

## Depictions of ships on roman lamps

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### Abstract

Roman everyday objects were often decorated with motives of the aquatic environment. Very interesting group of such artifacts are roman oil lamps found in the Roman provinces Germania Superior and Germania Inferior. They are characterized by repetition of iconographic themes connected to river or sea navigation. This paper deals with an attempt of interpretation connection between oil lamps and their decorations.

**Keywords:** oil lamps, navigation, ships, decorations, craf

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### Introduction

In the area of Germania Superior, Germania Inferior and so called Free Germany were found many artefacts with evidence associated with navigation. Next to the findings of ship wrecks and amphoras, are artefacts with rich iconography with elements of the aquatic environment. One of the groups of artefacts with pictorial evidence are roman lamps. The artefacts are dated from I century A.D. to III century A.D. Collected here lamps are located in Roman-German Museum in Mainz (Römisch-Germanische Zentralmuseum, Mainz), in Museum in Trier (Rheinischen Landesmuseums Trier) and in British Museum in London. Most of the lamps are preserved completely, some of the have missing handles or wick holes. The basis of the article are pictures of mentioned above 14 clay lamps. Through this pictorial evidence may be obtained new information about presentation of watercraft, for example types of trading goods, sails or ship itself.

### Purpose and decoration on the lamps in Roman Empire

In Roman world the use of the lamps began in the III century B.C., earlier the romans were using candles, candelae, which were place in candlestick (Bernhard M., 1955, p. 74).

Numerous discovers of the lamps in roman houses suggests that main purpose of the use of the lamps were to lighten the rooms. To really lighten up the rooms lamps were placed high in niches or directly on the walls or ceilings. Sometimes lamps were set on small shelf attached to the walls or on candelabra. Also lamps were used to heating of rooms, cult purpose, as a sacrifice for the gods, gifts and as the grave goods . In sanctuariues lamps were lighted up as a sacrifice or were destined as ex voto. This lighting artefacts which were put into the graves where never used before (Bailey, 1972, p. 12).

Lamps spread throughout the Roman Empire. The artistic value of items was very high, this good began to be treated as a luxury product. With time, lamp production centers began to appear in the provinces, it was at the end of the I century A.D. Often placed in military camps, most famous were in Vondonissia, Xanten and Wessenau (Bernhard M., 1955, p. 135-136).

The main material of which the lamps were made was clay or bronze, sometimes with depictions at various parts of them. The oldest fuel which was used in ancient Rome were made of vegetable fats like olive oil. The wick was made of flax fiber 30 cm long (Bailey, 1972, p. 9-10, Bernahrd M, 1995, p. 74-76).

The division of the lights was presented by S. Loeschcke, who was developing Vindonissia's artefacts and distinguished them into two groups: Bildlampen and Firmlampen. Bildlampen are lamps with decorations on the central disk, which evolved from I century B.C. to III century A.D. Name Firmlampen refers to the stems of the manufacturer, occurring mainly on the bottom of the lamps. These lamps appeared in the end of I century A.D. and in the beginning of the II century A.D. (Loeschcke S., 1919, p. 23-66).

Variety of motives were used for decorating lamps in the Roman period; they were very rich. Decorated were handles, rims for example with granulation, but most of all the central disk. This method was introduced in the I century B.C. and resulted from the construction of the lamp, which had a closed form. We have different types of depictions on lamp disks, they are mainly taken from everyday life, but also can find geometric figures and gods (Bernhard M., 1995, p. 226-228). Depictions on disks provide valuable material for the study of Roman art. They can serve as a document through which the perception of an art work by the public and provide evidence to determine its popularity, e.g. by duplication of the depictions.

### Roman lamps with depictions of ships

Findings of the Roman lamps with depictions of the vessels or in the shape of the vessel come from the area of provinces Germania Inferior, Germania Superior and so-called Free Germany. From this area were gathered 14 clay lamps, which were classified into three groups: simple form of depiction, rich form of depiction and lamps in the shape of a vessel. In the catalog were collected pictures of the artefacts.

First group are lamps with a simple form of depiction; consists of two artefacts. Lamp no. 1 (Fig. 1) is dated to I century A.D. and was found near Berlin. The lamp's diameter is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 10 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3 cm. The rim of the disk is bordered by three lines. The depiction is situated on the disk of the lamp. We can see a small ship with a mast and rolled-up sail. The ship has a prow on the left. Under the ship's prow can be seen a filling hole. The wick hole is placed in the burner nozzle. Handle has not been

preserved. Lamp no. 2 (Fig. 2) dates back to II-III century A.D. and was found in Mainz. The lamp's diameter is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 9 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 4 cm. The rim of the disk is bordered by two lines. The vessel visible on the disk is presented with a raised prow and a stern with a stem. Vessel has a mast and rolled-up sail and ropes on both sides of the mast. Filling hole is located under the ship, somewhat in the middle of the depiction. Wick hole is placed in the burner nozzle. The lamp has a ring-shaped handle.



