

AN UNUSUAL ROMAN THEATRICAL LAMP*



ABSTRACT: This note discusses an unusual Roman bronze oil lamp in the form of a dramatic tragic mask, which has not previously been published. It is part of the Antiquities collection of National Museums Liverpool, accession number 53.114.433. The lamp was previously owned by Dr Philip Nelson, a prominent antiquarian and collector who lived in Liverpool.

THE ANTIQUITIES COLLECTION of National Museums Liverpool includes an unusual Roman bronze oil lamp in the form of a dramatic tragic mask. It forms a significant addition to the corpus of Roman lamps which relate to the ancient theatre.

The lamp (Figures 1 to 3), which has the accession number 53.114.433, was acquired in 1953 by Liverpool Museum (now World Museum, part of National Museums Liverpool). It was donated to the museum by Lily Nelson (also known as Lily Court), the widow of Dr Philip Nelson, a prominent antiquarian and collector who lived in Liverpool.¹

The lamp depicts the type of tragic mask which was popular from the Early Hellenistic period throughout the Roman era, with a high onkos, a projection representing a tall hair style.² The inner surface of the lamp suggests that it may have been originally formed as two sections, each of which

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1. P. Rushton, "A Liverpool Collector: Dr Philip Nelson (1872-1953)", *Apollo* 467 (2001) 41-8, summarises Nelson's career as a collector of classical and medieval antiquities, and the acquisition of much of his collection by Liverpool Museum.
2. A. Schwarzmeier, "Theater Masks", in M. L. Hart (ed), *The Art of Ancient Greek Theatre*, Los Angeles, 2010, 44.

would have been a separate lamp. The lamp is 189 mm long, 55 mm wide and 75 mm in height. The nozzle of the lamp curves up from below the chin of the mask, and has a wick-hole whose rim is decorated with a series of protrusions. The eye is pierced to serve as a filling hole. The inner surface, visible on Figure 3, is flat apart from a sunken rectangular area which extends from the handle end of the lamp. Two suspension lugs remain, one on the onkos and the other at the side of the chin, the latter with a chain and ring still present. This suggests that the lamp was intended to hang in a horizontal position with the flat surface against a wall. If this was the case, only the right part of a pair of lamps is present.³ The base-ring of the lamp is oval.

The external surface of the lamp has been deliberately darkened, presumably by a former owner, whether collector or dealer. This 'patina' resembles the artificial darkening of the surface of Greek and Roman bronzes which was particularly prevalent during the 18th century, undertaken for the benefit of collectors such as Richard Payne Knight and Jean-Jacques Compté de Caylus.⁴ Although the dark-coloured patina was preferred by European collectors in the 18th century, ancient bronze objects would originally have had a lighter surface finish.⁵

As the lamp has not been previously published, it was not included by Bailey in his list of examples of this type of lamp.⁶ Bailey identified four lamps of this type. The first, and most similar to the lamp in Liverpool, is in the collection of the British Museum⁷ and shows the left section of a dramatic mask. The lamp has been in the collections of the British Museum since 1824, when it was donated by Richard Payne Knight. It shares many characteristics with the Liverpool lamp: the high onkos, the nozzle curving from below the chin, a wick hole with similar rim with protrusions, the filling hole being a pierced eye, suspension lugs in similar locations, an oval base ring, and flat inner surface with sunken rectangular area. Despite these similarities, it is clear that the lamps in London and Liverpool do not form a single lamp, the differences being most apparent in the hair style and, in addition, the dimensions are slightly different.

3. In describing the lamps, I have followed the customary practice of using the terms left and right from the viewer's perspective when looking at the lamp vertically, with the nozzle at the bottom and handle at the top.

4. P. T. Craddock, *Scientific Investigation of Copies, Fakes and Forgeries*, Oxford 2009, 353.

5. R. Wünsche, "On the Colouring of the Munich Bronze Head with a Victor's Fillet", in V. Brinkmann and R. Wünsche (eds), *Gods in Color: Painted Sculpture of Classical Antiquity*, Munich 2007, 126-127.

6. D. M. Bailey, *A Catalogue of Lamps in the British Museum*. Volume 4: *Lamps of Metal and Stone, and Lampstands*, London 1996, 17-18.

