

LAMP REPRESENTING A DOVE

Ro-Imperial, 1st - 2nd century A.D.
Silver and garnet inlay for the eyes
Height: 11 cm, Length: 14 cm
Reference: 13858



This astonishing lamp is in the shape of a sitting dove ready to swallow a berry. An irremovable lid, in the form of a shell surmounted by a stem with a small knob, ornaments the back of the bird.

This is a unique piece in all respects. It is primarily outstanding for the material that the artist chose, silver, which is unattested on tank lamps and whose use for such an item only appears in Late Antiquity, when this precious metal was used to create the polycandela (lamps intended to carry several glass lamp cups) that adorned the richest Eastern churches.

Taking into account the ductility of the material, it is very likely that our lamp was never actually utilized, since the whole body would have become red-hot when lighting the wick and burning the oil. This masterpiece was probably commissioned as an offering to a specific deity, like the famous golden lamp offered by Nero in the Temple of Venus Pompeiana (De Caro 1988).

The eclectic choice of subject from the animal world should also be emphasized. Bird-shaped statuette-lamps, of terracotta or of bronze, are rare and undocumented, with few exceptions, in Egypt and the Near East. Two species, the duck and especially the peacock, appear to be particularly appreciated from the Imperial period until the Byzantine period (see BrLa013 and BrLa059).

Doves (or turtle doves) pecking seeds on a branch are quite common on the discuses of terracotta lamps from the 1st to the 3rd century A.D. (Bailey 1988, pp. 81-82), while they are rarely attested as lamps in their own right, except in Byzantine and later Muslim Egypt (Hayes 1984, no. 213, p. 137; Bénazeth 2001, nos. 149-151, pp. 169-171). These examples have, however, a different rendering from ours, aside from the Byzantine lamp in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, on which the turtle dove adopts an almost identical posture (Bénazeth 2001, no. 149, p. 169).

Among the elaborate bronze lamps of the Imperial period and of the early Byzantine period, three lamps, each in the shape of a duck, in the

Leo Mildenberg Collection (Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1999, fig. 73, 88 and 89) present a number of details strikingly similar to our silver lamp. The first example (fig. 88), a High Imperial lamp in the shape of a standing duck, has an almost identical treatment with regard to the details of the wing feathers and of the down, as well as the rendering of the beak. Moreover, as with our lamp, the head is turned to the right and its open beak would have also held a berry. The second example (fig. 73), dated between the 4th and the 7th century A.D., is positioned like our dove, but the bird is depicted cleaning its plumage with its beak, while the rendering of the details is rather poor. The third example (fig. 89), a suspension lamp dated to the same period, also represents a sitting duck, its raised head looking forward, holding a berry in its beak. Another lamp from the 1st century A.D., now in the British Museum (Bailey 1996, Q 3601, p. 21, pl. 21), is in the shape of a sitting duck holding a berry between its beak and its neck. The fine rendering of the feathers recalls that of our example, as well as the overall shape of the body and the beak.

In light of all the above-mentioned elements, this masterpiece can be tentatively dated to the early Imperial period. Furthermore, it can be attributed to an Egyptian or even to a central Italian workshop, given the fine and realistic details and especially the shape of the beak with the protruding half-volutes, a morphological feature that seems to disappear at the latest in the 3rd century A.D.

CONDITION

Complete and in excellent condition; minor deformations on the body, small cracks.

PROVENANCE

Acquired on the German art market in 2001.

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