

# The Virgins' Lamps: *Shine Beautiful!*

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*The light of Christ shines beautiful for all of us.*

[Anonymous quote inscribed

on a Palestinian lamp of the fourth–fifth century A.D.]

In the ancient Mediterranean world, hand-sized lamps made of baked clay were used to light one's way after dark. The equivalent of the modern-day light bulb, clay lamps were also an essential part of the ancient household and are among the most common articles found during archaeological excavations (see figs. 1–9). Their nozzles held a burning wick fueled by oil, and they cast a dancing, flickering light like a candle or lantern. The essential parts of the lamp structure were a reservoir or cavity to hold the fuel, usually olive oil, and a wick rest or feature to anchor the wick, which could be a length of tightly twisted flax or other fiber. The reservoirs held sufficient oil to keep the lamp burning throughout an entire night, although the wick had to be shifted every few hours.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible makes many references to lamps, most frequently in association with offerings made at an altar and in connection with a golden candelabra.<sup>2</sup> They may not have been the earthen lamps in common usage in antiquity. In at least one instance, however, the Bible almost certainly refers to hand-sized clay lamps. Jesus relates the parable of the ten maidens who needed oil lamps to light their way to a midnight marriage.<sup>3</sup> Only five of the young girls witnessed the spectacle, as Jesus relates:

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of

them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. (KJV, Matthew 25:1-5)

What would these lamps carried by the five wise “virgins” have looked like? Were they *beautiful*? Or were they ordinary, everyday things? How would they have compared to lamps used by other people in the Holy Land? Were similar lamps used at Masada? Did pagans, Christians, and Jews use the same kinds of lamps?

This article will enable the patient reader to ponder these questions for him- or herself. It attempts to condense a very large body of (sometimes esoteric) literature on the topic of lamps in the Holy Land from about 2000 B.C. through the first century A.D.<sup>4</sup> An examination of lamp-making techniques, shape, and decoration will sharpen the eye for this mission. Reflecting upon the meanings of their decoration and how these relate to the beliefs of their users will lighten the heart. Special attention will be accorded lamps found at Masada, because some of them are on display in *The Story of Masada: Discoveries from the Excavations*, and because the contexts of their discovery often have much to teach us. Indeed, in postulating a theory on what the virgins' lamps looked like, the reader will have to exercise the same sort of investigative thinking that archaeologists do when faced with their complex heaps of dirt and ruins.

### **History of Technique, Shape, and Decoration in Palestinian Lamps**

The study of ancient Mediterranean lamps is a veritable discipline unto itself. These ubiquitous artifacts are long-lived in the archaeological record, and they experienced an intricate and complicated evolution in technique of manufacture, shape, and decoration. For these reasons, clay lamps can often be dated rather closely, making them very useful to the archaeologist for dating other things found with them. Chemical analyses of the clay fabric by neutron activation analysis (NAA) aid specialists in determining the sources of the clays used in lamp manufacture. This information can help identify the output of workshops and trace patterns of distribution. The subject matter used in decorating the lamps,

moreover, sheds light on the beliefs and concerns of their users. Thus, lamps are a particularly worthy class of artifacts to examine in detail.

**Technique and Shape.** Ancient lamp makers used three principal techniques to make clay lamps, and all three are represented in the Palestinian repertoire. The makers could form lamps by hand, use a potter's wheel, or cast them in molds. The technique of manufacture greatly influenced the shape a vessel would take.

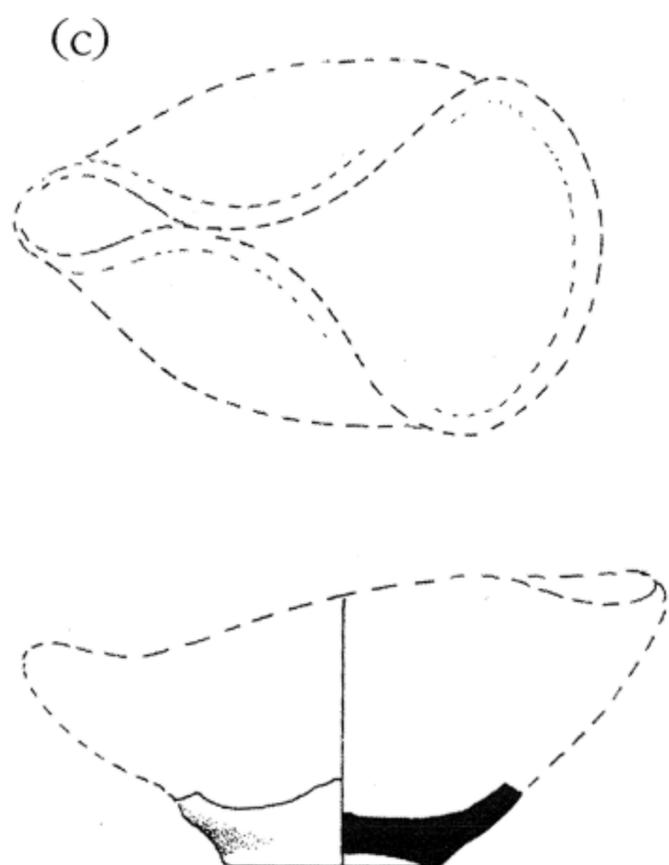
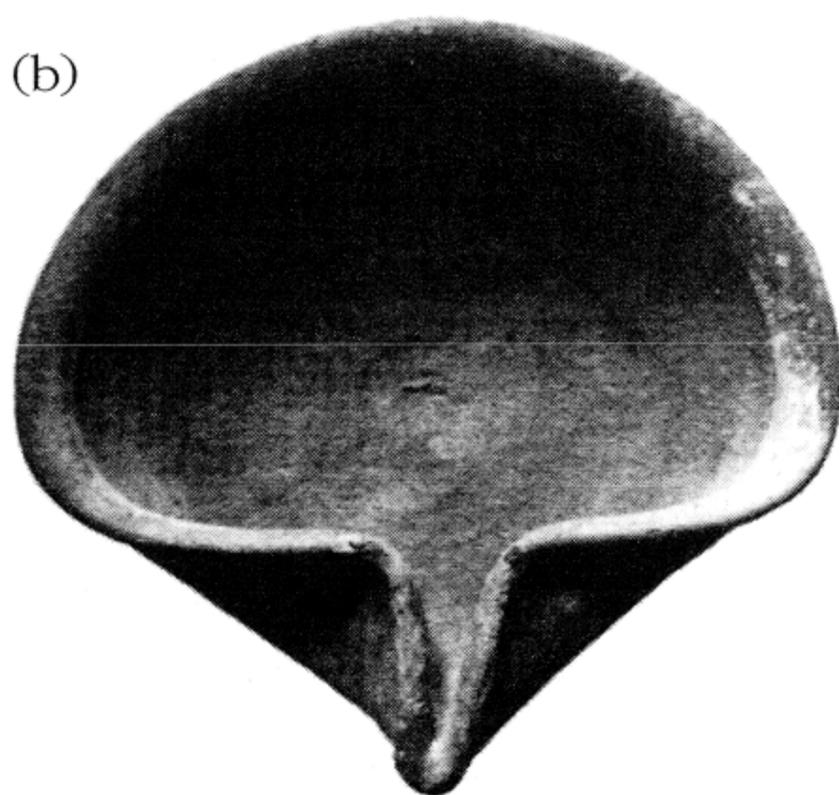
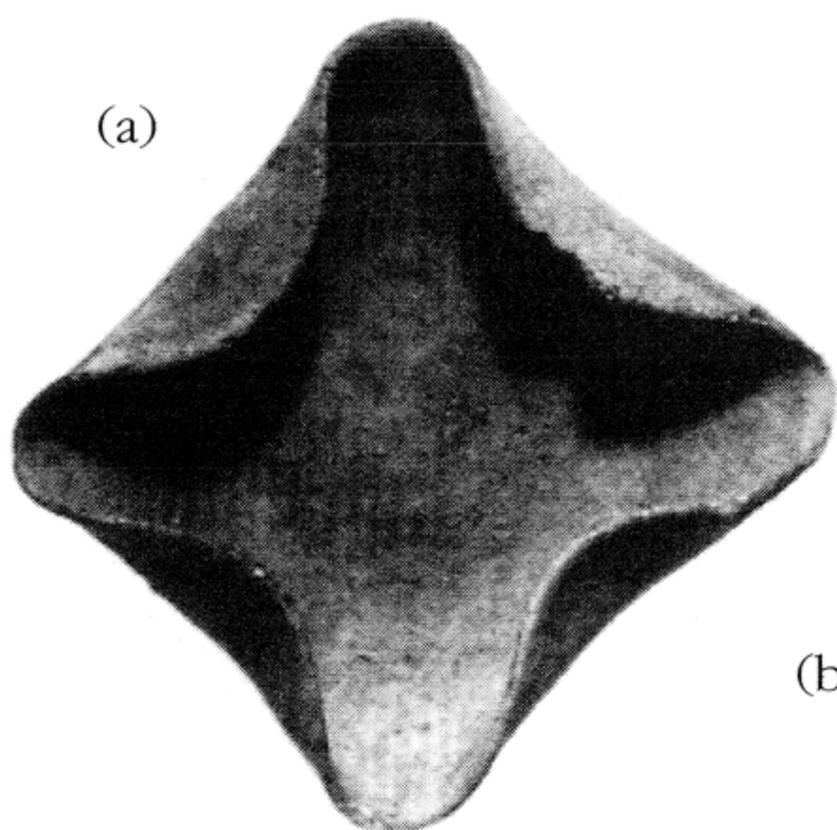
The earliest varieties of lamps were hand formed. These were not necessarily lamps by design but bowls adapted in a makeshift fashion to serve this function. Plain, hand-formed bowls with tell-tale wick burns on their rims have been recovered from contexts as early as the fourth and third millennia B.C.