Fig. 1. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

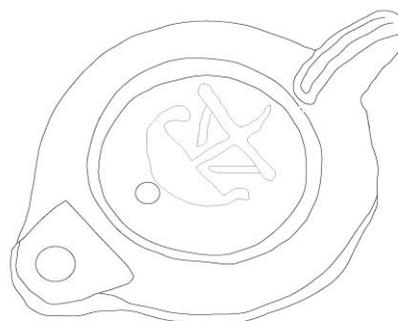


Fig. 2. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

Second group with lamps with a rich form of depiction consists of nine lamps. Lamp no. 3 (Fig. 3) is dated to I-II century A.D. and was found

near Berlin. The lamp's diameter is 6 cm., length is 9 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by two lines. The center of the disk is filled with a ship with visible mast, sail and ropes on left side of the mast. On the ship's side can be seen four oars. The prow of the ship is pointing to the right. Filling hole partially overlaps lower part of ship's side. Wick hole is placed in burner nozzle. Handle has not been preserved. Lamp no. 4 (Fig. 4) from Neuss dated back to I century A.D. The lamp's diameter is 6 cm., length of the lamp is 9 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 2.8 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by three lines. On a central disk we can see ship with a mast, driven by sail and oars. The presentation is very detailed, we can count five oars, stern is finished with a head of an animal, probably a bird head. On the prow we can see anthropomorphic eye. The sail is stretched to half, under the sail we see two men, one on the left side of the mast, second on the right, both rising right shoulder to the sky. Water, waves under the ship are marked. Filling hole is located under the waves and wick hole is placed in burner nozzle. Handle has not been preserved. Lamp no. 5 (Fig. 5) dates back to II-III century A.D and comes from Mainz. The lamp's diameter is 10 cm., length of the lamp is 17 cm. The lamp is flat with a height with a handle, of 13 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by three lines. The lamp has a disk with a heart ornament, filling hole is in the middle of the disk. Handle is in a shape of triangle with depiction of vessel with mast. We can see 3 men, one of the is sitting on the stern and holds the rudder, the other two members of the crew are standing around the mast looking up. They are probably put the mast vertically. On the ship's side we can see planking. Bow of the ship is directed to the right. Lamp no. 6 (Fig. 6) was found in Bingen and is dated to II-III century A.D. The lamp's diameter is 6 cm., length of the lamp is 9 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by three lines. On the disk is vessel with open sail. On the ship's side are eight oars and a rudder. Filling hole is located under the ship. Handle has not been preserved. Lamp no. 7 (Fig. 7) is dated to the II-III century A.D and was found in Mainz. The lamp's diameter is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 10 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3 cm. The rim of the discus

is bordered by three lines. On the disk was presented a ship with a prow directing to the right. We also can see mast with rolled up sail. Ship's side has visible five oars, filling hole is located on the stern of ship. Lamp no 8 (Fig. 8) found in Stuttgart, dated to II century A.D. The lamp's diameter is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 10 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 4 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by two lines, from which small radial lines extend toward the centre. Depiction of the ship occupies a large part of the central disk of the lamp. The ship is under full sail with eight oars on the ship's side. The vessel's prow is directing to the left. On the stern can be seen an animal head. Rims of the lamp is decorated by concave grooves in clay. The filling hole is located in the middle of the sail, there is another small hole under the ship, maybe second filling hole. The lamp has a ring-shaped handle. Lamp no. 9 (Fig. 9) dated to II-III century A.D., located in Trier. The lamp's diameter is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 9 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3 cm. The rim of the discus is bordered by three lines. Presented ship is under sail with three oars and rudder. On the stern we can see head of an animal, probably bird. On the prow we can see anthropomorphic eye, also we can see waves under the vessel. The filling hole is located on the right side of the ship and overlaps the rudder. Lamp no. 10 (Fig. 10) was found in Trier and is dated to II century A.D. The lamp's diameter is 13 cm. The ship is located in the middle of the disk, she has a mast and sail stretched to half. On ship's side are numerous oars and a rudder. Filling hole is in the middle of the ship, overlapping oar. Handle has not been preserved.



