

# Terracotta oil-lamps from Egypt's Theban region in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York



**Abstract:** The group of 17 oil lamps now in the Islamic Art Department collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) was excavated in West Thebes in Upper Egypt by the Metropolitan Museum of Art expedition at the beginning of the 20th century. The assemblage was never fully published (apart from being included in the online MeT Collection database). The present paper documents the material in full, examining the collection and proposing in a few cases a new dating based on parallels from other sites.

**Key words:** terracotta oil-lamps, lighting, West Thebes, Upper Egypt

The Islamic Art Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) has in its collection 17 terracotta oil lamps that were excavated by the MMA expedition in West Thebes in Upper Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century. The opportunity presented itself to examine first-hand this assemblage, which otherwise can be viewed in the online Met Collection database (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>). The lamps came from three locations: Monastery of Epiphanius (three lamps), Tomb of Nespekashuty in the Asasif necropolis (five lamps) and Medinet Habu (nine lamps).

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## LAMPS FROM THE MONASTERY/TOPOS OF EPIPHANIUS

The Monastery of Epiphanius is located on the northern slope of the Sheikh Abd el-Gurna hill, approximately 500 m from the Temple of Hatshepsut [Fig. 1]. Excavations in this area were begun by Norman De Garis Davies in December 1911, primarily to examine the tomb of Daga, a Middle Kingdom vizier. It soon became clear that there were also early Christian remains (Winlock and Crum 1926: xxi). From 1912 Herbert E. Winlock supervised the expedition and he was soon joined by coptologist Walter Crum. The two-

volume final publication of the site is still essential for comparative studies on other monastic sites in the region. A few terracotta oil lamps were documented among the many finds from the monastic complex (Winlock and Crum 1926: 88, Fig. 38, Pl. XXXII A). Apparently not all of them were brought to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, because only three are in the collection of the Islamic Art Department. They were all dated securely by the context to about AD 600, which is consistent with the dating of known parallels.<sup>1</sup> The

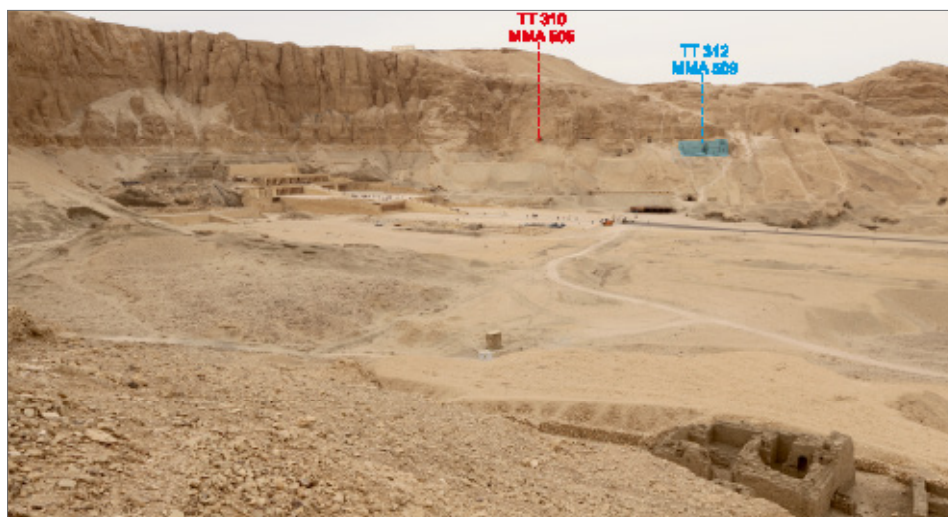


Fig. 1. Deir el-Bahari viewed from Sheikh Abd el-Gurna. The mud-brick tower belonging to the Monastery of St Epiphanius at bottom right, the Monastery of St Phoibammon/Temple of Hatshepsut to the left and, in the background to the right, the northern slope of Asasif with marked location of the two Middle Kingdom tombs, TT 310 and TT 312 (Photo A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda)

1 **Cat. 1:** see Hölscher 1954: 68, Fig. 89d–f, Pl. 40; Bernhard 1955: 360–364, Nos 459–485, Pls 132–133; Sidebotham 1982: 249, No. ee, Pl. 60; Bailey 1988: 255–257, Nos Q2100–Q2117, Pls 46–47; Zych 2004: 88–89, No. E221, Fig. 8; Bussière and Wohl 2017: 366, No. 508; Chrzanowski 2019: 299–300, Nos 484–468. **Cat. 2:** see Hölscher 1954: 70–71, Fig. 95; Bernhard 1955: 349, No. 397, Pl. 125; Bailey 1988: 274–275, Nos Q2270–Q2277, Pl. 56; Chrzanowski 2019: 363, Nos 622–623. **Cat. 3:** see Bernhard 1955: 339–340, No. 360, Pl. 108; Bagatti 1964: 257, No. 17, Fig. 1; Bailey 1988: 269–270, Nos Q2228–Q2235, Pl. 53; Chrzanowski 2019: 357–358, Nos 610–612.

only exception is the Neo-Hellenistic type or so-called Frog type (Cat. 1), made at least from the 3rd century AD; an earlier 2nd century dating has also been proposed by some scholars (Bernhard 1955: 360–363; Peacock and Blue 2011: 50–51, Nos 23–28, Fig. 6.3).