Wheel-thrown lamps designed specifically for that function were made in Palestine by the late third millennium B.C. The so-called saucer lamp consists of a shallow wheel-thrown bowl, the rim of which was folded to form four corners that served as wick-slots (see fig. 1a). Lamps with just one folded corner became the most usual kind (see fig. 1b), a shape which persisted almost without change for nearly two thousand years in Palestine and indeed throughout the Mediterranean once the Phoenicians had colonized its coasts.

Beginning in the seventh century B.C., Greek lamps were imported to Palestine for the first time. These are technically different from the locally made saucer lamps, being bowl-shaped but with a separately made nozzle for the wick. Eventually the wheel was used to shape these lamps (see figs. 2a-c).

In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the Greek wheel-thrown lamp cornered the market in Palestine and even inspired local imitations. Yet, the old saucer lamp continued in use alongside it and elsewhere throughout the Persian period (587-333 B.C.). It finally died out at the end of the period but enjoyed a revival in the form of the so-called pinched lamp in the late Hellenistic repertoire of Palestine (second-first century B.C.).<sup>5</sup>

A fragment of a lamp from Masada dated to the late Hellenistic (Hasmonean) period or early in the reign of Herod represents this revived pinched type, although one has to be imaginative to recognize the type from the lamp's sole surviving fragment.<sup>6</sup> An



**Fig. 1. Early Palestinian lamps.**  
(a) Saucer lamp (2200–1550 B.C.);  
(b) saucer lamp (1550–1200 B.C.);  
(c) Hellenistic pinched lamp (late  
2nd century B.C.–early 1st cen-  
tury B.C.).

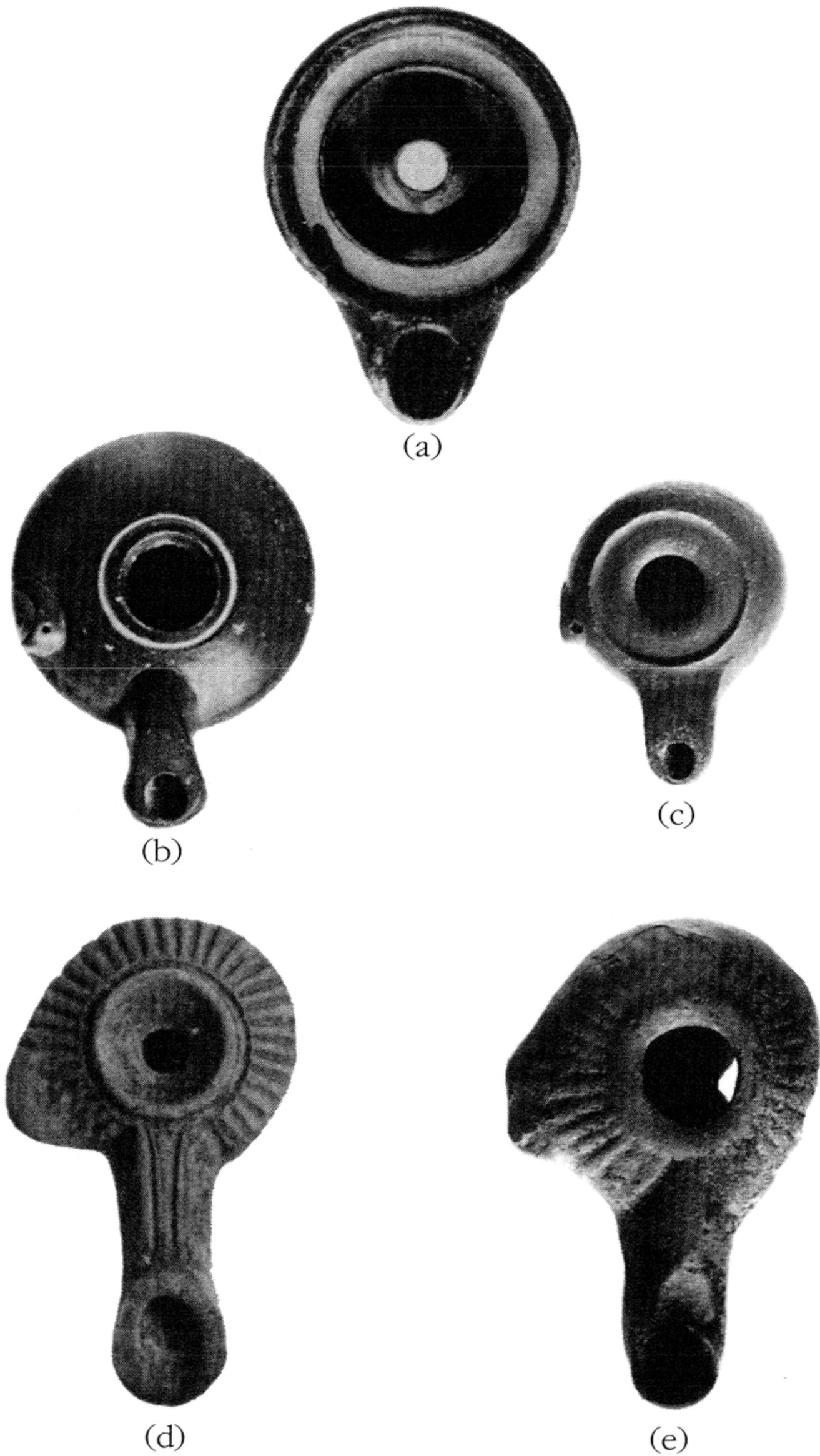
artist's reconstruction shows its folded lip and its bowl-like structure (see fig. 1c). It is smaller than the saucer lamps of earlier times. According to the NAA results reported by Dan Barag and Malka HersHKovitz,<sup>7</sup> the Masada pinched lamp is made of clay from the area of Jerusalem. It is therefore a local imitation of the imported Hellenistic type.

The conquest of Persia in 333 B.C. by the Macedonian Greek Alexander the Great brought substantial changes to Palestine and the Near East. The great Persian empire was divided up into administrative centers that cultivated strong connections with Greek culture. In this Hellenized culture of the Greek East, the third technique of lamp manufacture was first practiced—molding.

The craft of molding clay was an industry unto itself and required an expertise significantly different than that of wheel technology. To make a molded lamp, the artisan formed a two-part mold off an original model or existing lamp or carved a negative from scratch in a soft stone. One valve of the mold held the features of the top part of the lamp, which might include various decorations. The other valve was impressed or carved with plainer features for the lower half.

From here lamp makers could easily mass-produce replicas. The artisan pressed strips of clay into each of the two valves and allowed them to dry to the leathery-hard state. While drying, the clay would shrink, so that the impressions would easily come out of the mold. The next step was to cut the wick hole and filling hole into the top half of the impression and join the two halves along their seams, using a solution of liquid clay or slip. The artisan used a sharp tool to pare down the seam lines and to freshen or add details, making each impression unique.

The lamp was then fired into permanence along with, potentially, tens of mold duplicates. Since an existing lamp could serve as the original from which new (clay or plaster) molds could be made, artisans could easily copy any lamp that came on the market—a plagiarism of sorts. And plagiarize they did—even at the expense of producing dulled images as the mold generations wore on. Many artisans began signing their wares or impressing their “maker's mark” on the underside of the lamp, thus spreading their fame wherever the lamps were distributed.



