

Indo-Roman lamps from Ter: the long shadow of Rome or the light of transculturation?



Abstract: Ter, ancient Tagara, in the Osmanabad district (Maharashtra), is among the most important sites when discussing Indo-Roman relations. Local production of small artefacts, such as pottery lamps and figurines, reveals an enthrallment for the exotic resulting in new transcultural visual solutions. The shape, iconography, and execution of terracotta lamps of the so-called Indo-Roman type from Ter are a clear witness to this phenomenon. The absence of precise comparisons with Western productions, and the impossibility to connect them to a direct trade of lamps confirm the transcultural value of these lamps. They are indeed the product of intermingling and contact, not just a copy of well-known types; they are better understood as an original product of Indian manufacturers based on a current stylistic trend gathering inputs from different media and materials. The result is a syncretic original product, created to satisfy the refined taste of urban mercantile elites. These lamps definitely show how alien visual culture found a welcoming environment in the countries involved in ancient globalisation.

Keywords: Indo-Roman, terracotta lamps, globalization, transculturation, early historic India, local production

The trade contacts of South India with the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic and Roman periods are a well known phenomenon, well beyond the scope of this short paper.¹ Coastal sites, like the ports mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Casson 1989), took part in this trade, but inland settlements also witnessed a flourishing of in-

¹ For more exhaustive studies on these issues, see, e.g.: Begley and De Puma 1991; Boussac and Salles 1995; De Romanis and Tchernia 1997; Ray and Salles 1996.

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ternational contacts at this time [Fig. 1]. Ter, ancient Tagara, in the Osmanabad district (Maharashtra), is among the most important sites when discussing Indo-Roman relations.² Excavations and surveys in Ter resulted in a fairly large number of finds including terracotta figurines, bowls and lamps clearly related to contemporary Western productions (Deshpande 1994: 175). Despite this clear involvement in Indo-Roman dynamics, excavations at Ter did not provide any genuine Roman finds. At that time, Ter was part of the territories controlled by the Sātavāhana dynasty; previous case studies show how the Sātavāhana coroplasts were fascinated by western forms as a consequence of the Indo-Mediterranean trade. In the case of the Sātavāhana production, this clear enthrallment with the exotic, from their point of view, resulted in new transcultural visual solutions: forms derived from foreign



Fig. 1. Map with location of Ter and other sites involved in the Western Indian Ocean trade (Processing S. Autiero from Google Maps)

models were used in the production of evidently local artifacts (Brancaccio 2007: 393). The early centuries of our era saw a peculiar development in Indian terracotta production. In Sātavāhana territories, potters developed the use of a double mould in order to produce hollow three-dimensional figures, small bowls and lamps, establishing an extremely refined production. The use of the double-mould technique is part of the technological transfer along trade networks linking the Indian Subcontinent to the Roman West (Autiero 2015: 93).

Direct links between Egyptian Red Sea ports and India were possible thanks to the exploitation of the monsoon wind starting from at least the 1st century BC (Casson 1989: 11). Warmington (1928) first referred to these connections between India and the Egyptian Red Sea as the Indo-Roman trade. Until the re-excavation of Arikamedu in the late 1980s (Begley et al. 1996; 2004), the interpretation of Indo-Roman trade followed an existing orthodox view, fostered by Mortimer Wheeler who first excavated Arikamedu in 1945, as a trade center controlled by Rome (Wheeler, Ghosh, and Deva 1946; Wheeler 1954a; 1954b; 1955; 1976; for an exhaustive introduction to the subject, see Tomber 2008: 13). This initial approach to Indo-Roman trade strongly biased the understanding of this phenomenon; moreover, most of the relevant written sources are in Latin and Greek, thereby reinforcing the disturbed balance in favor of a dominating West (Karttunen 1989; 1997).

Recent research makes it clear that the study of the contacts between the Roman world and the Indian Subcontinent needs to be seen through the lenses

2 The site was excavated in 1958 by Chapekar (1969).

of transcultural studies. Previous case studies, focused on terracotta figurines, demonstrated cultural interaction going beyond the simplistic ideas of imitation

or influence (Autiero 2015; 2017). It is more appropriate to discuss Indo-Roman relations in terms of exchange and intermingling.