All three bear traces of soot around wick-hole, indicating use. The nozzle of the elongated oval lamp [Fig. 2: Cat. 3] is the most heavily burnt. The shoulder bears an inscription, stamped in the mold, consisting of two words in Coptic: “tagapy” (Greek ἀγάπη) and “Tiryny” (Greek εἰρήνη). Words evoking concepts of love and peace, as well as others like

names of saints, dogmatic terms, were often attested together on Christian lamps from Egypt (Loverdou-Tsigarida 1972). The lamps from the MeT Collection are likely to have been in everyday use, also during religious ceremonies and prayer. Winlock’s excavations uncovered several lamp-niches inside the main complex (Vestibule, Room 5) and in the adjacent Cells B and C (Winlock and Crum 1926: 31, 43, Fig. 8, 44). Moreover, textual sources confirm the use of other products connected with lighting, such as oil and lampstands, inside the monastery (Crum and Evelyn-White 1926: 253, 291–292, 294).

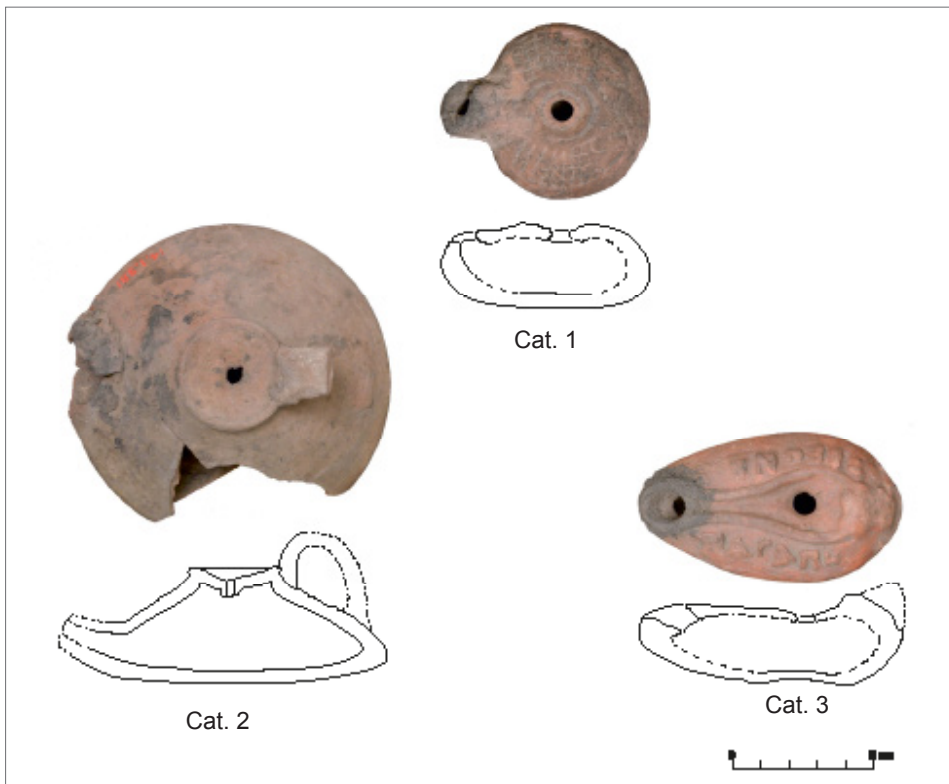


Fig. 2. Oil lamps from the Monastery of St Epiphanius (Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; drawing A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda)

Table 1. Catalog of lamps Nos. 1–3 from the Monastery of St Epiphanius

		Description										
	Dimensions (cm)	Body	Base	Nozzle	Lugs/ handles	Discus	Filling-hole / Dia (cm)	Decoration	Clay and slip	Production	Typology	Dating
1 (14.1.379)	W. 6.2 L. 7.5 H. 3.0	Circular, flat, carinated	Circular, flat	Short, raised area between two straight ridges on nozzle-channel	No	Flat, encircled with concave line	One, circular / 0.6	Rear frog legs, cuts imitating warty skin, palm-leaves or grain-ears around filling-hole	Red clay with mica; reddish brown slip	Mold-made	Neo Hellenistic type	about 600 CE
2 (14.1.381)	Dia 10.0 H. 4.3	Squat, rounded, conical	Rounded	Short, tapered, tip broken	Applied vertical band-handle, broken	Concave, encircled with rim	One with flaring rim / 0.5	No	Brownish red clay; yellowish to dark yellow slip	Wheel-made	Turned type	
3 (14.1.378)	W. 5.4 L. 9.5 H. 3.2	Long, oval, carinated	Oval, base-ring	Eongoted nozzle-channel flanked with ridges	Traces of applied handle or lug	Slightly concave, oval, encircled with ridge	One, circular / 0.7	Applied Coptic inscription on shoulders	Light red to brownish red clay with mica; red glossy slip	Mold-made	Aswan Relief Ware, type III	

