbarian man (p. 330, no. 567) and two additional frog lamps with faces of a grotesque and female head (p. 330, nos. 566 and 568, respectively), at least for me, demonstrate the wider repertoire of images found on this group which in general, tends to represent various frog styles: natural (p. 305, no. 502), geometric (p. 299, no. 485), and symbolic (p. 303, no. 497). Images interpreted as human fetuses are pictured on three other rare frog lamps located in the British Museum which I suggest may have been intended for use as photoamulets: the lamps may have been placed in burials of miscarried fetuses to “radiate” symbolic light to protect them from darkness where impure demons lurk. I was delighted to discover that a frog lamp decorated with Christian crosses is also located in the Bouvier Collection (pp. 50-51, 328-329, no. 565). These are rather uncommon and reflect the early Christian appropriation of the millennia-old Egyptian association of this slimy amphibian with rebirth, renewal, and resurrection as Chrzanovski points out based on similar examples from Karanis (p. 51).

As a fellow lychnologist, I greatly appreciate Chrzanovski’s decision to publish large photographs of the lamps, and not only the upper part of the lighting vessels, but also their respective bases. Much information can be gleaned from the inscriptions, initials, and lamp-maker marks found on a lamp base, as Chrzanovski’s helpful index of lamp-epigraphy in the volume shows (pp. 57-65). Medallion-like photographs of discus scenes with accompanying discussion is another helpful feature of the publication. The lamps’ clay fabric colors pictured in the respective photographs appear accurate and the resolution of the black-and-white images is particularly superb. The
combined effect is as if I were examining The Bouvier Collection in person! The inclusion of Prof. Bouvier’s lamp drawings intermittently throughout the volume is a thoughtful touch and pays tribute to his fascination with ancient lamps.

Chrzanovski’s attention to detail and superb scholarship is evidenced in his correct identifications and dating of the lamps in the tome, a sizable accomplishment given the large number of lamps from many different provenances. Take, for example, the Syrian discus lamp entry (p. 281, no. 427). In Roman times, numerous regional versions of the widely popular discus or “picture” lamps (Bildlampen) were manufactured. Phoenicia, Syria, and Palestine were no exception. It has become standard practice among lychnologists, including myself, to identify the latter regions as the origin for the discus lamp group produced in the Levant. That said, no archaeological evidence – such as an actual workshop, molds, and wasters – has been found to confirm this regional type’s location of manufacture. Two possible clay sources may have been quarried for this group, as the findings of a combined petrographic and trace-element analysis of lamp samples from multiple sites in Israel and Jordan suggest. But whether these sources were limited to locations in Phoenicia, Syria, and/or were actually situated in Palestina Tertia at or in the vicinity of the Decapolis city of Scythopolis/Beth Shean still must be determined. Another sourcing study has identified Abila as a site for picture lamp production, but the version made there differs from the Palestinian discus type in that its fabric is a pinkish red and its wall tends to be thicker. There simply may have been several workshops and even multiple production centers for the Levantine versions of the picture lamp group given its widespread distribution and abundance at sites throughout the region. So, I was impressed that Chrzanovski distinguished the Syrian discus lamp from the very similar provincial Palestinian discus lamp form that is typically characterized by two double-ax motifs on its shoulder and a hard-fired thin wall, among other distinctive features.

The section about Firmalampen (“factory lamps”) reminds me of the rarity of this type in the Levant as compared to the substantial quantities produced in Italy and in the northern provinces of the empire. Examples have been excavated at the Red Sea port of Aqaba, Byblos, Caesarea Maritima, and Masada. A theater mask is depicted on a standard factory lamp from Italy included in the catalogue (p. 252, no. 346; cf. to a face interpreted as Jupiter Ammon’s depicted on another Firmalampe unearthed at Gerulata in the Roman province of Pannonia). Additionally, three versions of this lamp type are found in the catalogue (p. 253, nos. 348-350) and, as suggested by Chrzanovski, may originate from Egypt or the Near East. Some lychnologists identify lamps belonging to this version as the “Northern Group” or “Northern Stamped” form which was likely manufactured in Galilee or somewhere farther north, as distribution maps suggest.

One topic Chrzanovski confronts is the interpretation of façades on lamps as Christian and Jewish motifs (pp. 405-407). He identifies four stylistic variants of a façade motif depicted on lamps. The shrine image portrayed on the lamp example from Chersonesos appears to have been made in the same mold as that from Miletus (Variant A, middle bottom, p. 406). The Miletus example has been identified as representing a Torah Shrine based on similar depictions pictured on synagogue mosaics in Israel (e.g. Beth Alpha, Hammath-Tiberias, Sephoris, and Susiya), shown in the frescoes of the Jewish catacombs of Torlonia and Monteverde in Rome, and those portrayed on gold glasses and on other clay lamps. Torah Shrine images on lamps are rare, though. One example
from Ostia shows open doors with scrolls represented inside. Another shrine is pictured with a drawn curtain or parochet and was unearthed at Tel Mevorakh near Caesarea Maritima in Israel. Further examples exhibit closed paneled doors (i.e. Miletus and Kalymnos). The facades portrayed on a few lamps from Sepphoris in Lower Galilee may represent possible Torah Shrines, but unfortunately are incomplete as they occur on fragments. Crosses typically distinguish Christian shrines depicted on lamps, including one found on a lamp from Caesarea Maritima, and another interpreted as the Edicule of the Holy Sepulcher on a lamp located in the Münster Museum.

In his introduction on the economic contribution of Egypt and the Levant regarding oil lamps (pp. 37-53), and his most captivating section, Chrzanovski takes his lamp catalogue a critical step further, advancing the field of lychnology by addressing wider matters involving the commercial culture behind lamp production, lighting accessories, and usage. His discussion on the various types of oil-fuels and wick materials processed for lamp use are treated in light of Egyptian hieroglyphs in addition to Hebrew and Arabic religious texts. Evidence for vapors resulting from the burning of such lamp oil-fuels has been petrographically identified as hairline vapor veins meandering through the fabrics of lamp sherds excavated at Sepphoris and Aqaba. Chrzanovski’s analysis and inclusion of a papyrological fragment belonging to the Zenon corpus listing various oil-fuels and hand-lamps (pp. 44-47) is also welcomed. Papyrological texts cut to the chase by informing us directly about ancient daily life activities and rituals involving lamp usage.

I appreciate that Chrzanovski mentions the occurrence of finger imprints on lamps in this section as well (p. 49). Finger impressions are an important diagnostic feature of some lamp types, including, for example, the Classic Nabataeanean group dating to the Early Roman period and likely produced in the Petra area. As a recent study reports, a lamp-maker’s thumb-impression was extracted from a Classic Nabataean lamp fragment excavated at Roman Aqaba using 2D-laser scanning methods. Lamps belonging to the Beit Nattif type made in one or more workshops in the Judaean Shephelah, too, characteristically exhibit finger imprints, as indicated in the image provided in the catalogue (p. 49).

Additionally, Chrzanovski draws our attention to the modern manufacture and ritual usage of clay lamps for the Hindu festival of lights (Diwali) which is especially intriguing as the lighting vessels are similar to ancient saucer lamps and demonstrate how this tradition has survived for centuries. Another example where Chrzanovski takes that additional leap forward is his acute identification and comparison of the multi-pointed star motif carved into the façade of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to the same-shaped stone lamps from the Arabian Peninsula, probably Yemen, in the collection (pp. 476-477, nos. 794-795). This symbolic connection between sacred space and material culture is fully plausible. All said, Chrzanovski’s exquisite scholarly publication of The Bouvier Collection has readily achieved international acclaim as a lychnological classic.

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