Fig. 3. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

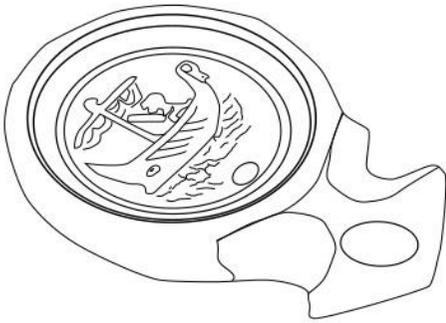


Fig. 4. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

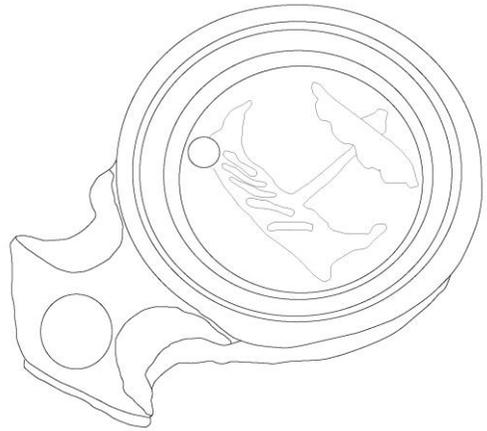


Fig. 7. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

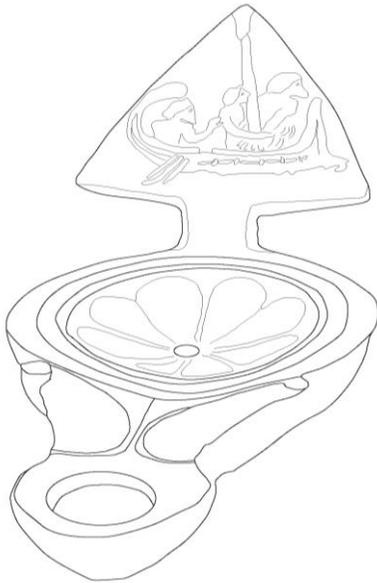


Fig. 5. <http://www2.rgzm.de>



Fig. 8. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

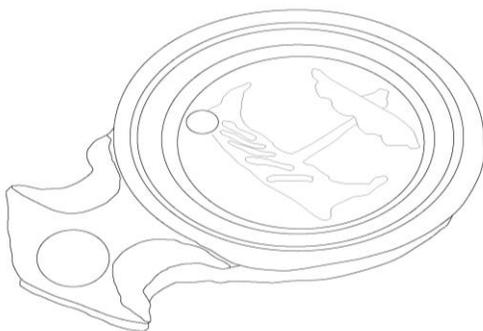


Fig. 6. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

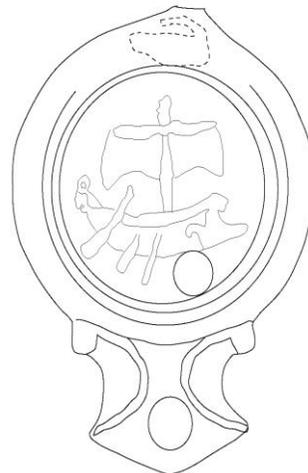


Fig. 9. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

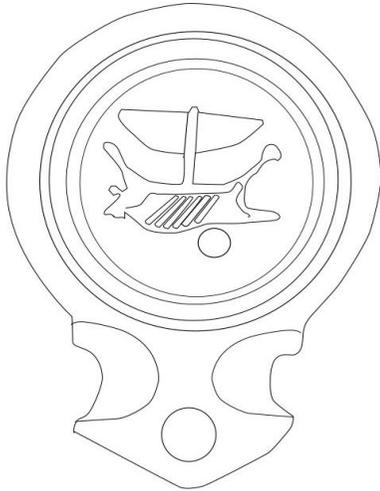


Fig. 10. Goethert K., *Römische lampen und leuchter*, Trier 1997, p. 63

In group with lamps in shape of vessel are four artefacts. Lamp no. 11 (Fig. 11) is dated to II-III century A.D. and comes from Mainz. The lamp's width is 7 cm., length of the lamp is 25 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 6 cm. The lamp is in the shape of the ship with raised prow. Ship's side are smooth. The lamp has 28 holes for a wick. Second lamp no. 12 (Fig. 12) comes from Weissenburg and is dated to II century A.D. The whole lamp is in the shape of the flat-bottom boat with raised prow and stern (Ellmers D., 1978, p. 6). In the middle of the boat can be seen an animal, probably sheep or goat. The animal may be the trading good. On ridge of animal is holder, which is partially damaged. Wick holes are placed on the prow and stern, one of each side. The third and fourth artefacts were found together in Trier, one lamp is fully preserved, second only partially. Both lamps are dated to II-III century A.D. Lamp no. 13 (Fig. 13) is preserved completely. The lamp's width is 4,10 cm., length of the lamp is 6,20 cm. The lamp is flat with a height of 3,60 cm (Goethert K., 1997, p. 137). Lamp is in the shape of regular ship with both prow and stern raised up with a rudder. Filling hole is located in the middle of the ship. On both sides of the filling hole are two small, probably handles. Eight quite small wick holes are on the both sides, four for each side starboard and port. The vessel lamp is situated on two legs. Only back half of the ship lamp no. 14 (Fig. 14), with a

rudder was preserved. Ship's side is decorated with concave grooves in the clay in the shape of squares. Filling hole, which partially retained, is located in the middle of the ship. Four wick holes are on the both sides of the ship starboard and port.