## TOMB OF NESPEKASHUTY (TT 312/MMA 509) DEIR EL-BAHARI, ASASIF SLOPE

The entrance to the Tomb of Nespekashuty overlooks both monasteries, that of St Epiphanius and of St Phoibammon [see *Fig. 1*]. It was discovered and explored by Winlock in 1922–1923 during his fieldwork in Deir el-Bahari (Winlock and Crum 1926: 20; Winlock 1942: 81–83). This tomb, along with others located nearby, is currently investigated by Patryk Chudzik from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw (especially Chudzik 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). Prepared for a nobleman of the Eleventh Dynasty (Middle Kingdom), the tomb was later adapted for the Vizier Nespekashuty during the reign of Psamtik I (Twenty-sixth Dynasty). In the 6th and 7th centuries AD, the southern slope of Asasif, where this tomb is located, was undoubtedly inhabited or at least visited by the monks, who left ample material remains, such as metal tools and leather artifacts, as well as 50 texts (O'Connell 2006: 122; Cribiore 2007).<sup>2</sup> These sources mention Epiphanius (founder of a nearby monastery) who could have dwelled here briefly, and the monk Pleine the Young (or the Less), who spent his time improving his epistolary skills (Cribiore 2007: 128–130). Whether living in seclusion, writing, praying or visiting, they would have needed oil lamps to give light in the darkness of the rock-cut chambers.

One of the lamps from the collection was wheel-made and had small hand-applied small side-lugs [*Fig. 3: Cat. 4*]. One of the lugs was pierced in order to hang it on the wall when not in use, using thin string or a fine metal chain. Pins for picking up a wick could have been stuck through the perforation, while the pierced lug might have served as a finger-rest (Broneer 1930: 6; Thompson 1933: 199, 201; Howland 1958: 72; Bailey 1972: 13). It proved to be a Hellenistic lamp, similar to Howland type 25 B–D (Hölscher 1954: 68, Figs 88–89, Pl. 40; Howland 1958: 72–80, Pls 38–39; Bailey 1975: 252–253, Q540, Pl. 108; Chrzanowski 2019: 125, No. 24).

Two lamps can be attributed to the so-called Frog type typical of the late Roman and early Byzantine period (Bailey 1988: 229). [*Fig. 3: Cat. 5, 6*]. The type designation can be misleading when the amphibian is actually not represented on the lamp (Hölscher 1954: 69, Fig. 92a–c, Pl. 40; Bernhard 1955: 371–372, Nos 526–530, Pls 146–148; Bailey 1988: 262–263, Q2163–Q2177, Pl. 49; Peacock and Blue 2011: 50–51, Nos 34–41, Fig. 6.4; Chrzanowski 2019: 306, Nos 505–506). Lamps of this kind are typical of late Roman and Byzantine times, especially in West Thebes (Bailey 1988: 229). Both were molded with bosses around the filling hole, five in one case and four in the other. Their surface is buff and generally

2 List of small finds originating from TT 312 kept in MMA: iron spear head, iron nails (Inv. Nos 26.3.203–205), iron pokers, black leather sole of a sandal, red leather slippers (Inv. No. 26.3.202a, b), sole of rope sandal, wooden loom toggles, drop spindle-whorl with copper alloy-hook (Inv. No. 26.3.201).

plain, except for the hardly visible palm-branch motif encircling the filling-hole on lamp No. 5.

The last pair, two practically identical lamps, belong to a broad category of frog-like lamps (Bailey 1988) [Fig. 3: Cat. 7, 8]. The most distinct feature is the decoration in the form of the rear legs of a frog with a schematically marked warty skin on the shoulders (or “grain ears”, following Bernhard 1955: 360; for the evolution from the corn/grain motif to a frog’s skin, see Petrie 1905: 10). This particular shape is referred to as Neo-Hellenistic. The decoration also suggested other names, for instance, “Frog-and-corn lamps” and for lamps with bosses

simply “Boss” (Petrie 1905: 5, Pls 64–67). At Myos Hormos, the group of lamps with bosses were casually referred to as “Potato lamps” (Peacock and Blue 2011: 50). This highly popular Egyptian form, as noted above, was manufactured from the 3rd/4th centuries until the 7th century. None of the Frog lamps recorded by Bailey in his publication were post-4th-century, but he suggested that their production continued: “the boring Frog lamp was the main Egyptian product for the third and fourth centuries AD and even longer” (Bailey 1988: 217). The well-dated context of these lamps (around AD 600) lends credence to this belief.