7. Accession number 1824,0454.28, Q3585 (Bailey 1996, 17-18, plate 16).

Also close in style is a lamp once in the collection of Jules Sambon,⁸ who amassed a large collection of classical antiquities relating to the ancient theatre⁹ which were auctioned in Paris from the 1st to the 3rd May 1911.¹⁰ The description indicates that the lamp was in the form of the left half of a tragic mask, with a suspension ring on the cheek. The accompanying illustration shows the mask in profile. The surface is described as having a green patina and the illustration suggests heavy corrosion. The lamp in the Sambon collection is fairly small, its length given as 13 cm, considerably smaller than the lamps now in Liverpool and London, which are 18 cm and 18.2 cm long respectively¹¹. The lamp is now in the collection of the Museo Teatrale alla Scala in Milan.¹² However, their illustration shows the lamp as though the right-hand portion survives,¹³ although the description and illustration in the catalogue of the sale of the Sambon collection is of a left-hand portion.

A complete lamp composed of two split lamps joined together was noted by Bailey.¹⁴ At the time of publication in 1975¹⁵ the lamp was part of the collection of Alexandre Iolas,¹⁶ a collector and art dealer in Athens. The lamp, which depicts the head of an African man, has some similarities with the lamps in Liverpool and London, most notably the knobbed rims of the filling holes.

The fourth lamp of this type noted by Bailey was acquired in 1908 by Catania Museum in Sicily. This is described by Bailey as a complete lamp with a split body which locks together. The lamp is in the form of three masks with a handle in the shape of an eagle.¹⁷

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8. Also known as Giulio, as he was born in Naples to a French family, F. Slavazzi, "Giulio Sambon (1836-1921): mercante d'arte, collezionista e studioso", in A. Ceresa Mori, C. Lambrugo and F. Slavazzi (eds), *L'infanzia e il gioco nel mondo antico*, Milan 2012, 9.
 9. Slavazzi 2012 (n.8) 10-13.
 10. G. Sambon, *Catalogue des Antiquités. ... Collection Théâtrale de M. Jules Sambon*, Paris 1911, 46, plate XXI, Lot 399.
 11. Bailey (n.6) 17.
 12. Inv. Statale 26331, Inv. Del Museo Teatrale alla Scala 256. N. Franken, "Nur eine technische Spielerei? Bemerkungen zu zweiteiligen Kopflampen aus Bronze", in L. Chrzanowski (ed), *Lychnological Acts I. Actes du 1er Congrès international d'études sur le luminaire antique, Nyon-Genève, 29.9-4.10.2003*, Montagnac 2005, 123-130.
 13. Franken (n.12), Plate 50, Fig. 4.
 14. Bailey (n.6) 18.
 15. A. Andriomenou, "Vases et lampes de bronze dans des collections privées d'Athènes", *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 99.1 (1975) 559-561, no.6, figs. 27-30.
 16. Inv. No. Bronzes 139.
 17. Bailey (n.6) 18. Also note a double lamp in the form of a wild boar which was on the art market in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, in 2001, Franken (n.12) 126.

Franken also noted a lamp in the form of the left part of an African head, now in Berlin,¹⁸ and a double lamp in the form of a head with a comic mask, now in Milan.¹⁹ Another half-lamp, the left portion, depicting a male wearing a fitted cap was sold at Christie's New York, in 2001.²⁰

The only currently known example of this type of half-lamp found in an excavated context came to light in 2012. It was discovered during an excavation to the west of the Roman civil settlement of Aquincum in modern day Budapest in Hungary.²¹ The lamp, the body of which is 75mm long and 25mm wide, shows the right half of a comic mask, and the excavator suggests a date of the 1st or 2nd century AD.²²

The unusual nature of this type of lamp leads to consideration of whether they are Roman in date or were produced in the 18th and 19th centuries to satisfy the demands of collectors. The high level of corrosion visible on the photograph of the lamp formerly in the Sambon collection²³ suggests it is ancient; it is unlikely that an 18th or 19th century workshop would have spoiled the appearance of the lamp to such a degree.²⁴ The authenticity of the lamp once in the Nelson collection was queried when the lamp was accessioned by Liverpool Museum in 1953, undoubtedly because of its unusual form together with absence of provenance. Although the impractical nature of this type of lamp may cast doubts on whether it is ancient, there is no overwhelming evidence to indicate that it is other than Roman in date, specifically Early Imperial, by comparison with other bronze lamps either in the form of theatrical masks, or depicting theatrical masks.²⁵ Other useful

18. Berlin, Antikensammlung. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Inv. 22010. Franken (n.12) 125, plate 49, figure 2a-d.

19. Milan, Civiche Raccolte Archeologiche. Inv. A.0.9.7048. Said to have been found by a farmer in the early 19th century close to Roman Aquileia in north-east Italy, Franken (n.12), 126, plate 50, figure 5.

