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Dunham Bible Museum

“Bodey Oil Lamp”

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The Bodey Oil Lamp: The Illumination of Dating Through Construction and Design

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Nestled amongst the pieces of parchment, papyri, and codices in the Dunham Bible Museum, a conspicuously decorated oil lamp from the Gerald and Nancy Bodey collection is on display. Seen in the first stand-alone case on the left after passing through the museum's main entrance, the lamp has a small half-globe body, with a bridged nozzle rounded at the tip, which itself is winged by volutes on both sides. Opposite of the nozzle, a plug handle protrudes a half inch from the body with a hole punched through the side, enabling a string or hook to pass through it. While the top of the lamp is ringed by a gently decorated fringe, the focus is on the elaborate Athenian owl relief on the discus of the lamp.¹ The informational plaque accompanying the Bodey Lamp lists it as an “Oil Lamp with Athenian owl on discus, 400 B.C.” While the visible facts are swiftly confirmed by a glance, the 400 B.C. dating of the piece raises concerns pertaining to the accuracy of that placement. After a thorough evaluation of oil lamps from Greece's Archaic period to the fall of Rome, both the construction and style, suggest that the Bodey Oil Lamp is more accurately dated from the Early Roman Empire.

The age of an oil lamp, when excavation reports are not present, is sought in not only the way it was manufactured, but also by cross-referencing the stylistic characteristics of the artifact in question with similar pieces whose dates are known. Following the first way, the development of technology used by lamp makers throughout antiquity provides a general periodization for the placement of lamps. The construction methods of pottery oil lamps can be divided into those modeled by hand, thrown on a potter's wheel, and those pressed into two-piece molds.² Hand designed lamps constitute the entire

¹ See picture I: Dunham Bible Museum Catalogue: Object Record 06.31

² D. M. Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume I: Greek, Hellenistic, and Early Roman Pottery Lamps* (London: British Museum Publications, 1975), 3.

corpus of artifacts up until 525 B.C., after which, “only the wheel was used.”³ The wheel-made lamps held prominence in ancient lamp factories due to ease of construction caused by the supremacy of its technology. That advantage, however, was usurped by the gradual adoption of the two-piece mold method in the second⁴ and third⁵ centuries B.C. The mold-made lamps then became the standard of production during the later Roman Republic and Imperial eras, with the most noticeable technological variation being the decline in the proficiency with which they were made.⁶

The Bodey Lamp exhibits many of the characteristic qualities of a lamp constructed with the two-piece molding technique. During fabrication, clay would be pressed into both the upper and lower halves of the mold. Thus two halves would then be, “joined while the clay was moist, and pared with a tool.”⁷ When looking at the Bodey lamp from the side,⁸ the evidence of the two halves having been joined together and then smoothed over by a tool is clearly visible around the outside equator. Secondly, the decorative additions are of a nature distinct to a later period in the development cycle of two-piece molded lamps. For example, the wheel made lamps⁹ are, “usually heavy in form, and without ornamentation.”¹⁰ Contrary to this description, the Bodey Lamp is both of a lighter construction, and highly decorative. In fact, the type of relief decoration placed on the discus is a common feature particular to the Roman lamp makers beginning in the age of Augustus, although some early antecedents occurring in the second century B.C.¹¹ Therefore, the two-piece molding process

³ Richard Howard, *The Athenian Agora, Volume IV: Greek Lamps and their Survivals* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1958), 5.

⁴ H.B. Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), xxi.

⁵ Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume I*, 15.

⁶ D. M. Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume II: Roman Lamps Made in Italy* (London: British Museum Publications: 1975), 6.

⁷ Waalter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum*, xvii.

⁸ See picture II.

⁹ See picture III for an indicative example of a wheel-made lamp. From Howard, *The Athenian Agora, Volume IV*, Plate 30, Artifact 30.

¹⁰ Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman lamps in the British Museum*, xx.

¹¹ Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman lamps in the British Museum*, xxvii.

restricts the oldest possible dating to 300 B.C., as that technology was not used before then, while the presence of the relief decoration narrows the oldest likely dating to around 50 B.C. Recourse to the specific stylistic characteristics would allow for a yet more accurate dating of the Bodey Lamp.