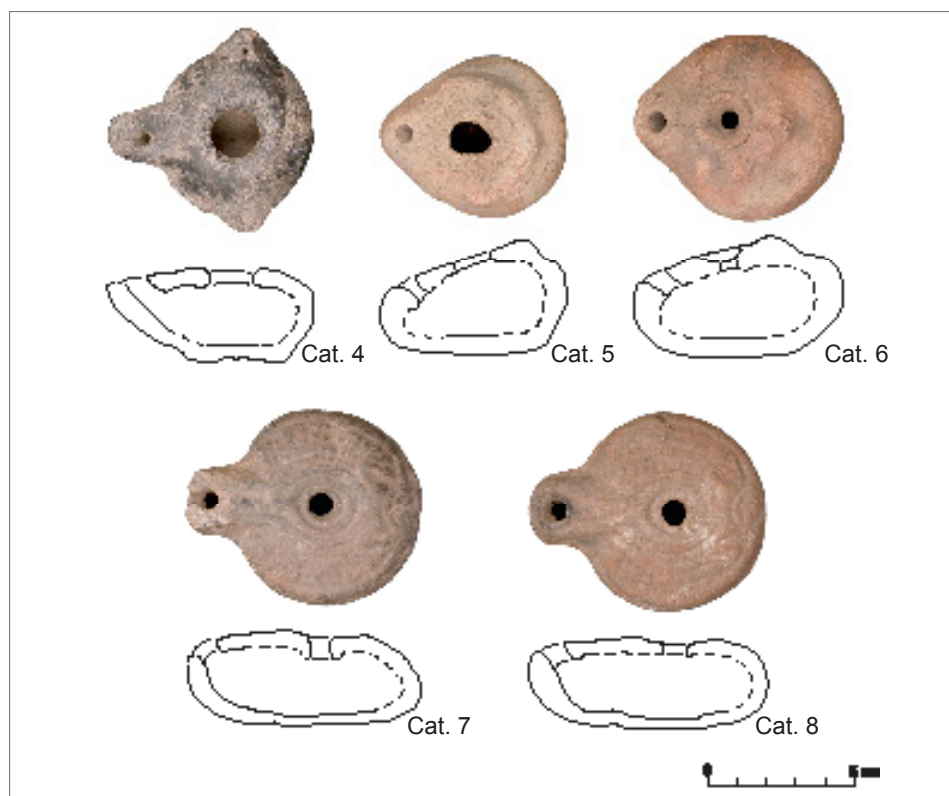


Fig. 3. Oil lamps from the Tomb of Nespekashuty (Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; drawing A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda)

Table 2. Catalog of lamps Nos. 4–8 from the Tomb of Nespekashuty

Description		Dating		Typology		Production		Clay and slip		Decoration		Filling-hole / Dia (cm)		Discus		Lugs/ handles		Nozzle		Base		Body		Dimensions (cm)		Cat. (MMA Accession No.)	
		3rd–2nd BC		Mymarzyk B, close to Howland 25 B-D		Wheel-made		Black to dark grey with clay mica; black glossy slip		No		One circular with inward sloping rim / 1.5		No		Two side-lugs, left one pierced		Medium-long, rounded tip		Circular, ring base		Biconvex, carinated		W. 7.0 L. 7.2 H. 3.2		4 (26.3.208)	
		3rd–4th CE		Frog type		Mold-made		Pinkish to whitish orange clay with mica; buff brown slip		Five bosses, two palm branches around filling-hole		One oval / 1.2		Flat		No		United with the body		Flat		Piriform, carinated		W. 5.5 L. 6.5 H. 3.9		5 (26.3.211)	
		3rd–4th CE		Frog type		Mold-made		Pinkish to buff orange clay with mica; whitish red slip		Four bosses around discus		One circular / 0.5		Concave		No		United with the body		Flat		Piriform, carinated		W. 6.4 L. 7.3 H. 4.2		6 (26.3.210)	
		3rd–7th CE		Neo Hellenistic type		Mold-made		Pinkish brown clay with mica; grey glossy slip		Rear frog legs, cuts symbolising warty skin, palm-leaves or grain-ears around filling-hole		One, circular / 0.8		Flat, encircled with concave ridge		No		Short, raised area between two straight ridges on nozzle-channel		Circular, convex, marked with groove		Circular, flat, carinated		W. 6.8 L. 8.1 H. 3.3		7 (26.3.207)	
		3rd–7th CE		Neo Hellenistic type		Mold-made		Orangish brown with mica; slip not preserved		Rear frog legs, cuts symbolising warty skin, palm-leaves or grain-ears around filling-hole		One, circular / 0.8		Flat, encircled with concave ridge		No		Short, raised area between two straight ridges on nozzle-channel		Circular, convex, marked with groove		Circular, flat, carinated		W. 6.8 L. 8.1 H. 3.2		8 (26.3.209)	



