

# A late Roman oil lamp from Ajdovščina/Castra



**Abstract:** Over a hundred fragments of clay oil lamps from the Roman period were discovered in the foundations of five buildings dating from the middle to late imperial periods, during rescue excavations from 2017 to 2019 carried out at a Roman-period site in Ajdovščina (Fluvio Frigido/Castra). This presentation concentrates on a fragment of lamp with decoration on the discus, interpreted as a tabernacle flanked by two columns topped with human busts or the tomb of Lazarus flanked by two columns topped with human busts.

**Keywords:** Slovenia, Ajdovščina/Castra, late Roman oil lamp

Ajdovščina is a small township in the fertile Vipava valley in the southwest of Slovenia. The valley has a mild Mediterranean climate, but is known for strong winds, from which the city of Ajdovščina is huddled safely away at the foot of the slopes of the Gora Plateau. In early imperial times, if not earlier, the Romans had built a post and freight station, named *Mansio Fluvio Frigido* (near the Cold River, today's Hubelj), on the road from Aquileia to Emona passing through the Vipava valley. After the conquest of the Alps and the expansion of the empire to the Danube in the early 1st century AD, the Romans established a new, considerably shorter road leading across Col, Hrušica (ad Pirum).

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The rescue excavation in the city of Ajdovščina operates under the auspices of the municipality of Ajdovščina.

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The unstable political situation in the late 3rd and early 4th century AD necessitated the construction of a line of defenses called *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, stretching from the Kvarner Gulf across Slovene territory to the city of Cividale in Italy. A fortress at the junction of the Hubelj and the Lokavšček streams, north of the old *mansio* in the area of the modern city center of Ajdovščina was part of this system [Fig. 1]. *Castra* became a relay station with a fortified central part that probably housed an army garrison and command. The fort layout was in the shape of an irregular polygon 220 m long and 160 m wide, and an overall diameter of about 600 m. The walls, which were 3.40 m thick, included 14 round towers at least 6 m high, built on square foundations. The exterior width of a tower was 9 m to 9.60 m, but the interior was less than 3 m. The spacing of the towers ranged from 28 m to 55 m with most of them being 30 m to 34 m apart. A moat 6 m wide surrounded the fortress. The entrance was on the west side, between towers 1 and 2 (Pavlin 2010).

The name of the fortress is listed in three different itineraries: as “*fl. frigidus*” on the *Tabula Peutingeriana* from the beginning of the 3rd century AD, as “*Fluvio Frigido*” in the *Antonine Itinerary* from the end of the 3rd century AD and as “*mutatio Castra*” in the *Jerusalem Itinerary* from the first half of the 4th century AD (Pavlin 2010).

*Castra* was investigated mostly in the second half of the 20th century. Two relatively large-scale excavations inside the fortress walls examined the remains of the so-called atrium house and parts of two buildings, one adjoining a small

bath complex, by the southern section of the circuit walls. In the past ten years, the western section of the defense walls was additionally investigated in three locations and several small-scale excavations were conducted south and west of the walls (Tratnik and Žerjal 2017: 245, 279). The most recent archaeological excavation from November 2017 to August 2019 was part of an urban renewal program for the old city center; the research took place mostly inside and partly outside the walls of the late Roman fortress of *Castra*.



Fig. 1. Outline of the walls of the *Castra* fortress on an aerial view of modern Ajdovščina; top, red dot marks location of the city in Slovenia (Processing M. Urek; map DMV 100, GURS)

The trench outside the walls, southeast of tower 12, uncovered the wall, a ditch, and a walkway (*berma*). Inside the fortress, the remains of four late Roman buildings were discovered along with part of the sewage system and a road. A large building complex in the central part of the fortress must have been of major importance considering its size and position within the fortress. The high share of imported goods in the late Roman period highlights the important role played by Castra, which was presumably involved in supplying this part of the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* system of defense. Small finds from Ajdovščina, especially pottery, indicate a well organized supply of goods imported from all over the Mediterranean. Numerous bronze and iron finds of a military nature support the idea that an army garrison was permanently stationed at Castra (Tratnik and Žerjal 2017: 283).

The lamp corpus, which consists of over 100 fragments and three complete oil lamps, is dated from the second half of the 1st to the end of the 6th century AD. One of the fragmentary lamps (PN 51) from the uppermost late Roman layer

(SE 6004) in the southeastern corner of building IV merits consideration in view of its decoration [Fig. 2]. It is a part of the discus and shoulder of a lamp with a handle, preserving a section of the filling hole or air vent on the edge. A ridge in relief frames the shoulder section, separating it also from the discus, which bears an image also in relief of a building, a temple with decorated doors and triangular roof flanked by two columns or towers. The execution of the decoration is crisp and precise. The shoulder section is filled with equidistant geometric motifs, each made up of three concentric circles. The handle is solid and wedge-shaped, the back ridge dropping vertically to connect presumably to the base. Two well-preserved fingerprints can be seen on the underside of the discus.