CASE STUDY

TERRACOTTA LAMPS FROM TER

Western influence is evident in the shape, iconography and execution of the terracotta lamps from Ter [Fig. 2]. Lamps of this kind (*diya*, *dīpa*) continue to play a prominent role in religion and rituals in India, allowing further insight into

the ancient production, and confirming their importance in a long-standing traditional culture (Chrzanovski 2010: 187).

In ancient India terracotta lamps were of the simplest kind—a small cup with pinched spout-like nozzle, commonly referred to as a ‘saucer type’ by archaeologists. Such lamps are still common today, in daily religious practice as much as for special festivals, in particular Holi and Diwali.

Terracotta lamp production is for the most part extremely simple, but in the early centuries AD Sātavāhana craftsmen started using moulds to produce lamps and developed more elaborate decoration. The mouldmade lamps from Ter were first designated as ‘Indo-Roman’ by Klaus Karttunen (2000: 933),³ but Ptolemaic models were subsequently considered as a more likely source of inspiration than the Roman imperial types (Brancaccio 2005: 62). Indeed, searching for comparisons in the Western world, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt provides interesting insights. In Egypt mould-made lamps were produced as early as the 3rd century BC as copies of earlier wheel-made specimens (Thomas n.d.: 10).

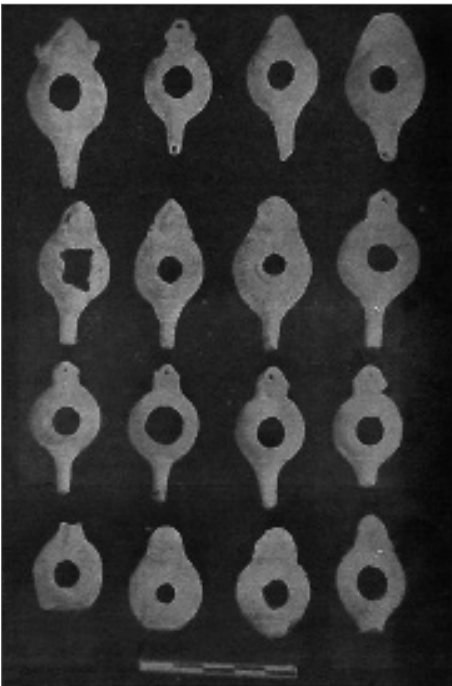


Fig. 2. Assemblage of terracotta lamps from Ter (After Margabandu and Gaham 1979: Fig. 6)

3 For a thorough, although brief review of the literature on the so-called Indo-Roman lamps from Ter, see Brancaccio 2005: 62; the text is an assessment of the state of research with some interesting insights into the transcultural value of the lamps. The ‘Indo-Roman’ label will be retained in this discussion, although ‘transcultural’ would probably be more appropriate as a label.

The use of moulds tended to preserve lamp forms and decoration, the Roman production being not much different from the late Ptolemaic. This justifies the much earlier Hellenistic parallels for the Indo-Roman lamps.

The site of Ter yielded about 30 terracotta lamps of the so-called Indo-Roman type of the 1st and 2nd century AD.⁴ Humble as the assemblage is, it still allows the distinctive features of this class of lamps to be discerned. Indo-Roman mouldmade lamps from Ter have a globular body, a large filling hole and, in most cases, an elongated nozzle. The body may be plain or decorated, either with a tiny petal frame around the filling hole or one or more rows of moulded petals in lotus fashion [Fig. 3]. Two of the Ter lamps have a handle in the shape of a human head and the reservoir shaped like the human body.⁵ The shape and positioning of the long pipe-shaped nozzle is peculiar compared to Western counterparts; it intersects the body below the shoulder and tapers upward, resulting



Fig. 3. Indo-Roman lamp from Ter showing moulded petal decoration; note position of the wick hole (Courtesy IsMEO/photo R.M. Cimino)



Fig. 4. Position of the wick hole in Western lamps (all three from Naukratis, Egypt): left, Ptolemaic, 333–250 BC; center, Ptolemaic, 3rd–1st century BC; right, Roman, late 2nd–3rd century AD (Courtesy of the British Museum, from left, Cat. 1886, 0401.1341; Cat. 1886, 0601.142; Cat. 1888, 0401.1360)

- 4 The available documentation does not allow for a precise census. Some lamps are fragmentary, and more fragments might have been stored as unspecified pottery sherds.
- 5 This peculiar shape bears a clear reference to fertility, and despite its transcultural origin, the symbolism is entirely Indian in meaning (Brancaccio 2005: 62).

in a different positioning of the wick end: frontal in the Indo-Roman lamps instead of being pierced from the top as in Hellenistic and Roman lamps [Fig. 4].⁶ It does not affect the functionality of the lighting device because the nozzle still points up.