## MEDINET HABU OR THE TOMB OF KING SIPHTAH

The last group of lamps was given to the Museum by Theodore M. Davis in 1914, following his work in Upper Egypt during the two preceding years (Burton and Winlock 1916: 13, Note 1). The exact provenance of these objects is not clear. At the time Davis was excavating a Nineteenth-Dynasty tomb of king Siptah (KV47), discovered in 1905, but no post-pharaonic objects were listed in the report written by Henry Burton, Davis's associate (Burton and Winlock 1916: 13–18). Davis then moved to Medinet Habu, first removing the debris from the area known as the Royal Palace, west of the First Pylon. No terracotta oil lamps were mentioned among the small finds from there either (Burton 1916).

Further archaeological investigation in the Valley of the Kings confirmed that there were no Greco-Roman or Byzantine remains in tomb KV47 (Pimpaud and Lecuyot 2013). However, human activity in Medinet Habu is well-documented from the Twenty-first Dynasty through the Byzantine period with the Coptic town of Djeme flourishing there between AD 600 and 800 (Hölscher 1954; Wilfong 2002). All things considered, Medinet Habu with the long occupation history up to the early Islamic period seems to be far more probable as the original find spot of this lamp group.

The nine lamps present a variety of types and forms. The wheel-made lamp Cat. 9 [Fig. 4], dated to the 4th–2nd centuries BC, originally had three symmetrically disposed nozzles (Howland 1958: 111–112, Pl. 43; see Bailey 1975: 246, Q521, Pls 104–105). The surface was undecorated. The size of the filling hole was considerable [Table 3].

The next lamp [Fig. 4: Cat. 10] resembles the Neo-Hellenistic type, although it is of much earlier date (2nd–1st century BC) and can be classified as Antioch Type 13 (Howland 1958: 165, Pl. 55; Colt 1962: 62, Pl. XXVIII.5; Bailey 1975: 262–264, Q565–Q570, Pl. 110; Chrzanowski 2019: 149, Nos 78–79). It has a biconvex circular body with well-marked carination. The decorative pattern may be an imitation of a frog's skin, but it could simply be a set of convex dots. Unlike Neo-Hellenistic types, it was molded with greater care, the shape being perfectly even, the ornament crisp, the grooves deep and regular.

The wheel-made red-slipped lamp in the shape of a shallow bowl seems to be fairly unique [Fig. 4: Cat. 11]. Saucer lamps are encountered mostly, but not exclusively, prior to the 4th century BC and post-7th century AD (Bailey 1972: 17, Pl. 1; Bussière and Wohl 2017: 8). Bowl-shaped lamps during Fatimid and Mamluk times tended to be glazed; the rim was often wavy and the wick-rest much bigger (Kawatoko 1987: 36–37). Plain and without any special characteristics, this lamp is not easily classifiable, thus a general dating from Hellenistic to Roman is the most reasonable (Bailey 1975: 244–245, Q517–Q518, Pls 102–103; 1988: 170–171, Q1634–Q1638, Pl. 8).

Two lamps represent Frog types (Cat. 12 akin to Cat. 5 and 6 above) [Fig. 4]. Lamp Cat. 13 has a realistic rendering of the body of an amphibian on the top, wrapping the front legs around the wick-hole and evenly distributed round punctures all over the surface in imitation of