**Fig. 2. Hellenistic lamps.** (a) Wheel thrown (6th century B.C.); (b) wheel thrown (late 4th century B.C.–second quarter 3rd century B.C.); (c) wheel thrown (late 4th century B.C.–second quarter 3rd century B.C.); (d) molded (mid-2nd century B.C.–first half 1st century B.C.); (e) Palestinian copy of Hellenistic radial lamp, from Masada (late 2nd century B.C.–1st century B.C.).

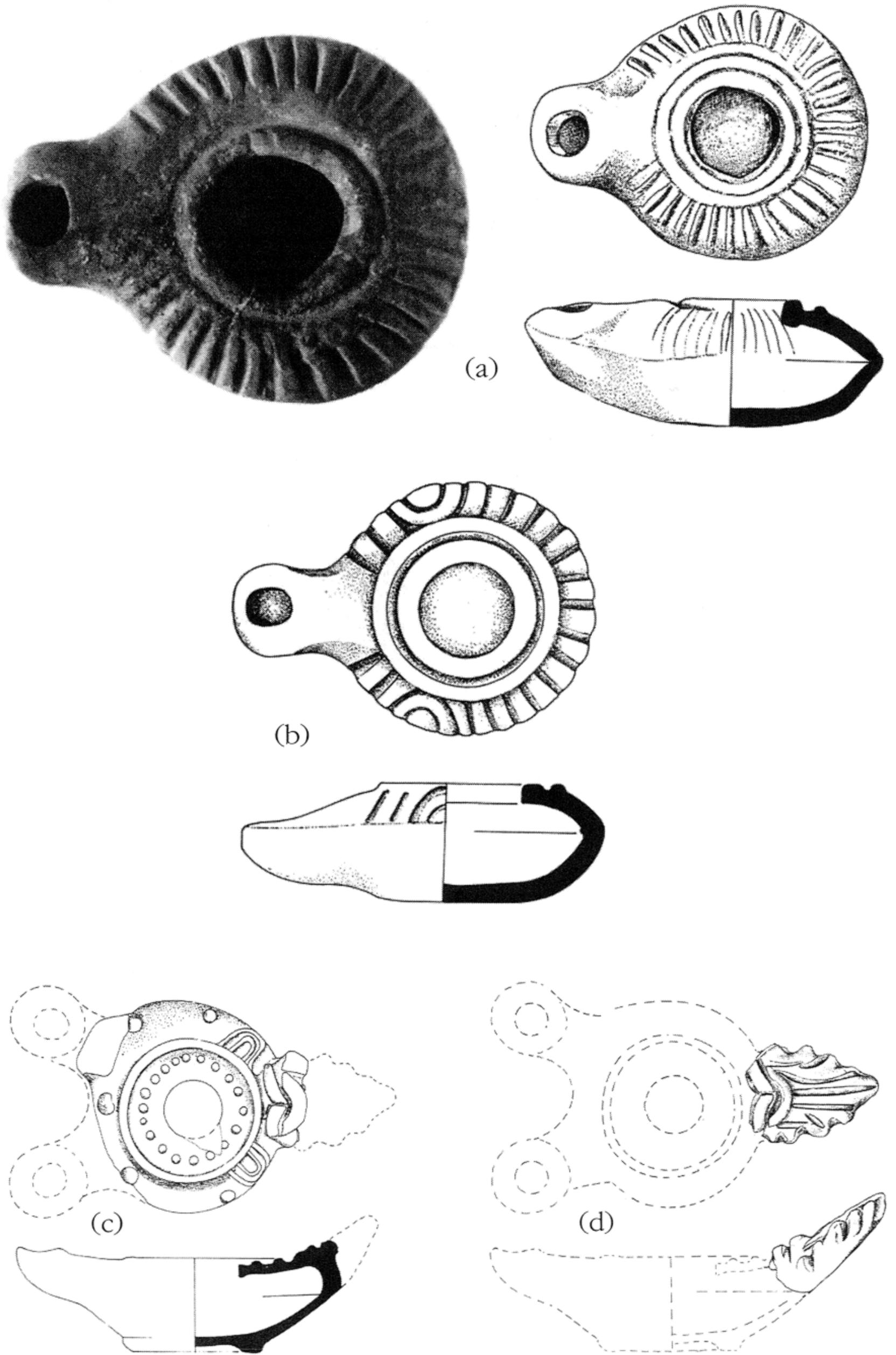


Fig. 3. Lamps from Masada (1st century B.C.). (a) Judean radial; (b) Judean radial with concentric circles; (c) two-nozzled with palmette handle; (d) two-nozzled with palmette handle.

The Greeks practiced the craft of molding lamps as early as the third century B.C. By the second century B.C., mold-made lamps were the norm throughout the Mediterranean, and Rome led the industry.<sup>8</sup> The characteristic early Roman lamp has a round body with a distinct spout terminating in a triangular or rounded nozzle (see figs. 4-5). The body of the lamp rests on a flat base or a pronounced ring-shaped foot. A kind of Roman lamp popular in the late first century B.C. and early first century A.D. has a tall delta- or crescent-shaped handle and one or two nozzles (see fig. 4a-c). Both a single-nozzled and a two-nozzled example found their way to Masada.<sup>9</sup> Their shape and their crisp, carinated features indicate they had metal prototypes.

A distinctive feature of the typical Roman lamp is the wide field around the filling hole called the *discus* (see figs. 4-5). Excess oil or spills could pool here and be funneled into the reservoir. This flat or depressed area was typically the focus of decoration (see below). The filling hole itself is consequently smaller than in Hellenistic and earlier lamps. Most types of early Roman Imperial pictorial lamps persisted with minute (and, to the specialist, noticeable!) changes well into the second century A.D.

Around the end of or just after the reign of Herod the Great, probably in response to the demand for late Hellenistic and Early Roman lamps, an interesting development took place in Palestine. Palestinian lamp makers invented (or re-introduced) a wheel-made oil lamp (see fig. 6a-b). This type of lamp bears the misnomer "Herodian," for when specialists first studied it, they believed it dated concurrently with Herod's reign. This type of lamp has a circular, wheel-made body to which a separate, hand-formed nozzle was joined. In contour, right down to their knife-pared, triangular nozzles, "Herodian" lamps resemble their imported molded contemporaries (compare fig. 5a). The filling-holes are significantly larger, however. This was a cheaper lamp, for its production did not require the kind of expertise needed to make the molded lamps, an advantage that spared consumers the costs of importation markups.

By the second half of the first century A.D., local Palestinian lamp makers had fully embraced mold technology into their practice. Nabatean lamp makers also capitalized upon the technology.

Notably, two new types of molded lamps were introduced (1) a round lamp with a discus, and (2) a round lamp with a decorated shoulder, called a Southern or Judean molded lamp. Round lamps with the discus have a flat reservoir with a petite nozzle and lack a handle (see fig. 7a-b). Their bases are flat, usually with an imitation ring base and, commonly, potters' marks. They are decorated both on the shoulder and in the discus. Although clearly inspired by Roman lamps, this type of lamp was fairly restricted in distribution to Syria-Palestine, being found in Jerusalem in levels predating A.D. 70, as well as in contexts dating to the third century.

In contour, Judean molded lamps imitate the shape of the contemporary "Herodian" lamp, right down to the flare of the nozzle (see fig. 7c-e). Fin-shaped motifs flanking the nozzle give the impression of knife paring like the "Herodian" lamps, and the filling hole is the same size. Here the comparison ends, for Judean molded lamps always have handles and incorporate a wide variety of decorations. Judean molded lamps were a local phenomenon, as is indicated by their chemical "fingerprints." Analysis of two examples by NAA point to clay sources in the Shephela of western Judea. A third sample is chemically similar to clays found in the Jerusalem area.<sup>10</sup> This type of lamp came onto the market after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and continued into the second century.

In the third and fourth centuries, Palestinian lamp makers developed regionally distinct varieties of lamps. Molded lamps were the rule. Existing types were expanded upon and there were new developments in shape. Notably, the nozzle tended to lose its discreteness, and, as a result, the body became pearshaped, ovoid, and conical.

**Preferences in Decoration.** Early Palestinian wheel-made lamps as well as the earliest Greek molded lamps are almost purely utilitarian in nature and sparsely decorated if at all (see figs. 1-2). Even as late as the mid-second-early first century B.C., the favored ornamentation of Hellenistic molded lamps consisted only of nodules or closely set lines disposed radially about the shoulder (see fig. 2d). The single, pre-Herod lamp from Masada is apparently a local copy of one of these (see fig. 2e).<sup>11</sup> Compared to earlier Greek issues of the type, the Masada example is quite degenerate, being dulled and uninspired in character. As a local copy of the imported Hellenistic type, it could well be several mold generations removed from the original Greek series.



