



Oil lamp with raised geometric pattern

Date

6th-8th century

Medium

Terracotta

Description

Isaac Hollister Hall, Class of 1859, tutored at Hamilton College for four years following his graduation and before attending law school at Columbia University. Although he practiced law in New York City for a decade, he maintained a fascination with Near Eastern antiquity. From 1875 to 1877, he taught at the Syrian Protestant College (now American University of Beirut), where he

produced significant scholarship on Syriac manuscripts and Cypriot inscriptions. It was during this period that Hall formed the collection of sixty-six ancient objects later given to Hamilton, which includes numerous glass vessels, ceramics, and oil lamps. Integral to Hall's acquisition of these objects was his relationship with Luigi Palma di Cesnola, an Italian immigrant of noble birth who served as a Union general during the American Civil War. It is unclear how Hall met Cesnola, the US consul to Cyprus from 1865 to 1877, who, in addition to his political post, was also an archaeologist and conducted excavations in the area around Larnaca during his consulship. It is likely that Cesnola reached out to Hall to assist in identifying specific objects and translating Cypriot inscriptions. Letters now in the Hamilton College Archives show that, by 1876, the two men were in epistolary communication; in that year, Hall accompanied Cesnola on a visit to a number of sites in northern Cyprus. The collection includes objects that span the island's diverse history. Because of its strategic position in the Mediterranean along important shipping routes, Cyprus was influenced and occupied throughout antiquity by numerous cultures, including the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, and Byzantines... In 1872, Cesnola sold to the incipient Metropolitan Museum of Art a large collection of Cypriot antiquities excavated between 1866 and 1872 and ultimately became very involved in running the museum, serving as its first director, from 1879 until 1904. Hall continued to assist Cesnola in translating Cypriot inscriptions, especially after his own appointment as curator of the Metropolitan's Department of Sculpture and Casts in 1885, where he remained until his death in 1896. "I know you will do the work 'con amore,'" Cesnola wrote to him in 1883, "having been connected already with the Cypriote antiquities." (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) A large portion of the Isaac Hollister Hall Collection of Cypriot antiquities at the Wellin consists of oil lamps, which were used as light sources. In antiquity, olive oil was commonly used as fuel and was poured through the central hole of the lamp, while a flax wick was threaded through the nozzle and lit. Oil lamps were used in many public and domestic spaces including houses, temples, taverns, and tombs. While most of the oil lamps in the Wellin's collection share common characteristics such as a round shape, central pouring hole, and a nozzle, each of the oil lamps feature unique styles as they were produced in different periods. For instance, many Greek oil lamps are simplistically rendered with large pouring holes, Roman oil lamps can be very circular in shape with animal and human motifs, and Byzantine era lamps are commonly pear-shaped with short handles. This particular oil lamp was produced during the Byzantine era, likely sometime between the 6th and 8th centuries A.D. It has a typical pear-shaped body and features an ornate raised geometric pattern of diamonds and circles. After the Roman Empire split into eastern and western halves in 330 A.D., the eastern half flourished economically and came to be known as the Byzantine Empire. The western half of the empire fell in 476 A.D., but the Byzantine Empire extended for another thousand years until it fell in 1453 to the Ottomans. As a province in the eastern part of the Roman empire, Cyprus came under Byzantine rule and adopted many mainland cultural practices, most notably Christianity, and artistic styles, as seen in the shape and motif of this oil lamp, which resembles numerous other ones excavated throughout the Byzantine Empire (SOURCE: Ianna Recco '16, "Unpacking the Past: Object Highlight: Byzantine oil lamp," Wellinformed blog (Spring 2016), <https://www.hamilton.edu/wellin/wellinformed/unpacking-the-past-object-highlight-1>).

Dimensions

Overall: 3 1/2 in. x 2 3/4 in. x 1 in. (8.9 x 7 x 2.5 cm) Spout: 3/8 in. (1 cm) Other (Center Opening): 11/16 in. (1.8 cm)
Base: 2 1/2 x 1 13/16 in. (6.4 x 4.6 cm)