Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

GRAECO-ROMAN LAMPS AH 50

Oil lamps like these were widely used in the Ancient World to provide lighting in homes, shrines and on stage. Simple oil lamps are known to have been in use from at least 3,500 BC, but pottery versions came into common use around the eighth and seventh centuries BC. The earlier lamps were very basic wheel-spun saucers with a wick at the edge; these developed into pottery lamps with enclosed bodies, like the three examples here.

The fuel, which was normally vegetable oil (often made from olives like the ones in this picture), was poured into the lamp through the hole in the centre and a wick made of fibre ran through the oil and out through the spout. Some lamps have been found with two spouts, but you would need more fuel for these. The part of the wick that poked out through the spout could then be lit to provide a small flame. A tablespoon of oil would burn for about two hours. Keeping the oil filled up would have been a very important job.



The Ancient Greeks were the largest producers of these lamps, adding handles and eventually a glaze to the surface, which helped to stop the oil seeping into the clay. During the Hellenistic period (third century BC to first century AD), moulds were used to make the lamps, making it much easier and cheaper to produce large quantities of them. The clay was hand pressed into the mould in two halves that were then put together and fired in a kiln. Some of the plainer, mass-produced lamps are known as firmalamps or factory lamps, whereas others are called picture lamps and are decorated with mythical characters, floral or animal designs.

All three of the lamps in this box are decorated, making them picture lamps.

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The lamp on the left has suffered the most damage but it is still possible to see a sea creature on the upper surface, which seems to be wrapped around the hole for pouring the oil into the lamp. It has a beautifully formed tail and two fins either side of its body. It has a handle, making it easier to hold and carry.



The lamp in the middle is smaller than the others and is slightly red in colour. The petals of a flower radiate from the central hole with the stem of the flower extending down the spout. This lamp has suffered some damage to the spout but the detail in the pattern is still quite clear.



The lamp on the right has abstract designs on its surface. You can see a mixture of straight lines and circles on the top and a nice decoration underneath. It is unglazed and probably dates from the Hellenistic period.

