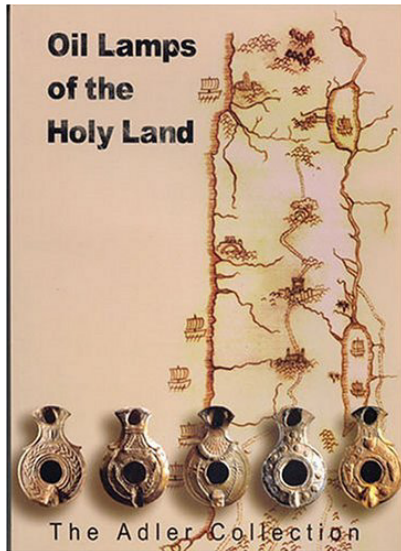


RBL 05/2009



Adler, Noam

A Comprehensive Collection of Oil Lamps of the Holy Land from the Adler Collection

Jerusalem: Old City Press, 2004. Pp. x + 176. Paper.
\$65.00. ISBN 9655551660.

Jodi Magness

University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

In this richly-illustrated volume, Noam Adler catalogs ancient oil lamps in a collection belonging to his father, Stephen Adler (plus a few lamps from other private collections). The oil lamps apparently were purchased on the antiquities market in Israel, and most of them represent types characteristic of ancient Palestine (Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea), together with a small number from neighboring regions such as Egypt, North Africa, and Asia Minor. The lamps range in date from the Bronze and Iron Ages to the Islamic and Crusader periods, but the majority belong to the first-seventh centuries C.E. They include the following types: wheel made (“Herodian”) lamps, Southern (“Darom”) lamps, ovoid lamps with a large filling hole, lamps with a bow-shaped nozzle, and “candlestick” lamps. Samaritan lamps are especially well-represented. Adler provides descriptions and measurements of the individual lamps, although he should have included information on the fabric/ware. Drawings of the decorated lamps would have been helpful, as it is often difficult to discern details in the accompanying photographs. The volume would have benefited from additional copyediting, as the text contains occasional misspellings (e.g., “Judean Dessert lamps” [51]; Appolonia instead of Apollonia [64]), awkward translations (e.g., the channel on the nozzles of some lamps is rendered throughout as “trench” from the Hebrew; Maresa instead of Marisa [34]; Sepphoris is sometimes rendered as Zipori), and other errors (e.g., for lamps 481–482, 484, 490–491, 496–498, 507–511, 513, the reference should be to p. 72, not 70).

Adler discusses and dates the various types and provides bibliography and a list of relevant sites. His treatment is competent and accurate except in a couple of instances. For example, the discovery of so-called “Persian” wheel made oil lamps (described by Adler on 146 as “high shouldered lamps”) under the pavement of Justinian’s Nea Church in Jerusalem indicates that this type appeared by the first half of the sixth century and therefore was introduced to Palestine before the late sixth or early seventh century (see Jodi Magness, *Jerusalem Ceramic Chronology circa 200–800 C.E.* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 129).

Readers of *RBL*, most of whom are not archaeologists or ceramic specialists, will find this volume of interest mainly for the information that the lamps provide on the religious orientation of their original owners. For example, some are decorated with religious symbols or cultic objects, including the menorah, cross, and facades of aediculae and temples, and a few carry inscriptions. As Adler notes, the fact that the discus of certain types of lamps (including Samaritan lamps) was broken after purchase (or sometimes not at all) probably is connected with purity observance (see 96). In fact, some oil lamps discovered in ancient tombs might have been left behind by their owners due to purity concerns.

The question of provenience is one of the major problems raised by this publication. Thousands of ancient oil lamps, many of them from Palestine, are in private collections and museums around the world. The overwhelming majority come from tombs that were looted—illegally excavated—and then were sold on the antiquities market to collectors. Oil lamps are perhaps the most common type of object traded on the antiquities market, for several reasons. First, oil lamps are found by the dozens and even hundreds in ancient tombs. Looters prefer to rob tombs because, unlike ancient settlements, tombs often contain whole (intact) vessels, which are more valuable on the antiquities market. Second, because oil lamps are small and portable, they are easily traded without detection. Third, many collectors acquire oil lamps not only because they are more affordable and plentiful than other antiquities (including other types of pottery and glass vessels), but because they are decorated, as is clear from S. Adler’s preface to this volume.

S. Adler’s preface shows that he is aware of the problems surrounding the collection of antiquities: “I have always been ambivalent about purchasing such items, even though it is legal under Israeli law. However, if I didn’t purchase them someone else would have and many of the lamps would have been lost to our society. While grave-robbing has existed since ancient times, we must hope that the State will eventually allot the Antiquities Authority sufficient resources to protect our national heritage. Until that time, some collectors have undertaken to preserve these antiquities. This catalogue allows the public to study and enjoy the lamps, which I have collected over the past forty years”

(viii). In the next paragraph S. Adler even feels it necessary to explain that his son Noam, who is an archaeologist, is not a collector.

S. Adler's remarks reflect an ongoing debate between archaeologists and collectors (including some museums). The major professional archaeology organizations condemn the trade in illegally excavated and unprovenanced antiquities; see, for example, the policies adopted by the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) at www.archaeological.org/webinfo.php?page=10352 and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) at www.bu.edu/asor/excavations/policy.pdf. S. Adler echoes the claim made by other collectors that acquisition preserves objects that otherwise would be lost.

Nevertheless, the greatest loss of information occurs when an object is removed from its context without proper archaeological excavation. Recently I published a corpus of Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic oil lamps and lamp fragments from archaeological excavations in the Ahinoam Cave Cemetery at Beth Guvrin (Jodi Magness, "The Oil Lamps from the South Cemetery," in *The Necropolis of Bet-Guvrin-Eleutheropolis* [IAA Reports 36] [ed. G. Avni, U. Dahari, and A. Kloner; Jerusalem, 2008], 121–78). Many of the lamps in the Adler collection apparently come from illegal excavations in this same area (see 72), and little can be said about them aside from describing the type and decorative motifs (even the dating must be done on the basis of parallels with lamps from properly excavated contexts). In contrast, in the case of the Ahinoam Cave Cemetery I was able to compare the types of lamps represented in different burial caves and track changes in the composition of the corpus over the course of time, as the provenience of each lamp had been documented by the excavators. Based on these comparisons, I concluded that the religious orientation of the cemetery's occupants changed from Jewish to Christian over the course of the Roman and Byzantine periods. The proper excavation of this corpus thus provides valuable information about the cemetery's population that would have been irretrievably lost had the lamps been looted and sold on the antiquities market.

I believe that archaeologists have a responsibility to educate our colleagues in other disciplines as well as the general public about the damage done to the world's cultural heritage through the looting of antiquities and illegal excavations. Archaeologists and collectors share an interest in the past and recognize the importance of ancient artifacts. Perhaps, then, S. Adler and other collectors can be persuaded that the money spent on acquisition could be more productively used to fund site conservation and the protection of antiquities, for which many countries, including the State of Israel, lack sufficient resources, as Adler notes. Such cooperation would be to the benefit of all.