Fig. 4. Early Roman lamps (Augustan-Flavian). (a) With delta handle, plain disc; (b) with delta handle, Medusa in disc; (c) with crescent handle, arms and weapons in disc; (d) ovolo on rim, plain disc.

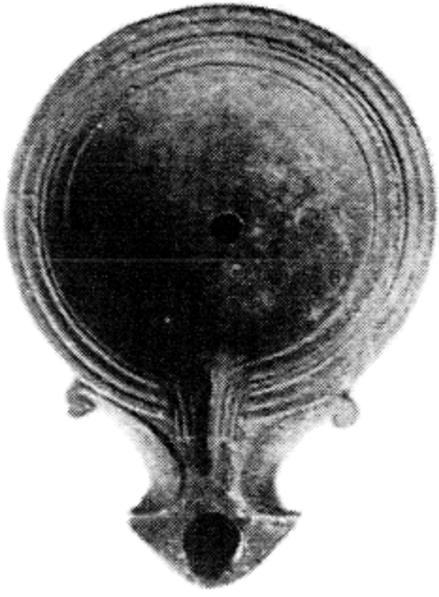
The modest character of the designs in these and many other types of Hellenistic lamps would have made them acceptable to a Jewish market. A large group of lamps from Masada dubbed “Judean Radial” by Barag and Hershkovitz take their inspiration from both Hellenistic and Roman contemporary lamps but were probably drawn from molds created locally (see fig. 3a–c).<sup>12</sup> Eighty-seven lamps from Masada or fragments thereof exhibit radial decorations on the shoulder, and some have a simple circle of dots in raised relief in a narrow discus. Some lamps from Masada with these decorations also have two nozzles as well as handles in the shape of palmettes (see fig. 3c–d).<sup>13</sup> In these respects, they clearly draw upon Roman lamps of the Augustan period (compare fig. 4a–b). While samples analyzed by NAA are inconclusive as to the location of the clay source used in these lamps, these lamps are paralleled primarily in Judea, and abundantly so. These particular lamps from Masada are believed to date to the reign of Herod.

The so-called “Herodian” lamp type described above was in high demand in the first century A.D. A major difference between “Herodian” lamps and their molded competitors is their decoration. “Herodian” lamps are plain in aspect and almost entirely void of decoration (see fig. 6a–b). They neither have a discus nor is the shoulder used for decoration. A few incised or rouletted lines and a few punched circle designs on the nozzle suffice.

“Herodian” lamps circulated within a restricted geographical area, being most common in Judea and rarer in north Judea and Transjordan. Visually acceptable to Jewish sectors of the population, they had a lengthy popularity, continuing in circulation through the first half of the second century A.D. Most of the lamps from Masada are of the common “Herodian” type and date to the period of Sicarii occupation.

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Fig. 5. Early Roman imperial lamps. (a) Triangular nozzle, plain discus (Augustan/early Tiberian century A.D.–2nd century A.D.); (b) rounded nozzle, amphora in discus (1st century A.D.–2nd century A.D.); (c) small nozzle scored at base, potter’s signature CATILVEST on base (second third of 1st century A.D.–2nd century A.D.); (d) small nozzle scored at base, potter’s mark on base (second third of 1st century A.D.–2nd century A.D.); (e) factory lamp, potter’s signature FORTIS on base (from circa A.D. 79–3rd century A.D.); (f) sketch of discus of Roman lamp imported to Masada (A.D. 40–80).



(a)



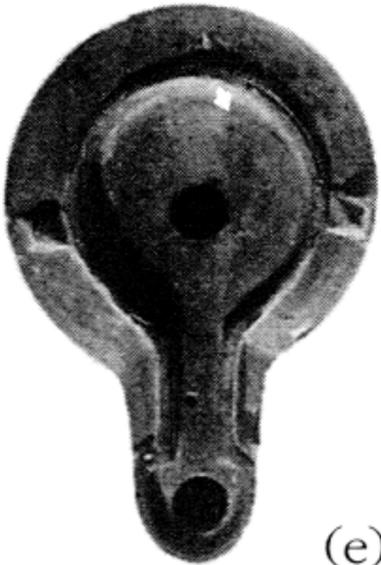
(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



Lamp makers of first-century A.D. Judea offered a Jewish clientele alternatives to the plain “Herodian” lamp. Floral and geometric designs, permissible within Jewish religious restrictions, did occur. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, many Jews moved south in search of safer havens. The lamp makers who catered to them broadened their repertoire of decorations, as observable in the Southern or Judean molded lamps (see fig. 7c–e). They used, in addition to floral and geometric motifs, a range of articles such as vases and domestic paraphernalia. This shift marks a slight relaxation in the standard against pictorial representations, although lamps with deliberately defaced ornamentation raise the eyebrows (see fig. 7d, motifs defaced on shoulder).<sup>14</sup> The motifs include volutes, double axes, ovolos, darts, triangles, and leaves, as well as a wide range of pictorial subjects.

Varda Sussman points out that these pictorial subjects—candelabra, baskets of fruit, myrtle, palm branches, etc.—express a “longing for the Temple and its rebuilding and the memory of [Jewish] festivals.”<sup>15</sup> In keeping with the Jewish prohibition against making true-to-life representations of the menorah, none of the candelabra depicted on the lamps have seven branches.<sup>16</sup> In addition, figural representations remained taboo for the most part. Clearly, Judean molded lamps were designed primarily for Jews. Lamps of this type were recovered from the caves in the Judean Desert, where people fleeing the Bar Kokhba War (A.D. 132–35) took refuge.

In sharp contrast to Hellenistic and “Herodian” lamps, Roman lamps had from their inception a manifestly decorative aspect, an aspect that no doubt greatly enhanced their appeal and marketability. The area favored for decorations in the earliest Roman lamps was the discus. In the disk of the lamp, decorations of all sorts were molded in relief, first at the expense of the size of the filling-hole (see figs. 4–5). In later developments, however, the shoulder of the lamp became the focus of designs at the expense of the discus (see fig. 8).

The repertoire of decorations on Roman relief lamps include geometric and floral designs, human figures and gods, and animals as well as scenes from the hunt, the circus, everyday life, and so on. A curious Roman convention of early Roman lamps is the pair