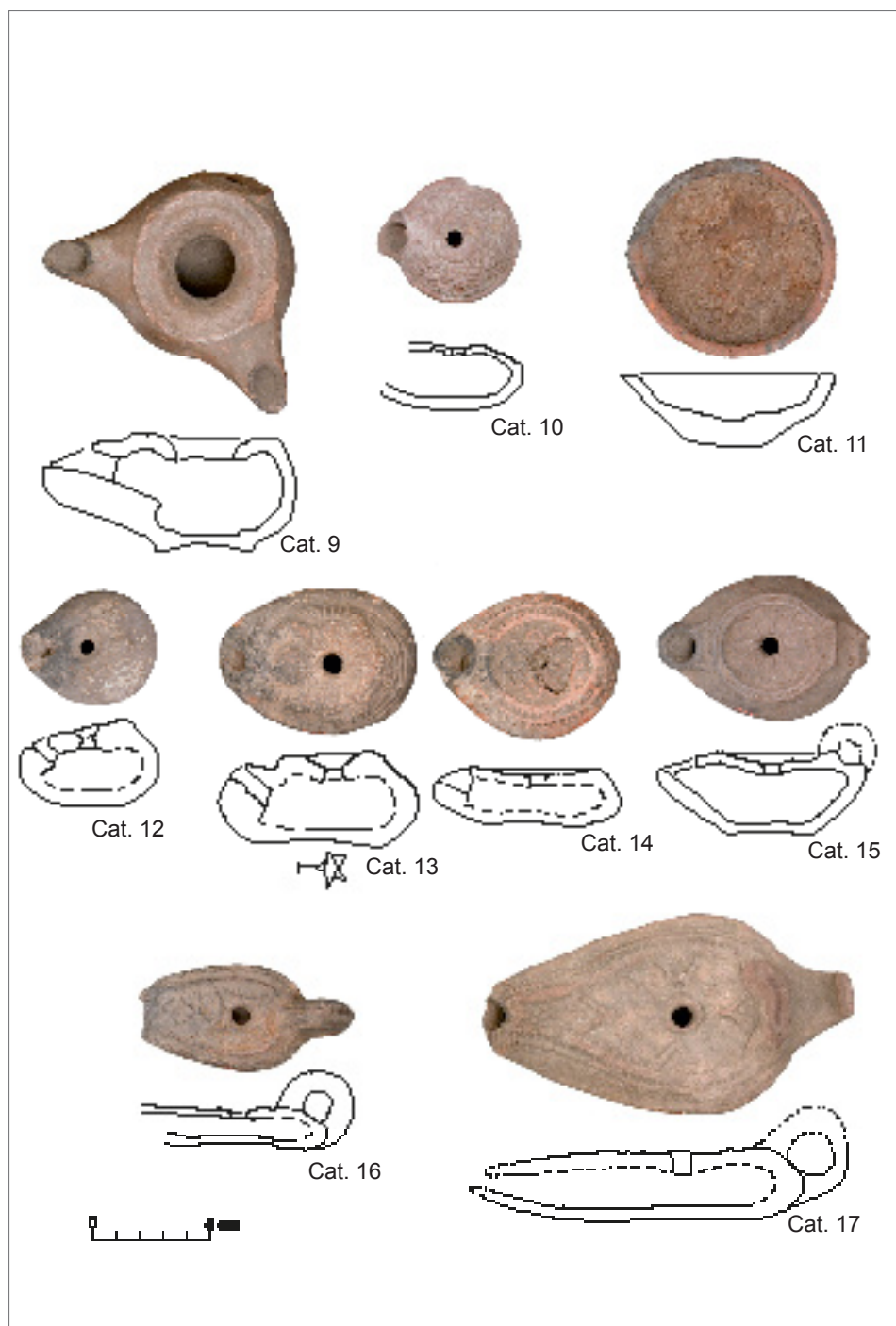


Fig. 4. Oil lamps from Medinet Habu (Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; drawing A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda)

Table 3. Catalog of lamps Nos. 9–17 from tMedinet habu or the Tomb of King Siptah

Cat. (MMA Accession No.)	Description							Clay and slip	Production	Typology	Dating	
	Dimensions (cm)	Body	Base	Nozzle	Lugs/ handles	Discus	Filling-hole / Dia (cm)					Decoration
<b>9</b> <b>(14.6.73)</b>	Dia 10.9 H. 5.0	Biconvex, carinated	Circular, concave	Three, one broken, oval tips	No	Concave	One, circular / 2.5	No	Pinkish orange to buff brown with mica	Wheel- made	close to Howland 35 B	<b>4th–2nd BC</b>
<b>10</b> <b>(14.6.76)</b>	W. 5.2 L. 6.1 H. 2.8	Biconvex, circular, carinated	Flat	Short, tip broken	No	Flat, encircled with groove	One, circular / 0.5	Convex dots, three multiplied curves bend like arches	Greyish red clay with mica; greyish red slip	Mold- made	Antioch Type 13, Benachi 5/6	<b>2nd BC–1st CE</b>
<b>11</b> <b>(14.6.69)</b>	Dia. 9.1	bowl-shape with marked wick-rest on the rim						No	Red clay with mica; brownish red slip	Wheel- made	Open saucer type	<b>Hellenistic- Roman</b>
<b>12</b> <b>(14.6.77)</b>	W. 5.5 L. 6.0 H. 3.7	Piriform, carinated	Flat	United with the body	No	Concave	One, circular / 0.4	Three bosses around discus	Buff brown clay with mica; greyish brown slip	Mold- made	Frog type	<b>3rd–4th CE</b>
<b>13</b> <b>(14.6.75)</b>	W. 6.3 L. 8.0 H. 4.1	Oval, carinated	Concave, maker's mark	United with the body	No	Concave	One, circular / 0.7	Frog with dots, front legs embracing wick- hole	Orange clay; dark brown slip	Mold- made	Frog type	<b>3rd–5th CE</b>

Table 3. (continued)