To this end, an examination on the appearance and ornamentation of oil lamps as the popular fashions flickered, with an emphasis on the early Roman Imperial age as directed by the construction methods used, will enable the Bodey Lamp to be matched with whichever age it is most indicative of. Starting with known lamps dated at 400 B.C., the assumed date of the Bodey artifact, the common and popular style was an open-bodied, wheel-made lamp with a bridged nozzle which the wick would rest in.¹² The dissimilarities between this style of lamp and the Bodey lamp are clearly seen and nearly innumerable. Setting aside the different methods of construction for a moment, the Bodey lamp on the one hand has a plug handle pierced with a small hole, a closed oil well covered by the discus, a more substantial nozzle flanked by volutes, and decorations adorning both the lip and the center. On the other hand however, the example lamp from 400 B.C. has a strip handle, open well for oil, a slight nozzle with no volutes, and absolutely no ornamentation. This, alongside the knowledge that the manufacturing technology of the Bodey lamp was not utilized for another two or three hundred years, strongly suggests that it is not from 400 B.C.

Moving now to where the preliminary re-dating by means of the artifact's construction indicated, the early Roman Imperial age lamps are remarkably similar to the Bodey Lamp. Not only was the artifact constructed in the same way as those lamps, using a two-piece mold, but they also share many of the distinctive stylistic elements indicative of that time period. For instance, one lamp¹³ dated about 80-120 A.D. has analogous decorations on the discus with the air hole drilled in an

¹² See picture IV. From: Howard, *The Athenian Agora, Volume IV: Greek Lamps and their Survivals*, Plate 36, Artifact 222.

¹³ See Picture V. From: J. W. Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum I: Greek and Roman Clay Lamps* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1980), Plate 22, Artifact 227.

unobtrusive spot, looped plug handle opposite of the bridged rounded nozzle winged by volutes, and a thin rounded lip.¹⁴ Although the fringe on the example lamp in Picture V is unadorned, another indicative example lamp from the “late first or early second century A.D.” supplies the decorated edge in the same manner found on the Bodey Lamp.¹⁵ The parallels between these example lamps and the museum piece suggest that the artifact is from the early Roman Empire, somewhere in the hundred years between the middle of the first and second centuries A.D..

To restate what has been said, both the two-piece molding method used for the Bodey Lamp's construction and the distinctive decorative elements found upon it reasonably point to an early Imperial dating between 50-150 A.D. instead of the original 400 B.C. dating proposed by the display card. This illumination of dating is a light unto the path of the past. It is the beginning steps to a more complete understanding of the early Roman Empire, and an artifact of not only the ground, but also of the people whose own paths were once lit by it. The Bodey Lamp still enlightens the potter's hands that pressed the shapeless clay into the mold,¹⁶ upon the friend it might have once been given to in celebration of a new year,¹⁷ and upon those other pieces displayed on all sides of it. Truly history's flame still burns in the Dunham Bible Museum with the Bodey Lamp now leading the way.

¹⁴ Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum I: Greek and Roman Clay Lamps*, 50.

¹⁵ See Picture VI. From: Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume II*, Plate 22, Artifact 964; Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum, Volume II*, 188.

¹⁶ For a discussion on the particular process of making a lamp in this way see; Walter, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁷ It was common practice in Rome for, during the celebration of New Years, friends to give each other lamps dedicated to Janus for the illumination of the upcoming year's journey. See: Lesley Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Facts on File, 1994) 281.

Pictures

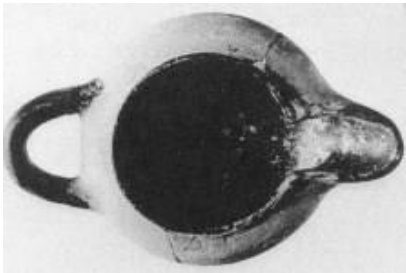
Picture I



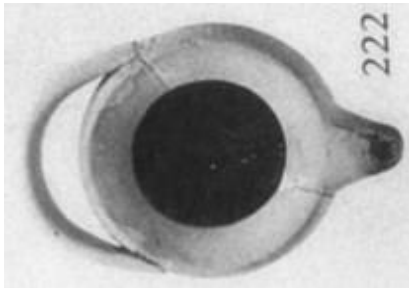
Picture II



Picture III



Picture IV



Picture V



Picture VI



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