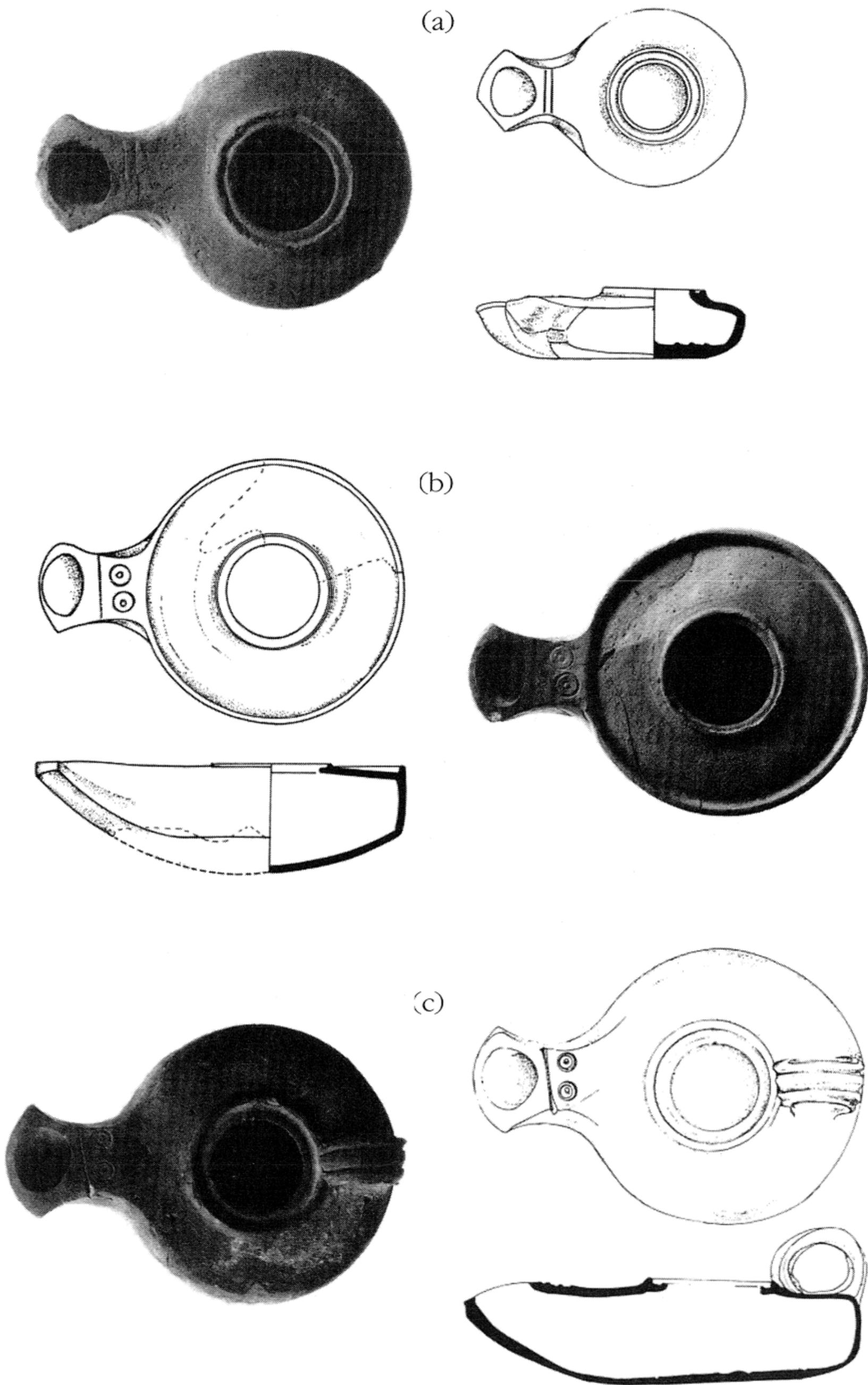


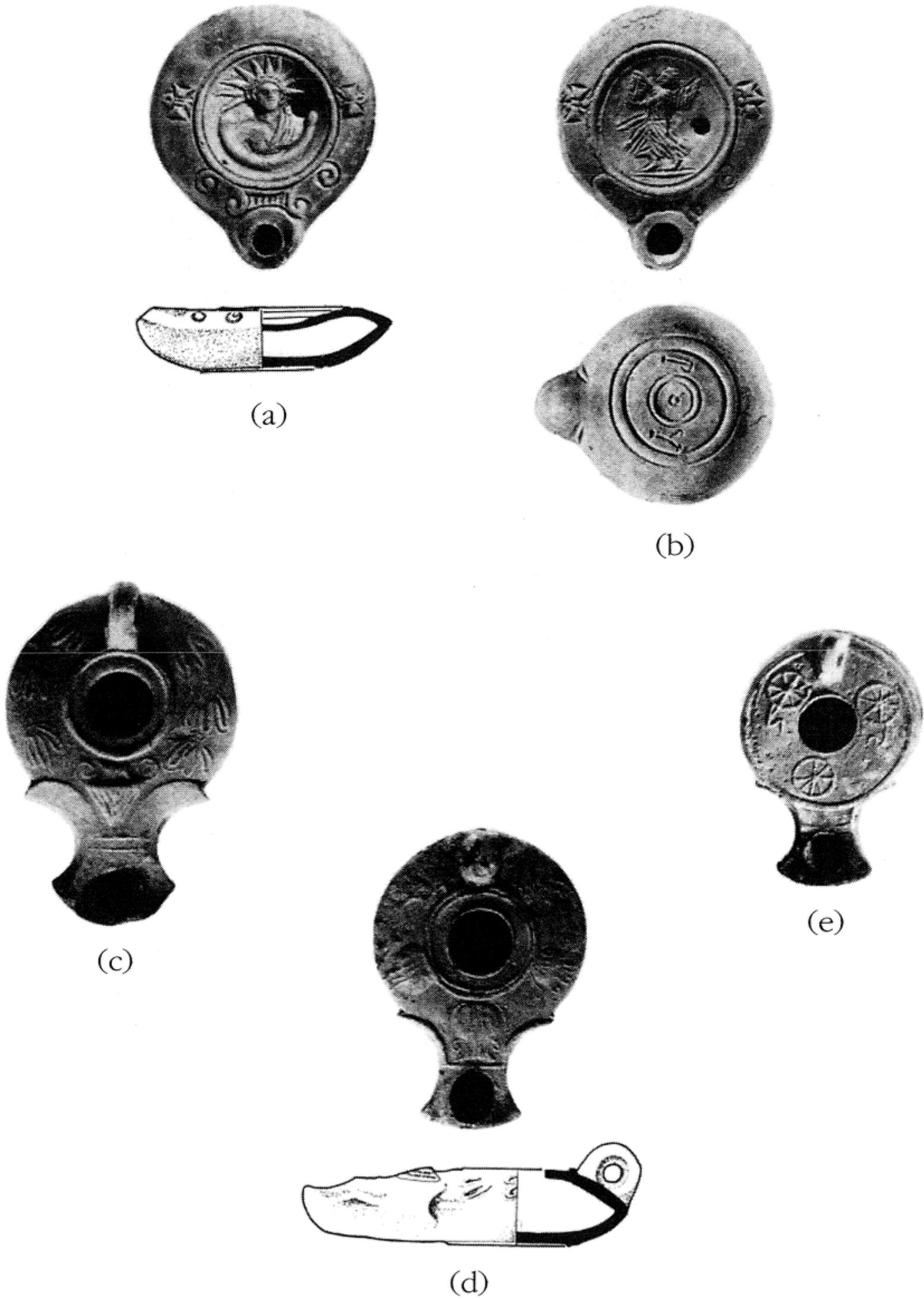
Fig. 6. Wheel-thrown lamps from Masada. (a) "Herodian" lamp; (b) "Herodian" lamp; (c) plain grayware with handle.

of volutes that flank the nozzle (see figs. 4, 5b). Rendered in pronounced relief, the volutes have a sculpturesque quality.

The decorative motifs of most Roman lamps are deployed away from the lamp user's perspective; that is, they face the nozzle and not the filling hole (see figs. 4b, 5b, 5d).<sup>17</sup> It stands to reason, therefore, that if one commonly held the lamp with the wick side away from the body, the motifs would have been best appreciated by people who met the lamp holder in passing or by anyone after the lamp had been placed in the destination of its use, that is, on a table or in a wall niche. In many Palestinian lamps, the opposite perspective was employed for the motifs (see figs. 7d, 8a).<sup>18</sup> Thus, lamp users typically had the benefit of viewing the motifs right-side up both while walking and after setting the lamp down. It would have made for a more personal experience for the user, especially if the motifs had a special significance for the user rather than being purely ornamental in character.

There was a tremendous demand for Roman decorated lamps; they were exported and widely copied throughout the empire. An imported example brought to Masada by a Roman soldier preserves in its discus the scene of Eros playing the double flutes and riding a dolphin (see fig. 5f). Roman discus lamps served as the prototypes for the class of Palestinian round lamps with the pictorial disci already discussed (see fig. 7a-b). The linear rendering of the conventional Roman volutes on the nozzles of one example (see fig. 7a) betrays the copyist's uninspired hand. The pictorial subject matter on these lamps would have been offensive to Jewish sectors of the society. Roman pictorial lamps would have appealed most to pagan markets and to Hellenized Jews.

The demand for Roman discus lamps was curbed in Palestine perhaps by their high cost and by the offensive content. Cosmopolitan Jews of the first century A.D. would still have been able to choose from a selection of plain, imported Roman lamps (compare fig. 5a). One particularly innocuous possibility was the so-called Factory lamp (see fig. 5e), the brainchild, it seems, of a lamp maker named Fors (see the Latin signature FORTIS, "of or belonging to Fors" on the base of fig. 5e). They hit the market before A.D. 79, having been found in the ashes of Pompeii, and persisted into the third century A.D. These lamps were purely utilitarian and had no



**Fig. 7. Molded lamps from Judea.** (a) Round lamp with Helios in discus (second half of 1st century A.D.—3rd century A.D.); (b) round lamp with Victory(?) in discus (second half of 1st century A.D.—3rd century A.D.); (c) Southern or Judean lamp, myrtle and amphora on shoulder (second half of 1st century A.D.—2nd century A.D.); (d) Southern or Judean lamp, motifs defaced except for three amphorae (second half of 1st century A.D.—2nd century A.D.); (e) Southern or Judean lamp, spoked wheels on shoulder (second half of 1st century A.D.—2nd century A.D.).