Description		Dating									
Dimensions (cm)	Cat. (MMA Accession No.)	Body	Base	Nozzle	Lugs/ handles	Discus	Filling-hole / Dia (cm)	Decoration	Clay and slip	Production	Typology
		<b>5th–6th CE</b>									
W. 6.4 L. 8.1 H. 2.4	14 (14.6.70)	Almond-shape, flat, carinated	Oval, base-ring	United with the body	No	Slightly concave, oval	One, circular 0.7	Rosette on discus, encircled with two concentric lines with drops	Light red clay; pinkish white slip	Mold-made	close to Atlante VIII and IX
		<b>5th–7th CE</b>									
W. 6.2 L. 8.9 H. 3.5	15 (14.6.72)	Oval, carinated	Oval, base-ring	Rounded nozzle-tip	Applied band-handle, broken	Slightly concave, circular	One, circular 0.6	Rosette on discus, encircled with two concentric concave lines	Brown clay with mica; reddish brown glossy slip	Mold-made	Atlante VIII and IX
		<b>6th–7th CE</b>									
W. 4.1 L. 9.1 H. 1.7	16 (14.6.71)	Long, oval, carinated	Concave, oval	Elongated nozzle-channel, broken tip	Applied vertical loop-handle	Flat, oval, encircled with ridge	One, circular 0.6	Concave studded square around filling-hole, two X-crossed studded lines on top, wavy lines on shoulders	Dark brown to black with mica; brownish red slip	Mold-made	Elongated type
		<b>6th–7th CE</b>									
W. 8.4 L. 15.5 H. 3.0	17 (14.6.74)	Long, oval, carinated	Flat, oval	Elongated nozzle-channel, broken tip	Applied vertical band-handle	Flat, oval, encircled with ridge	One, circular 0.8	Four chevrons and dots on top, studded lines and dots along shoulders	Pinkish brown to buff pink clay with mica; buff brown slip	Mold-made	Elongated type

frog skin. The potter's mark on the base is in the form of a distinctive five-pointed star with a T-shaped line, possibly the letter *tau* (see Chrzanowski 2019: 63; for the lamp, Hölscher 1954: 71, Fig. 98.1; Bagatti 1964: 259, Fig. 1.31; Bailey 1988: 113, 138). This symbol must have been scratched or impressed freshly after the lamp was removed from the mold, because it was not in relief. All these features point to a date sometime between the 3rd and 5th century AD. Hölscher published an identical lamp from Medinet Habu, also bearing a five-point star as a maker's mark (Hölscher 1954: 68, Fig. 89a, Pl. 40), whereas two objects of exactly the same appearance were described by Bailey (1988: 258–259, Q2130–Q2136, Pls 47–48; see also Sussman 2017: 216, Fig. 170.1; Chrzanowski 2019: 305, 322–323). The similarities suggest the same workshop. In this context, one should mention a large pottery production site located less than 3 km away in Gurna, which arguably supplied the town of Jeme (Mysłiwiec 1987).<sup>3</sup>

The last four lamps are typical of late antiquity. The two with a rosette on the

discus can be classified as types Atlante VIII and IX, even though they are slightly different in body shape (Hölscher 1954: 69, Fig. 92d, Pl. 40; Bernhard 1955: 343–344, No. 379, Pl. 115; Egloff 1977: 61, Pl. 86.5; Ballet, Bosson, and Rassart-Debergh 2003: 191, Nos 195, 197, Fig. 34; Lightfoot and Ivison 2012: 194, No. 10, 204, Fig. 4/3, Pl. 4/3; Weidmann 2013: 216, No. 90; Sussman 2017: 301–301, Fig. 224) [Fig. 4: Cat. 14, 15]. The two elongated oval lamps are the most impressive in terms of their size (4.1 x 9.1 cm and 8.4 x 15.5 cm); this type was emblematic for the late Byzantine/early Islamic period (Hölscher 1954: 70, Figs 93dfg, 94c; Bailey 1988: 272–273, Q2254–Q2258, Pl. 55; Chrzanowski 2019: 356) [Fig. 4: Cat. 16, 17]. The flat large discuses are decorated with relief studded lines, either straight or bent, dots and chevrons. The placement of the latter on Cat. 17 resembles a schematic representation of a cross (see Bailey 1988: 139, Q2200). The closest parallel geographically was found on the walking level of the church located in the second court of the Temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu (Hölscher 1954: 70, Fig. 93h, Pl. 40.16).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

A provisional study the fabrics (only macroscopic observation is possible on objects from a museum collection) suggest Egyptian production, some possibly even in West Thebes (Cat. 13) or even farther south in Aswan (Cat. 3) [see *Tables 1–3*].