All the lamps from Ter have handles. Some of these have human or animal shape [Fig. 5], but the vast majority recall the volutes on some Roman nozzles (Bailey 1980: Pl. 10: Q857 to mention just one example of many). Roman lamps frequently have no handles, hence it seems Indian manufacturers tended to integrate

into their lamps more elements than was the standard for Western examples. Also, the presence of a hole on the handle, apart from the presumed function for suspension, visually mimics the wick hole in Roman counterparts.

Indo-Roman lamps share stylistic and technological features with terracotta figurines and moulded petalled bowls also found at Ter and other Sātavāhana sites. The use of a very fine fabric might have come to India with Western specimens as well. Terracotta moulded objects are usually made of a whitish lithomarge clay from the Deccan area



Fig. 5. Lamps from Ter: left, handle in the shape of a human head; right, lamp with a handle in the form of a human head, made of very refined and whitish clay (Courtesy IsMEO/photo R.M. Cimino)

6 To my knowledge, there is only one lamp outside India with this peculiar frontal wick hole; it comes from Algeria (Bussière 2000: Pl. 3, P98). However, being an isolated case in an otherwise standard top-holed group of lamps, and being dated to the 3rd century BC, it does not constitute comparative material for the Indo-Roman lamps.

that gives a pink or ivory-white colour after baking (Deshpande 1994: 176) [Fig. 5 right]. Whether lamps or moulded bowls, this pinkish terracotta is often red-slipped, which goes even further to suggest an imitation of Western models such as the Neo-Hellenistic lamps from Egypt (Thomas n.d.: 10).

Terracotta lamps from Ter find parallels in Hellenistic material; in particular their presence along trade routes has been supported by comparative material from the Failaka island in the Persian Gulf (Margabandu and Gaham 1979). Wheeler briefly mentioned finding two fragments of Roman lamps at Arikamedu (Wheeler, Ghosh, and Deva 1946: 17–124), but this information, interesting though it may be does not add to our understanding of the moulded lamps from Ter. It merely confirms the circulation of such items in South India. Fragments of three Roman lamps were recently discovered at Arikamedu (Begley et al. 1996: 366) with Vimala Begley suggesting an Italian (or Egyptian) origin for these lamps. There has never

been any reference to local production at this important site.

The provenance of this production in Central India can be tentatively explained by looking at related production, such as the so-called ‘Megarian’ bowls. Indeed, terracotta lamps, petalled (Megarian) bowls, and terracotta figurines belong to one and the same cultural milieu and were most likely produced in the same workshops.

The petalled moulded motif, visible on the top part of some terracotta lamps from Ter, is strongly related to the so-called ‘Megarian’ bowls found at several Sātavāhana sites, such as Bhokardan, Ter, Paithan, Kolhapur, and Nevasa (Begley 1991: 157–176) [Fig. 6]. Clearly these mouldmade bowls are local replicas of a Western type widespread in the Hellenistic world (Brancaccio 2005: 63). As reported by Brancaccio, scholars suggested that the terracotta bowls derived from metal or glass prototypes from Ptolemaic Alexandria (Rotroff 1982: 6–13). A similar transfer of technology from glass to clay was also suggested by Cimino (1994: 161)



Fig. 6. ‘Megarian’ bowls from Ter (Courtesy IsMEO/photo R.M. Cimino)

who proposed to compare the Indian ‘Megarian’ bowls with Roman glass from the Italian Aquileia (Cimino 1994: Pl. XLII.2). A fragmentary glass bowl from Arikamedu clearly shows how this shape—widespread in the Roman world of the 1st century AD—actually reached India (Begley 1991: 157).⁷