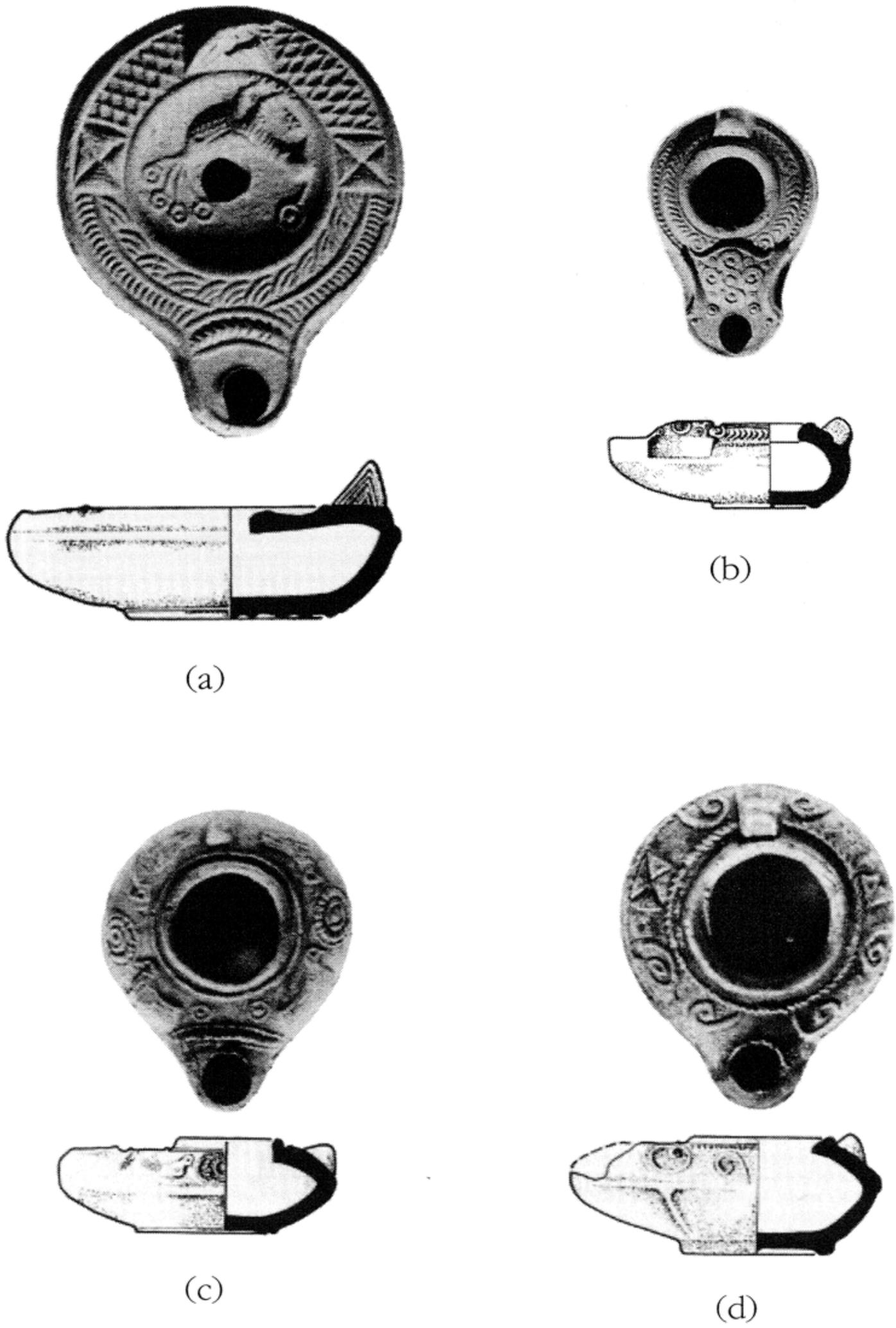


Fig. 8. Palestinian molded lamps (3rd century A.D.-4th century A.D.). (a) Round lamp of the South, double axes and geometric motifs on shoulder, peacock in discus; (b) bow-nozzled lamp, herringbone motifs on shoulder, quatrefoil loop on nozzle; (c) ovoid lamp of the South, confronted doves on shoulder; (d) ovoid lamp of the South, double axes and half-volutes on shoulder.

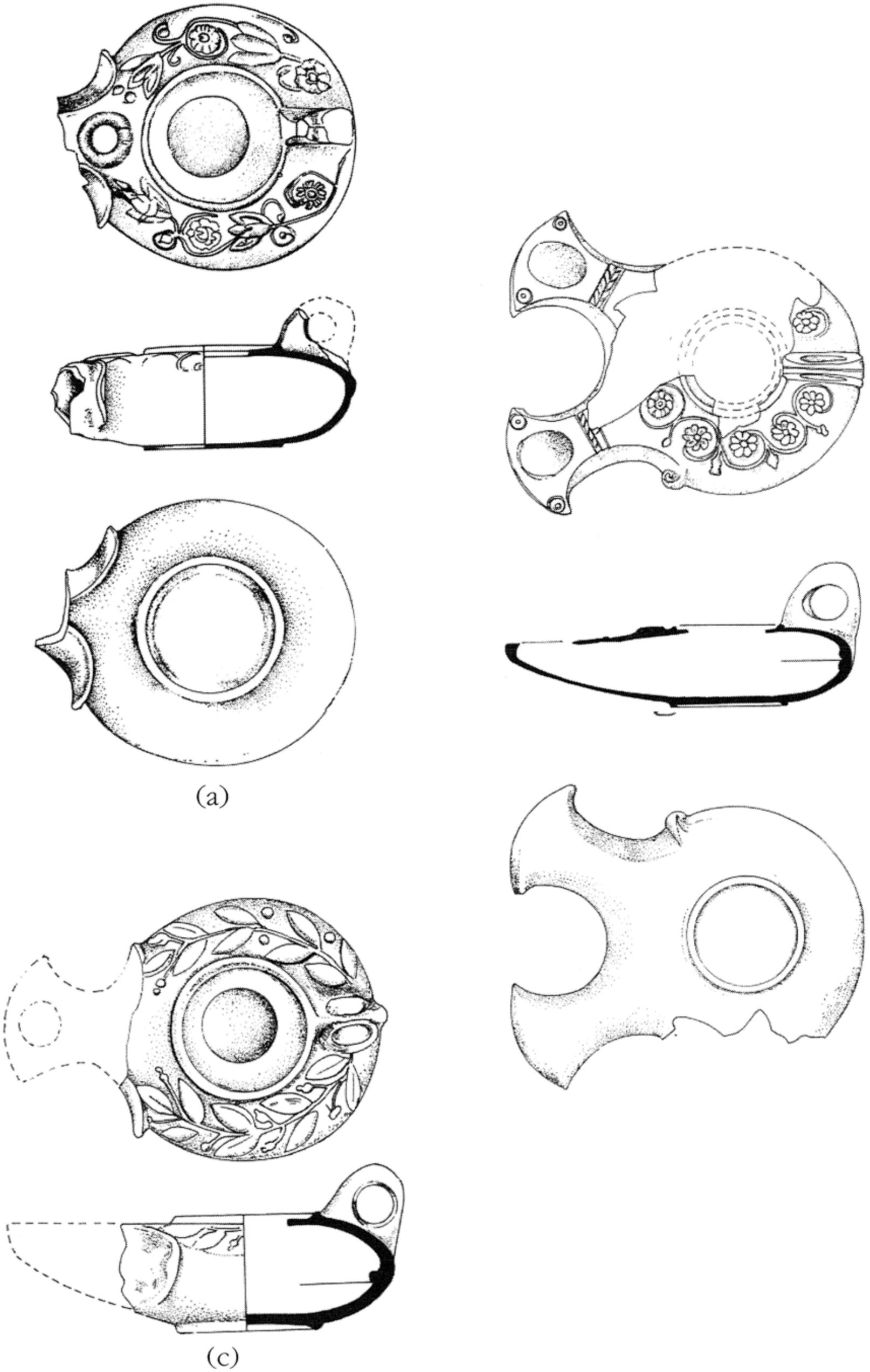


Fig. 9. Molded grayware lamps from Masada (circa A.D. 50-66). (a) Stylized flower, plantain leaves and garland on shoulder; (b) garland of flowers on shoulder; (c) olive leaves and fruit on shoulder.

decorations at all. Sterile to the point of being boring, they nevertheless had a wide circulation in Rome's western empire. Perhaps they functioned exceptionally well—a tiny hole in the nozzle may have enabled the insertion of a pin to shift the wick, or it may have been an air vent. Few such lamps were imported to the eastern provinces. The contemporary “Herodian” lamps offered equivalent features for a local price.

Beginning in the third century, decorations varied regionally along with lamp types, and the prohibition against depicting the menorah relaxed somewhat, making it difficult to determine which religious groups patronized a given lamp type. In Byzantine times (later fourth–seventh centuries), lamp makers sometimes added inscriptions on lamp shoulders in various languages. Examples of Greek inscriptions translate as “The light of Christ shines for all,” “Beautiful little lamps,” and “The Mother of God.”<sup>19</sup> Lamp makers also used fairly generic symbols, indicating little about the religious leanings of the user. Although the beautiful little lamps themselves have endured, the hands that lit them remain invisible to us.