Soot around the wick holes on 14 of 17 lamps from this group indicates their utilitarian character. Lamps without

soot marks imply use as tomb furnishings or votive offering (Coen-Uzzielli 1997: 319). The few that were wheel-made were generally from the Graeco-Roman period. The overall impression is of deteriorating quality in Byzantine Egypt. Both Hellenistic and early Roman lamps were well made and elaborately patterned, being evidently considered as luxury items (etymologically, the Latin

3 More about Egyptian production sites in Schrunk 2009.

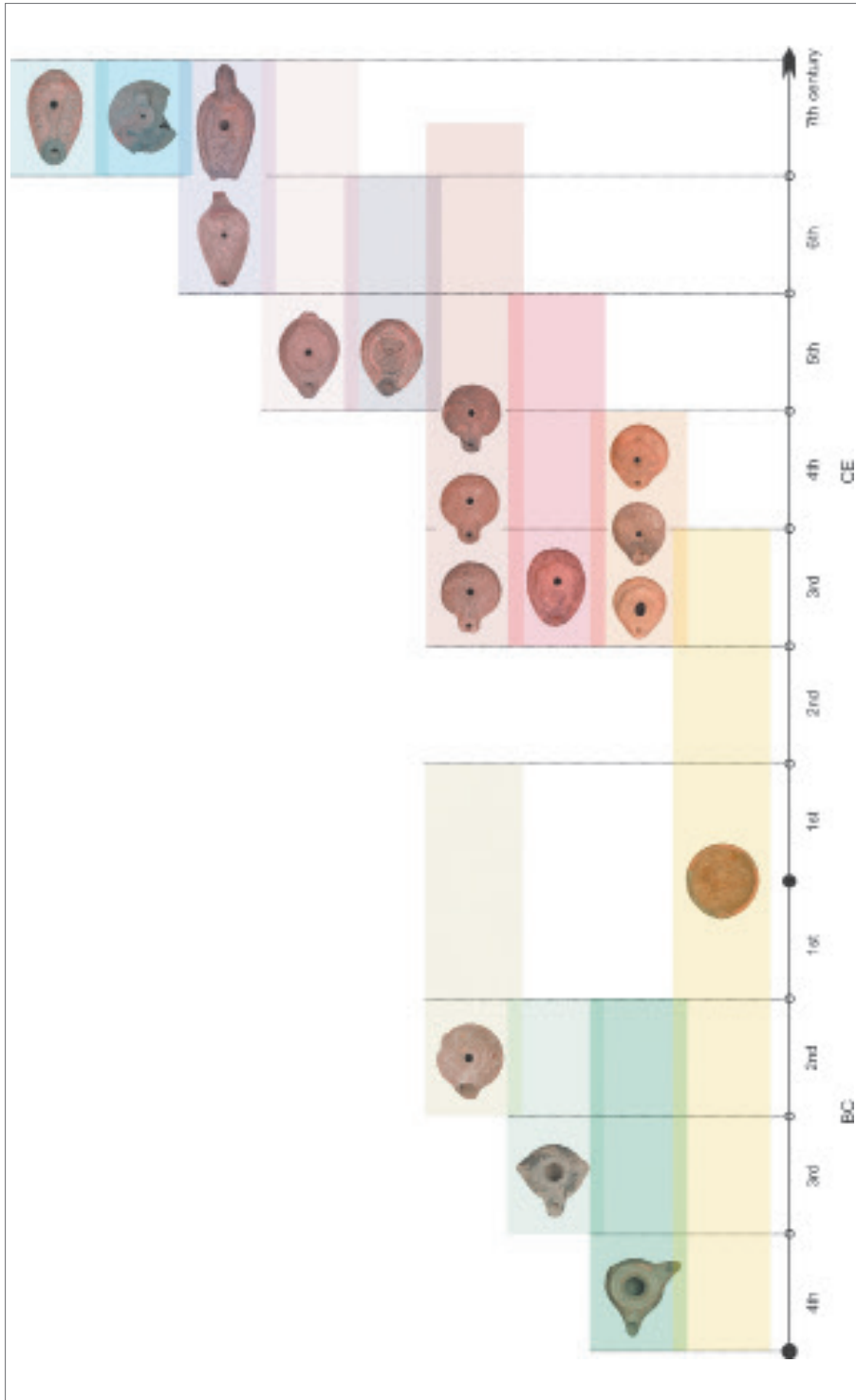


Fig. 5. Chronological sequence of the West Theban oil lamps (Processing A. Pawlikowska-Gwiazda)

word *lux* means “light”, see Motsianos 2019: 49). The decline could have been connected with mass production and a peaking popularity of molds in the 7th century AD: “The ability to produce large numbers of clay lamps by using molds was in fact a key reference point for the Roman period” (Motsianos 2019: 51). Afterwards wheel-made lamps were again favoured (Motsianos 2019: 50–52).

The frog as a widely-applied ornamental motif is not extraordinary in the Egyptian environment, inasmuch as this amphibian was identified with the Nile, and was thus believed to be

symbol of fertility, rebirth, or even resurrection in some Christian contexts (de Lee 2009; Chrzanowski 2019: 50–51). Stylized ears-of-corn or branches evoked the same associations.

The bulk of the presented assemblage could be attributed to the late Roman/early Islamic periods, which is coherent with the archaeological contexts. The chronological continuity was almost uninterrupted and forms were clearly contemporaneous [Fig. 5]. Summing up, their variety evidently reflects a long history of occupation and space reuse in the region of West Thebes.

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