

## An unusual Roman theatrical lamp<sup>1</sup>

Georgina Muskett, Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology, The University of Liverpool,  
Liverpool, L69 7WZ, UK

E-mail: [G.M.Muskett@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:G.M.Muskett@liverpool.ac.uk)

### 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 been 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> The inner surface of the lamp suggests that it may have been originally formed as two sections,

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank National Museums Liverpool for permission to publish this lamp, and my former colleagues Chrissy Partheni, Barbara Rowan and Pauline Rushton. Thanks are also due to staff at the British Museum for their assistance with this project, particularly Judith Swaddling, Fleur Shearman and Duncan Hook, and to Paul Roberts, now at the Ashmolean Museum. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> A. Schwarzmeier, "Theater Masks" in M L Hart (ed), *The Art of Ancient Greek Theater*. Los Angeles, 2010, 44.

each of which would have been a separate lamp. The lamp is 189mm long, 55mm wide and 75mm 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> century, undertaken for the benefit of collectors such as Richard Payne Knight and Jean-Jacques Comte de Caylus.<sup>5</sup> Although the dark-coloured patina was preferred by European collectors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ancient bronze objects would originally have had a lighter surface finish.<sup>6</sup>

As the lamp has not been previously published, it was not included by Bailey in his list of examples of this type of lamp.<sup>7</sup> Bailey identified four lamps of this type. The first, and most similar to the lamp in Liverpool, is in the collection of the British Museum<sup>8</sup> 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

---

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> P. T. Craddock, *Scientific Investigation of Copies, Fakes and Forgeries*, Oxford 2009, 353.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> D. M. Bailey, *A catalogue of lamps in the British Museum. Volume 4: Lamps of metal and stone, and lampstands*, London 1996, 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Accession number 1824,0454.28, Q3585 (Bailey 1996, 17-18, plate 16).

single lamp, the differences being most apparent in the hair style and, in addition, the dimensions are slightly different.

Also close in style is a lamp whose current location I have not been able to trace. It was once in the collection of Jules Sambon,<sup>9</sup> who amassed a large collection of classical antiquities relating to the ancient theatre<sup>10</sup> which were auctioned in Paris from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1911.<sup>11</sup> 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 13cm, considerably smaller than the lamps now in Liverpool and London, which are 18cm and 18.2cm long respectively<sup>12</sup>.

The only known example of a complete lamp composed of two split lamps joined together was noted by Bailey.<sup>13</sup> At the time of publication in 1975<sup>14</sup> the lamp was part of the collection of Alexandre Iolas,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

The unusual nature of this type of lamp leads to consideration of whether they are Roman in date or were produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to satisfy the demands of collectors. The high level of corrosion visible on the photograph of the lamp formerly in the Sambon

---

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Slavazzi 2012 (n.9) 10-13.

<sup>11</sup> G. Sambon, *Catalogue des Antiquités. ... Collection Théâtrale de M. Jules Sambon*, Paris 1911, 46, plate XXI, Lot 399.

<sup>12</sup> Bailey (n.7) 17.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey (n.7) 18

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Inv. No. Bronzes 139.

<sup>16</sup> Bailey (n.7) 18.

collection<sup>17</sup> suggests it is ancient; it is unlikely that an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century workshop would have spoiled the appearance of the lamp to such a degree.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Other useful comparanda from the Early Imperial period are terracotta lamps in the form of masks, often showing a comic 'slave' mask,<sup>20</sup> miniature flat-backed masks, perhaps used as appliquéés, made from materials including terracotta<sup>21</sup> or ivory,<sup>22</sup> and sculptures in the form of masks, used as part of the decoration of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD marble sarcophagi.<sup>23</sup> In addition, images of masks appear in 1<sup>st</sup> century AD wall painting, most notably at Oplontis on the Bay of Naples<sup>24</sup> and Solunto in Sicily.<sup>25</sup>

Other examples of bronze lamps have the body of the lamp in the form of an entire mask, rather than a half-mask<sup>26</sup> or have lids in the form of masks.<sup>27</sup> Another form of bronze lamp which features theatrical masks has been recently discussed by Green.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the bronze lamps previously discussed, this type of lamp has a conventional body with a mask at

---

<sup>17</sup> Sambon (n.11) plate XXI.

<sup>18</sup> My thanks to Fleur Shearman, Conservator of Metals at the British Museum, for this observation.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> For example, J.W.Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum. I: Greek and Roman Clay Lamps*, Toronto 1980, 408 (no.103).

<sup>21</sup> Examples include Sambon (n.11) nos. 400 and 401, plate XXI.

<sup>22</sup> 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).

<sup>23</sup> 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, Volume 2*, number 73, plate 89) and J.Paul Getty Museum, object number 72.AA.152, front panel of a garland sarcophagus.

<sup>24</sup> Green (n.19) 32, Figure 29.

<sup>25</sup> Green (n.19) 33, Figure 30.

<sup>26</sup> Examples include True and Hamma (n.22), 296 (no. 154) and 334 (no.176).

<sup>27</sup> For example, True and Hamma (n.22), 355 (no. 248).

<sup>28</sup> Green (n.19) 23; True and Hamma (n.22) 296 (no. 154) and 334 (no.176).

the end of its handle, which arches over the lamp.<sup>29</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> century AD onwards.<sup>30</sup>

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,<sup>31</sup> specifically in pantomime, which, along with mime, was the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the Roman Empire.<sup>32</sup> 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.

---

<sup>29</sup> Lamp type Loeschcke XXb. Green (n.19), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Green (n.19) 30-31.

<sup>31</sup> Green (n.19) 32, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Green (n.19) 37.