### **Lamps from Masada and the Significance of Their Contexts**

**An Additional Type: Luxury Grayware.** Over 1,100 lamps and fragments of lamps have been excavated at Masada.<sup>20</sup> Specialists Barag and Hershkovitz identified seven classes of locally made lamps in addition to one class of imported lamps and copies thereof. Generally speaking, the lamps from Masada fall within the late Hellenistic and early Roman types discussed above. They were fired various shades of buff, reddish-brown, and brown, the color range most common in late Hellenistic and early Roman lamps.

A series of lamps from Masada are gray with a black slip. They may have been inspired by imported lamps.<sup>21</sup> Barag and Hershkovitz, noting their high quality and rarity in the Masada lamp assemblage, suggest they were a luxury ware.<sup>22</sup> Yet they are clearly a local phenomenon: they were confined largely to Judea and the central coastal plain. Analyses by NAA point to a clay source near Jerusalem or to a source on the north coast.

Grayware lamps from Masada were both wheel thrown and molded. The wheel-thrown types resemble “Herodian” lamps in form, and both types are probably contemporaneous (see fig. 6c).<sup>23</sup>

However, the grayware lamps were brought to completion more expertly, and some varieties have high-quality stamped, rouletted, and incised decorations on their nozzles.

Another series of grayware lamps was made from molds.<sup>24</sup> In shape these lamps resemble the lamps just discussed, although some have a looped handle. They differ in decoration, exhibiting typically a volute or finlike decoration flanking each side of the nozzle. In this respect, they follow early Roman Imperial lamp makers in a well-established convention. In lieu of a discus of any note, these lamps were decorated on their shoulders with rich floral motifs—olive twigs with leaves and fruits, myrtle twigs, oak leaves and acorns, plantain, caper, mallow, ivy, and acanthus. No complete specimens of these lamps survived at Masada, but drawings of the fragments help the mind's eye (see fig. 9). The floral lamps from Masada that could be dated are thought to belong to the years ca. A.D. 50–66, just prior to the period when the Sicarii occupied the site.<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, the decorations on all the grayware varieties would have been acceptable and—in the case of the floral lamps—of particular interest to a Jewish clientele. The myrtle, with its clusters of three leaves, is a species that grows in Galilee, the Golan Heights, and on Mt. Carmel and that is considered ritually purest by rabbinic sources.<sup>26</sup> The species of oak depicted is also common to the Judean Hills.<sup>27</sup> Barag and Hershkovitz see parallels to this floral mode of decoration in “the un-iconic art of Jerusalem in the century before the destruction of the city” (in A.D. 70).<sup>28</sup>

**Contexts.** When Yigael Yadin's excavations began at Masada in the early 1960s, the excavators gazed upon what might be described as a giant jigsaw puzzle whose intriguing pieces had to be sorted and put back together into a meaningful whole. For six decades after Herod had quitted Masada, the First Roman Garrison occupied the site (A.D. 6–66). They felt no obligation to tiptoe around so as to make it easy for future archaeologists to discover the sequence of events that had and would transpire at Masada. After the defeat of the First Roman Garrison, the Sicarii took up habitation. They wreaked their own special havoc as they adapted the site to suit their needs, building ritual baths, superimposing mud tubs over fine mosaic floors, and throwing up makeshift households within Herod's palaces and the casemate walls. The

Sicarii, in a last-ditch effort to save themselves, probably grabbed everything in sight to bolster the wall against the Roman battering rams. The siege ended in flames. Silva's troops cared even less for maintaining an air of orderliness. Following a second occupation by a Roman garrison, Masada lay fallow for almost four hundred years. Masada's Byzantine inhabitants had their own plans for the site (fifth century A.D.—circa 635–38).

Despite successive rounds of construction, occupation, renovation, destruction, and reoccupation, the excavators of Masada were able to reconstruct the sequences of events on the site. However, many structures saw a continuous inhabitation from Herod's time through the abandonment of the site by the Second Roman Garrison in about A.D. 115. The excavators could not usually discern whether a given patch of debris in a room had been formed exclusively by people of Herod's time, the Roman soldiers, or the Sicarii. Accordingly, the contexts or *loci* of artifacts (sing. *locus*) were very broadly defined, consisting generally of entire rooms and whole courtyards.<sup>29</sup> For example, lamps (and fragments thereof) were found in many places on the site, but with a few possible exceptions,<sup>30</sup> no lamps were definitely found "in situ," that is, in the place of their original use. Rather, they were recovered from debris piles, backfill from renovation activities, and the like. Thus, the lamps may have been kicked about or otherwise "redeposited" after their users set them down or discarded them.

Most of the lamps at Masada belong to the period of eight years of Sicarii occupation, A.D. 66–74. The wheel-made "Herodian" lamps were extremely common at Masada, constituting 80 percent of the assemblage, counting fragments. These modest, undecorated lamps were most abundant in contexts associated with the Sicarii occupation. While some of them may have been brought to the site by the soldiers of the First Roman Garrison, it stands to reason that many were used by the religiously strict Sicarii.

Archaeologists recovered many "Herodian" lamps as well as luxury molded lamps in the grayware from stratified contexts in buildings 11, 12, and 13. Many "Herodian" lamp nozzles turned up in a single courtyard of building 10.<sup>31</sup> All of these buildings were originally constructed as palaces by Herod, but the Sicarii later

adapted them to serve as residences. The Sicarii took up household in them, adding new walls, blocking off doorways, and adding others. Within these reformulated spaces the Sicarii commonly installed cooking stoves and ovens (tabuns) made of mud, built small silos or bins for storage purposes, and added small niches in the wall to hold lamps or serve as shelves. The lamps from buildings 11, 12, and 13 all seem to date to the period of the Sicarii occupation.

A study of the imported lamps found at Masada yields equally interesting information. Donald Bailey reports that 64 imported lamps and fragments thereof have been found at Masada, all mold-made.<sup>32</sup> His tally included 31 apparently made in Italy, 6 in Asia Minor, 2 in the Phoenician part of the province of Syria, 14 of Nabatean origin, and 11 from unknown sources.

Significantly, the majority of imported lamps (52) date to the period when the First Roman Garrison occupied Masada (A.D. 6–66) and were likely imported for use by them.<sup>33</sup> The ones recovered at the site proper may have been found by the Sicarii and discarded.<sup>34</sup> An imported lamp found in Roman camp F (at the base of the mesa) undoubtedly belonged to a Roman soldier who participated in the siege (see fig. 5f).<sup>35</sup> Four others may have been brought to the site for use by the Second Roman Garrison (A.D. 74—circa 115).<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes archaeology is just vague enough to at once tantalize and nag the mind. Of intriguing note, for example, are the large groups of “Herodian” lamp nozzles found in *loci* 1047 and 1054.<sup>37</sup> Both of these *loci* are near the synagogue. How did they come to be there? One’s imagination can be richly employed in attempts to explain the phenomenon—did evening activities in the vicinity of the synagogue consume lamps at an unusual rate? Did the men of the synagogue commonly “burn the midnight oil,” as it were, immersed in their sacred texts? Were lamps used in the reading of texts particularly susceptible to defilement, or did the lamps need to be replaced more frequently to maintain the ritual purity of holy tasks? Were the lamps deliberately destroyed to keep them from falling into unholy hands? Or did they fall into “unholy” hands and meet their demise during or after the siege? A wholly mundane explanation may apply: were these *loci* garbage heaps?

The fact is, any speculation is simply that, as closer inspection reveals. *Locus* 1047 was a kind of corridor contingent with (but not communicating with) the north wall of the synagogue. The passage originally gave access to two long, partially subterranean rooms in the casemate wall (*loci* 1045 and 1046). These latter were back-filled during renovations prior to the Sicarii occupation. During the time when the Sicarii used the area, a pool was added, and the doorway leading to one of the casement rooms was equipped with a lamp niche. Unfortunately, the excavators could not distinguish between the finds from the early and later stages of renovations. The lamp fragments may have been part of the backfill.

*Locus* 1054 was not a room at all but an open area to the immediate south of the synagogue. The Sicarii had constructed a niche in the synagogue's south wall at this point. Many whole vessels were found here as well as a hoard of about one hundred coins. The excavators concluded that the area had served as a dump.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Maidens' Lamps**

What would the lamps carried by the five wise maidens in Matthew's story have looked like? Were they beautiful or ordinary? How would they have compared to lamps used by other people in the Holy Land? Were similar lamps used at Masada? Did pagans, Christians, and Jews use the same kinds of lamps?