The lamp is made of fine, slightly porous clay with some fine white sand, brown inclusions and very fine mica. It is light brown (7.5YR6/4) in color. The surface is dusty and soft with a residue of diluted red slip (2.5YR4/8). The slip is well preserved on the underside except for the edges in the breaks, which are



Fig. 2. Oil lamp PN 51: upper part with a fragment of the discus and the underside with fingerprints of the maker impressed in the clay (Photos A. Kovačič)

detached rather than broken, indicating that it had been molded. Lamps made in this technique consisted of two parts, upper and lower, pressed in two molds. The flat edges were subsequently moistened and the two halves were stuck together while still in the mold (Curta 2016: 62).

Lacking an exact parallel for this lamp, one needs to consider parallels for the discus motif separately from those for the shoulder decoration, and correlate this tentatively with the fabric. The shoulder decoration proved the most reliable for the purpose of the dating of this lamp. The discus motif is rare and not widely distributed. The nearest parallel is a Hayes II lamp from Mactar in Tunisia [Fig. 3 left], the discus motif of which has been interpreted as a structure (tabernacle) flanked by two columns or

towers (Bourgeois 1980: 74, Pl. VIII:54). The shoulder in this case is decorated with a motif of alternating heart-shaped leaves and stars. The motif of a structure between flanking elements is also present on lamps from Sabratha (No. 1228), Sidi Marzouk Tounsi and Syracuse, where it is interpreted as the Tomb of Lazarus, flanked by two columns topped with human busts (Bejaoui 1997: 136). The image of the resurrection of St Lazarus is one of the most common images in early Christian art. One of the oldest, if not the earliest depiction of this theme from the San Callisto Catacomb (Sacrament Chapel A690) is dated to the mid 3rd century AD.

Based on the shape of the fragment, this lamp may be a copy or imitation of a classical African lamp type *Atlante X*



Fig. 3. Parallels for lamp PN 51 from Ajdovščina: left, lamp from Mactar bearing an image of a tabernacle flanked by two columns on the discus; right, lamp from Ravenna with a series of concentric circles decorating the shoulder (After Bourgeois 1980: Pl. VIII:54 [left]; Berti 1983: Fig. 9.2 [right])

produced mostly in the Tunisian part of the province of Africa Proconsularis. The type started to be produced during the second quarter of the 5th century AD and was continued through the first half of the 7th century AD. John W. Hayes identified two variants based on the decoration and the quality of the fabric, each produced in a different center of African Red Slip Ware C and D (Hayes 1972: 310–315). Lamps of the D variant or Hayes's class II B are characterized by sloppier execution of the discus motif, with ornaments on the shoulder that are more widely spaced (Hayes 1972: 311). Abdelmajid Ennabli finehoned the classification and chronology of the motifs and ornamental patterns on these lamps, establishing three chronological groups. Lamps with a single-motif shoulder decoration, like the said fragment, belong to the third group, dated from the first half of the 6th to the first half of the 7th century AD (Ennabli 1976: 22–26, 256). Bonifay's most recent topological and chronological division (Bonifay 2004: 312–430) assigns the single-motif shoulder decoration to his group D4. The main element of the shoulder decoration is a "quatrefoil-without-center" repeated four or five times on each side of the shoulder. The group is dated to the end of the 6th and the first half of the 7th century AD (Bonifay 2004: 408–410).

African oil lamp imitations are common throughout the Mediterranean. No workshops or molds have yet been found in evidence, but it is assumed that ateliers imitating African oil lamps in the northern Adriatic were located in Ravenna and Aquileia (Berti 1983: 147; Pröttel 1996: 107).

Three lamps found in Ravenna have a similarly stamped shoulder and are described as lamps made in a local workshop imitating African production (Berti 1983: 149–152, Figs 9.1, 9.2, 9.7). One of the lamps [Fig. 3 right] with the nearest form of the shoulder decoration is made of light brown clay (10YR6/3) with a diluted reddish slip; the fabric and slip are the closest to our fragment. Depicted on the discus is a figure in a loincloth in the act of prayer. This image is recorded in several variants on lamps from Aquileia, Lodi, Ravenna, Ortona, Ephesus (Berti 1983: 151). The author has identified three types reflecting a progressive deterioration of manufacturing quality. A lamp of this type, with a very poorly visible figure of an orator on the discus and concentric circles decorating the shoulder, was found in the hilltop settlement of Ajdovščina nad Potoki. The clay of this lamp is light brown and the surface was not slipped. It is to be dated between the end of the 4th and the 6th century (Knific and Sagadin 1991: 68).

## CONCLUSION

The oil lamp fragment newly discovered in the late Roman layers at Ajdovščina bears decoration on the discus interpreted either as a tabernacle flanked by two columns topped with human busts

or the tomb of St Lazarus flanked by two columns topped with human busts. It is the first lamp with this particular motif found in Europe and, considering the characteristics of the fabric and slip, it



may have been made in Europe, specifically in the North Adriatic region, but this is more speculation than fact. Dated

to the 6th century AD, it is undoubtedly one of the youngest finds from this Roman site.

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