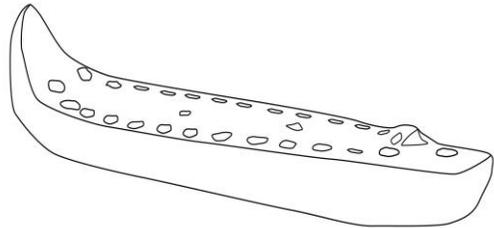


Fig. 11. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

Some depicts of ships on roman lamps allow to attempt to identify the type of vessel. Furthermore, comparing depicts of the ships on lamps to the descriptions of ships in book L. Casson "Ships and seafaring in ancient times" or to book S. Gulas "Żeglarze" and to redraws of the ships in J. Jundziłł "Rzymianie a morze" and of course to iconographic model known from mosaics in Ostia enables to qualify them into three groups: military units, punts and those which cannot be identified.



Fig. 12. <http://www2.rgzm.de>

Lamps no. 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 are probably triremes or, lamps no. 2 and 12 in shape are similar to biremes. The lamp no. 4 and lamp no. 12 are a punt shape ships with no deck and flat-bottomed.

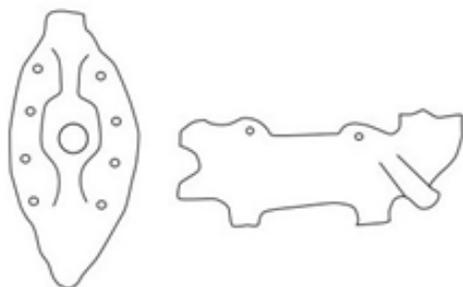


Fig. 13. Goethert K., *Römische lampen und leuchter*, Trier 1997, p. 137

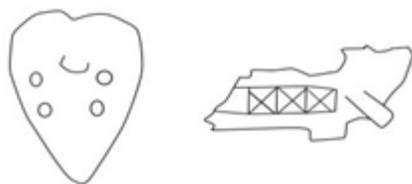


Fig. 14. Goethert K., *Römische lampen und leuchter*, Trier 1997, p. 137

## Conclusion

Ancient roman everyday objects were often adorned with decorative motifs of sea and river. They were characterized by repetition of iconographic themes. Everyday people living in riverside areas were mainly associated with trading. Navigation was part of everyday life, associated with the ports, trade and in Germania Superior and Inferior with patrolling areas of the limes. Legionaries living in roman forts were also fishermen, merchants, captains and craftsmen. Maybe people wanted to emphasize this connection by placing the depictions of the ships on lamps. Nevertheless, aquatic fauna, flora were rarely presented on lamps, except dolphin.

The relatively large surface of disk for decoration on the lamp allowed manufacturers to depict a vessel, not only in a schematic manner, but also in details. These additional elements are mast, sail, crew, sometimes cargo, animals or gods. We can also see planking and rudder or anthropomorphic eye. The crew can be count and sometimes it is possible to see

what are they doing on the watercraft, oars can be count as well, vessels can be seen under full sail or with rolled up sail. Even the water, waves are marked. These are small pieces of art which provide evidence of popularity of the depiction.

While discussing the purpose of depicting vessels on roman lamps we have to remember about the symbolic meaning of the ship and aquatic environment. Water is one of the four earth elements, it always will be a part of the human life, a symbol of abundance and vital forces. The combination of lamp light and with the ship could be a symbol of a safe return home, a reflection of the lighthouse. Another interpretation of this type of depiction on lamps can be elapsing moments, which are associated with the burning of the contents of the lamp.

Some performances of ships were shown under full sail which could mean prosperity and success (Carr-Gomm, S., 2005, p. 253). To have a safer journeys on ship's sides were placed various symbolic and cultural depictions. On the lamp no. 4 from Neuss (Fig. 4), where it is apparent effort to refine the details of presentation, on the prow is placed oculus, anthropomorphic eye. It was painted on the prow of the ship as a sign of prosperity reversing misfortune eye (Pitassi M., 2011, p. 41).

Small handicraft artefacts presenting the smallest details of floating units require very large practice. Although some elements, e.g. figures on monuments or parts of the ships are disproportionate and often are shown schematically, but they are very important source, which can be helpful in collecting information about ancient navigation and types of the ships.

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