To answer these questions, one must define a time frame for the lifetime of the maidens who, clearly, would not have been able to choose from hundreds of years of lamp varieties. The real question is, What did Jesus have in mind? It is his story, after all.

Jesus undoubtedly had a certain oil lamp in mind when he related his parable. The lamps must have been types he was familiar with. Therefore, the reader must establish the religious preferences, personalities, and economic status of the maidens or, more accurately, these traits as assigned to the young women by Jesus. Perhaps his maidens had an eye for luxury—was he thinking of an especially unusual variety on sale in the market, a Roman discus lamp or copy thereof? Or were the lamps a more humble, mundane kind, such as the plain and less expensive "Herodian" type? Perhaps Jesus observed the lamps in use by others and used the same kind himself.

Finally, consider the purely practical matters. If you were involved in a midnight ritual in Jesus' time, what style of lamp would best have suited your needs as you sat or walked long hours in the sidelines of such an event?

For the most part, in antiquity lamps were so common a household item as to be taken for granted. Because the lives of everyday folk in antiquity were not normally the stuff of novelists and historians, theirs are the ones most difficult to reconstruct. Putting lamps in the hands of the five wise maidens two thousand years after the fact is not unlike the challenge Masada's excavators faced when first they tackled the jigsaw: it tantalizes and nags.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Compare Varda Sussman, "Lighting the Way through History: The Evolution of Ancient Oil Lamps," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11, no. 2 (1985): 48, who writes that the chore of keeping the lamps burning through the night was consigned to women. She cites Proverbs 31:18, "Her lamp does not go out at night."

<sup>2</sup>Mentions of lamps associated with a golden candelabra that the Lord ordered made for use on an altar are in Exodus 25:31, 37; 30:7-8; 35:14; 37:23; 39:37; 40:4, 25; Leviticus 24:2, 4; Numbers 4:9; 8:2-4; and 1 Kings 7:49. In a few instances the eyes or mouths of supernatural beings or creatures are likened to the light of burning lamps: Daniel 10:6; Ezekiel 1:13; and Job 41:19. Other symbolic uses of the word *lamp* are found in 2 Samuel 22:29; Psalms 119:105; Proverbs 6:23; 13:9; and 20:20.

<sup>3</sup>The full parable is related in Matthew 25:1-13. The ritual alluded to by Jesus may have consisted of escorting the bride and bridegroom to the nuptial chamber, where the virgins perhaps left their lamps as a blessing of light. Compare also the lights used by Gideon's army in Judges 7:16, 20, to fool the enemy at night, but these may have been torches rather than clay lamps. Other references to oil lamps are Genesis 15:17; 15:20; 1 Samuel 3:3; 1 Kings 15:4; Job 12:5; Isaiah 62:1; and Revelation 8:10.

<sup>4</sup>In this task, I am preceded by scholars far more authoritative than myself on the subject and their years of study and work form the foundation of my humble summary. In particular, I relied throughout this article on chapter 7, "Palestinian Lamps," in Renate Rosenthal and Renee Sivan, *Ancient Lamps in the Schloessinger Collection*, vol. 8 of *Qedem, Monographs of the Institute of*

*Archaeology* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978), 75–139. Sussman, “Lighting the Way,” 42–56, provides a good general article written for the lay person. For more technical details, I relied on the section on lamps from Masada written by Dan Barag and others, “Lamps,” in *Masada IV: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Reports*, ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Specialists disagree on whether or not these Late Hellenistic pinched or folded lamps could continue the saucer lamp tradition after a 150–200-year gap in production. They have been referred to both as “revivals” and “survivals” of the earlier saucer lamps. See Barag and others, “Lamps,” 12 n. 6.

<sup>6</sup>This is type A, no. 1, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 11–13.

<sup>7</sup>Barag and others, “Lamps,” 11.

<sup>8</sup>The Roman lamps discussed in this article are standard types in the publications of lamp specialists. To get started, the reader may consult Rosenthal and Sivan, *Ancient Lamps*; O. Broneer, *Corinth*, 4, part 2, *Terracotta Lamps* (Cambridge, 1930); O. Broneer, *Isthmia*, 3, *Terracotta Lamps* (Princeton, 1977); D. M. Bailey, *Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London, 1975–83); or John W. Hayes, *Ancient Lamps in the Royal Ontario Museum*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>These are nos. 153 and 155, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 82–83, plate 4, both of which have been heavily restored and are in *The Story of Masada* exhibition.

<sup>10</sup>This is interesting, given the fact that Jerusalem lay in ruins after A.D. 70. Apparently, Jerusalem clays continued to be harvested even though the population had been decimated. See Barag and others, “Lamps,” 77–78, where the authors also report the results of NAA on Judean molded lamps from Masada, Aroer, and the Cave of Horror.

<sup>11</sup>This is type B I, cat. no. 2, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 13–14.

<sup>12</sup>These are type B II, cat. nos. 3–14, and type B III, cat. nos. 15–20, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 19–24.

<sup>13</sup>These are type B IV, cat. nos. 21–25, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 24.

<sup>14</sup>Compare type F, discussed in Barag and others, “Lamps,” 77–78; and Rosenthal and Sivan, *Ancient Lamps*, 82–85, nos. 335–44, which are referred to as “Southern” lamps. On the defacement of lamps by zealous Jews, see, among others, Varda Sussman, “Early Jewish Iconoclasm on Pottery Lamps,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 23, no. 1 (1973): 46–47.

<sup>15</sup>Sussman, “Lighting the Way,” 54.

<sup>16</sup>Sussman, “Lighting the Way,” 54–55, where she also notes that some of the stricter Jews would disfigure molds bearing representations of doves and fish so that the impressions lifted from them would not violate the prohibition against image making.

<sup>17</sup>Compare Barag and others, “Lamps,” 75; Rosenthal and Sivan, *Ancient Lamps*, 83, no. 337, who note the existence of exceptions; and A. Levy, “An Observation on the Direction of Decorations in Palestinian Oil Lamps,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 23, no. 1 (1973): 48–49.

<sup>18</sup>Figs. 7a–c are distinct exceptions.

<sup>19</sup>Joseph Naveh, "Lamp Inscriptions and Inverted Writing," *Israel Exploration Journal* 38, nos. 1-2 (1988): 36-43.

<sup>20</sup>About one-fifth of these lamps have been catalogued in the fourth volume of the recently published excavation reports (see above, note 4). This section of my article relies heavily upon the chapters written by Dan Barag and others.

<sup>21</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 53; Rosenthal and Sivan, *Ancient Lamps*, 12.

<sup>22</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 54.

<sup>23</sup>These are type C VIII and type C IX, discussed in Barag and others, "Lamps," 54-55.

<sup>24</sup>These are types D I-VI, discussed in Barag and others, "Lamps," 59-66.

<sup>25</sup>Barag and others discuss the dating in "Lamps," 67-69.

<sup>26</sup>As pointed out by Barag and others, "Lamps," 64, who cite the following in their notes 63-64: Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 32b (London: Soncino, 1938, III, 144); and Michael Zohary, *Flora Palestina* II (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1972), 371, plate 542.

<sup>27</sup>As pointed out by Barag and others, "Lamps," 64, who cite the following in their note 65: Michael Zohary, *Flora Palestina* I (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1966), 33, plate 32.

<sup>28</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 70-71.

<sup>29</sup>For discussions on the architectural sequences and description of *loci* at Masada, see Ehud Netzer, "The Buildings: Stratigraphy and Architecture," in *Masada III: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965, Final Reports*, ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991).

<sup>30</sup>An example of these exceptions is *locus* 1092, located in the central unit of the storeroom complex, in which a lamp and two pottery vessels were discovered sitting on an area of back-fill: see Netzer, *Buildings*, 70.

<sup>31</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 43; Netzer, *Buildings*, 311, *locus* 503.

<sup>32</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 79-99. Some of these are local copies of imported lamps.

<sup>33</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 79-99, nos. 138-59, 161-68, 172, 174-90, 195-98.

<sup>34</sup>See Barag and others, "Lamps," 79: "It is possible that all this [imported] material was dumped during the Zealots' occupation of the site." Donald M. Bailey's section of chapter 2 points out that there is nothing about the imported lamps that forces an exclusive date in the Sicarii period (A.D. 66-74).

<sup>35</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 98.

<sup>36</sup>Barag and others, "Lamps," 86-87, 92-93, nos. 173, 199-201.

<sup>37</sup>Netzer, *Buildings*, 399-401, 413.

<sup>38</sup>Netzer, *Buildings*, 413.