Different media shares the same visual culture in antiquity. Transfers of elements between mouldmade products in glass, metal and pottery were common indeed (McGovern 1989; Brancaccio 2005: 64), hence it is relevant to the study of Indo-Roman lamps to look into how “Megarian” bowls may have reached India in Sātavāhana times. Models of ‘Megarian’ bowls may have reached India in the form of metal prototypes, which have not survived, metal artifacts being generally easy to melt and recast, and hence rare in the archaeological record. No metal Megarian bowls have been found in India, while a soapstone mould for a small Megarian bowl found in Paithan demonstrated the popularity of the item at Sātavāhana sites (Brancaccio 2005: 64). A silver bowl from the 2nd century BC was found in Vietnam (Janse 1962), showing attesting to the

circulation of vessels of this kind along the Maritime Silk Road. Production of terracotta bullae (copies of Roman coins) demonstrates the likelihood of technological transfer from metal to a more affordable clay. It is indeed probable that Roman items of this sort seldom reached consumers in India and that the moulds circulating widely in Sātavāhana India addressed the difficulty of transporting fragile materials across the ocean (Brancaccio 2005: 65).⁸ The absence of exact parallels confirms the transcultural significance of Indo-Roman lamps. They are the product of intermingling and contact, not just the copying of well-known types. Egyptian assemblages indeed do not provide clear parallels.⁹ In the early centuries AD, copies of Roman lamps made in Italy were popular around Alexandria; once they started to be produced more frequently in other regions of Egypt the quality deteriorated and several local characteristics were included (Knowles 2006: 311). The appearance of local features in Egyptian copies of Roman lamps is an important precedent for understanding the local tastes reflected in oil lamps from India, even if the relation to Roman models is evident.

7 Wheeler mentioned four or five fragments of glass ribbed bowls from his excavations in Arikamedu, but these could not be located in later research (Begley 1991: 157).

8 The impact of the circulation of stone moulds for jewellery on the shaping of a transcultural visual culture in Sātavāhana India is further discussed in a recent paper (Brancaccio 2014). For more on bullae and other imitated Roman objects see Tomber, R. (2013). *Pots, coins and trinkets in Rome’s trade with the East*. In P.S. Wells (ed.), *Rome beyond its frontiers: Imports, attitudes and practices (=Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 94)* (pp. 87–104). Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology

9 Among the most recent excavations in Egypt, assemblages from sites involved in the Indo-Roman trade, such as Berenike (Hayes 1996; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998: 159; Sidebotham and Zych 2011: 119–125) and Myos Hormos (Peacock and Blue 2011: 47–56) are typical of the time and period, with a prevalence of Egyptian types and a lesser share of imports and imitations of Roman lamps. Also, the excavations at Mons Claudianus, the finds from which have been published comprehensively, show similar patterns of lamp circulation (Knowles 2007: 311ff.).

CONCLUSIONS

Indo-Roman lamps from Ter are related to a wider phenomenon of transculturation. It is impossible to connect them with direct trade in lamps—either in terracotta or other materials—since they are better understood as an original product of Indian manufacturers reflecting a contemporary trends of style, collecting input from different media and materials. The result is a syncretic original product, created to satisfy the refined tastes of urban mercantile elites.

This short paper aims at starting a constructive discussion on the geographical and cultural scope of lychnological studies. Terracotta lamps rank high in Hellenistic and Roman archaeology, and typological studies are well developed and long established. This comes as a weakness with regard to Indian archaeology, making it difficult to isolate foreign elements and biasing the approach to local lamp production with the long-established scholarship on Greek and Roman counterparts.

The neo-culture boosted by international trade that developed in the urban Deccan at the beginning of the common era did not have a long-lasting effect on the material culture, but it exemplifies the timeless effectiveness of the exotic to power short-lived fads. Nowadays, this kind of trend would be labelled as cultural appropriation; projected two thousand years into the past, one cannot underestimate the fascination that accompanied cultural globalisation when encounters with distant cultures created new and original visual solutions.

This is the case of the Indo-Roman lamps from Ter. Foreign visual elements were mingled, adapted and re-contextualized in Sātavāhana India; the lamps show how alien visual culture found a welcoming environment in territories participating in ancient globalisation: Indo-Roman lamps are indeed a genuine product of transculturation.

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