20. Antiquities Sale, 5-6 December 2001, Christie's New York, Lot 615.

21. G. Lassányi, "Kutatások az Aquincum polgárvárosától nyugatra épülő baseballpályán / Research on the territory of the future baseball park west of the Civil Town of Aquincum", in P. Zsidi and P. Vámos (eds), *A BTM Aquincumi Múzeumának ásatásai és leletmentései 2012-ben/Excavations and rescue work at the Aquincum Museum in 2012*, Budapest 2013, 19-31.

22. Preliminary report in Lassányi (n.21), 27-28, figure 6. Full publication to follow.

23. Sambon (n.10) plate XXI.

24. My thanks to Fleur Shearman, Conservator of Metals at the British Museum, for this observation.

25. Such as those discussed by J.R.Green, "Roman Bronze Lamps with Masks: Dionysos, Pantomime and Mediterranean Popular Culture", *HEROM. Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture* 1 (2012) 23-66.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 1-3: Bronze lamp in the collections of National Museums Liverpool (World Museum), accession number 53.114.433. All images courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

comparanda from the Early Imperial period are terracotta lamps in the form of masks, often showing a comic 'slave' mask,²⁶ miniature flat-backed masks, perhaps used as appliqués, made from materials including terracotta²⁷ or ivory,²⁸ and sculptures in the form of masks, used as part of the decoration of 2nd century AD marble sarcophagi.²⁹ In addition, images of masks appear

26. For example, J.W.Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum. I: Greek and Roman Clay Lamps*, Toronto 1980, 408 (no.103).

27. Examples include Sambon (n.10) nos. 400 and 401, plate XXI.

28. For example, M. True and K. Hamma (eds.), *A Passion for Antiquities: Ancient Art from the Collection of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman*, Malibu 1994, 356 (no.276).

29. National Museums Liverpool (World Museum) accession numbers 59.148.219, 59.148.219a, 59.148.307.2 and 59.148.307.3, included in B. Ashmole, *A Catalogue of Ancient Marbles at Ince Blundell Hall*, Oxford 1929, plates 48 and 49. Also see cinerarium lid in the collections of National Museums Liverpool (World Museum) accession number 59.148.1001, which has masks at the corners (G. Davies, *The Ince Blundell Collection of Classical Sculpture*, vol. 2, nr 73, pl. 89) and J. Paul Getty Museum, object number 72.AA.152, front panel of a garland sarcophagus.

in 1st century AD wall painting, most notably at Oplontis on the Bay of Naples³⁰ and Solunto in Sicily.³¹

Other examples of bronze lamps have the body of the lamp in the form of an entire mask, rather than a half-mask³² or have lids in the form of masks.³³ Another form of bronze lamp which features theatrical masks has been recently discussed by Green.³⁴ In contrast to the bronze lamps previously discussed, this type of lamp has a conventional body with a mask at the end of its handle, which arches over the lamp.³⁵ It is noticeable that the hairstyle shown framing the mask on this latter type of lamp bears some similarity to the hair on the half-lamps now in the collections of National Museums Liverpool and the British Museum. The hair on these two lamps is depicted as rows of tight curls extending over the brow and in three layers on each side of the face. Green has suggested that this type of depiction has its origins in the curls below the ears which were introduced in the late 2nd century BC for both comic and tragic masks, possibly to hide the edge of the mask, becoming more prevalent in depictions of masks from the later 1st century AD onwards.³⁶

Turning to the reason why masks should be such a frequent theme on lamps, Green has identified the masks on the handles of bronze examples as showing Dionysos, as god of theatre and performance,³⁷ specifically in pantomime, which, along with mime, was the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the Roman Empire.³⁸ There is no reason why the masks on related lamps, such as the example in Liverpool, and, indeed, on other decorative objects should also not show Dionysos.

The lamp in Liverpool makes, in my view, an interesting addition to the small group of Roman lamps in the shape of theatrical masks.

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30. Green (n.25) 32, Figure 29.

31. Green (n.25) 33, Figure 30.

32. Examples include True and Hamma (n.28), 296 (no. 154) and 334 (no.176).

33. For example, True and Hamma (n.28), 355 (no. 248).

34. Green (n.25) 23; True and Hamma (n.28) 296 (no. 154) and 334 (no.176).

35. Lamp type Loeschcke XXb. Green (n.25), 24.

36. Green (n.25) 30-31.

37. Green (n.25) 32, 36.

38. Green (n.25) 37.