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# ROMAN CLAY LANTERN FROM BIJAN ISLAND (IRAQ)

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**Abstract:** Lanterns are not as commonly represented in published collections of finds from archaeological contexts as could be expected compared to regular oil lamps. These sherds of wheelmade pottery from Polish excavations on Bijan Island on the Euphrates were only recently identified as a lantern in the shape of a kind of naiskos with a zoomorphic figurine above the opening. The article discusses the function of such lanterns, mundane objects providing light in the darkness, but at the same time exemplifying the apotropaic character of the flame in domestic shrine contexts.

**Keywords:** Bijan, Iraq, Roman, lantern, zoomorphic, lamp, Isis/Serapis

Lanterns in general, whether of clay or metal, are believed to be a common find in Roman assemblages and are often treated, at least the ones made of clay, as a collective category. However, unless they are well preserved or unique in some way, they are seldom published. Indeed, many lanterns are actually not recognized among the masses of potsherds originating from excavations on Hellenistic and Roman sites. Consequently, there is little material to use as comparanda, raising questions about the uniqueness of finds that escape the general mold.

The clay lantern discovered during Polish excavations on the island of Bijan in Iraq in 1983 shared this fate and would have probably been 'lost' among the pottery were it not for a zoomorphic figurine of a clay, initially mistaken for an equid, that was attached to one of the two discovered fragments. The lack of evident parallels long stood in the way of its publication. It was presented by the authors at the 2009 congress of the International Lychnological Association in Heidelberg.

## THE LANTERN

The fragments belong to a cylindrical vessel (Reg. no. 4120+4121). One piece comprises a section of the side wall with part of the bottom; two large openings

were pierced in the wall and there was an element of plastic decoration framing one of them. The other fragment consists of the shoulders of the vessel with the animal

figurine attached to it. The two fragments join to give a nearly full profile of the vessel [Fig. 1A, B]. The top of the lantern is missing. The bottom diameter is 11.2 cm, the preserved height is 10.8 cm.

The clay is brown in color with a brick-orange shade, coarse, with sand and mica mixed into the matrix, the surface is grayish-brown. The lantern was wheel-turned following regular pottery manufacturing

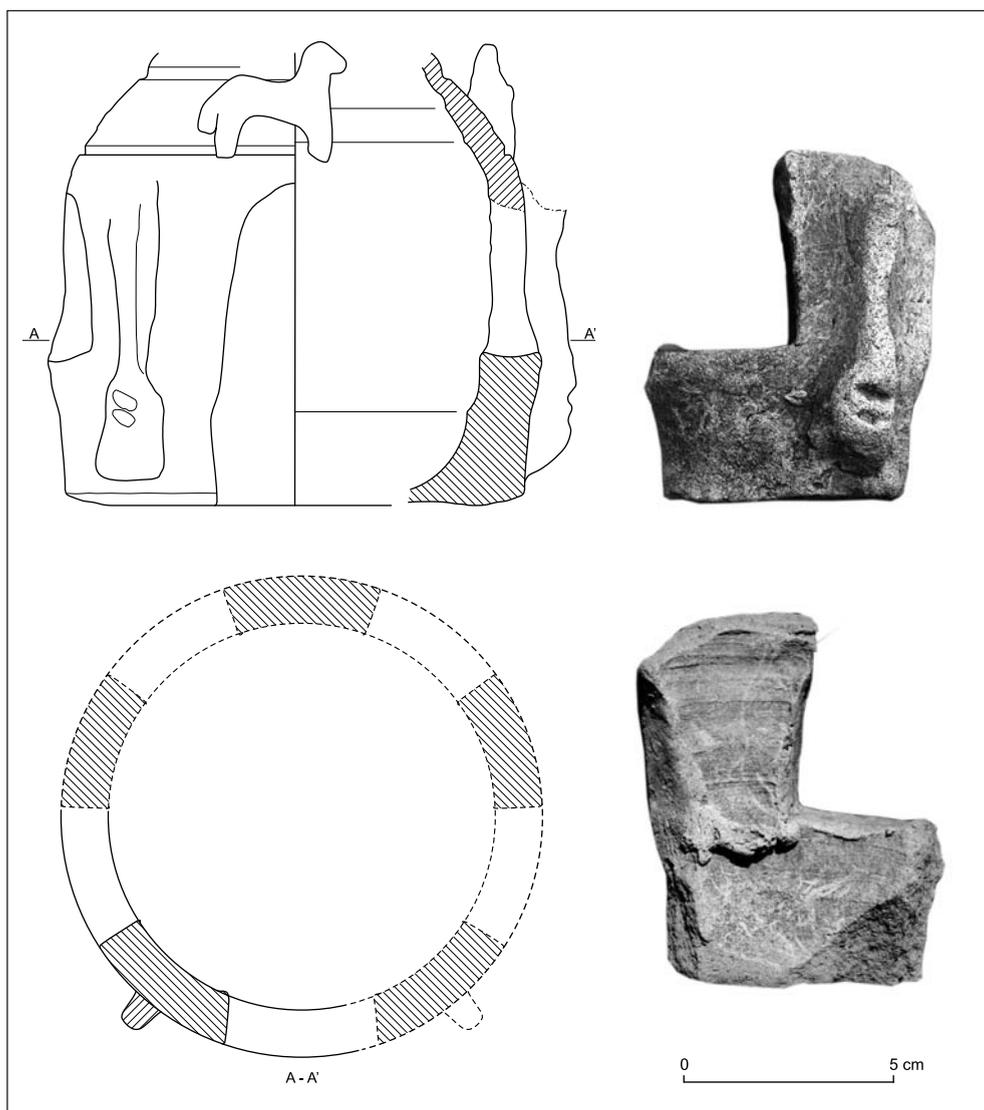


Fig. 1A. Roman clay lantern fragments, sections and views  
(Drawing F.M. Stępniewski; digitizing M. Momot; photos A. Reiche)

standards. The openings were cut in the wall of the vessel with little finesse before firing and the figurine and the plastic decoration applied to the wall was modeled by hand.

The resulting form is a cylinder with a side wall thickening toward the bottom

and rounding off inside to a thin floor. Since the bottom is mostly broken off, it cannot be said whether it was full or not, but there is a good chance that it may have been left open. At the top, a shallow groove in the outside surface marks the point where the shoulders start sloping. Another similar groove 1.6 cm higher up was made to set off the top of the lantern, which is missing. A clumsily formed figurine of a tailed quadruped, possibly a sheep, was attached above the lower of these two grooves, sideways and facing to the right. It stands above the arched top of an opening cut into the side of the vessel. This opening reaches all the way down to the base of the vessel. At a distance of 3.5 cm to the left from the left-hand side of this opening, the wall of the vessel was perforated with another hole, this time starting 3.5 cm above the base. The bottom and right-hand side of this perforation is

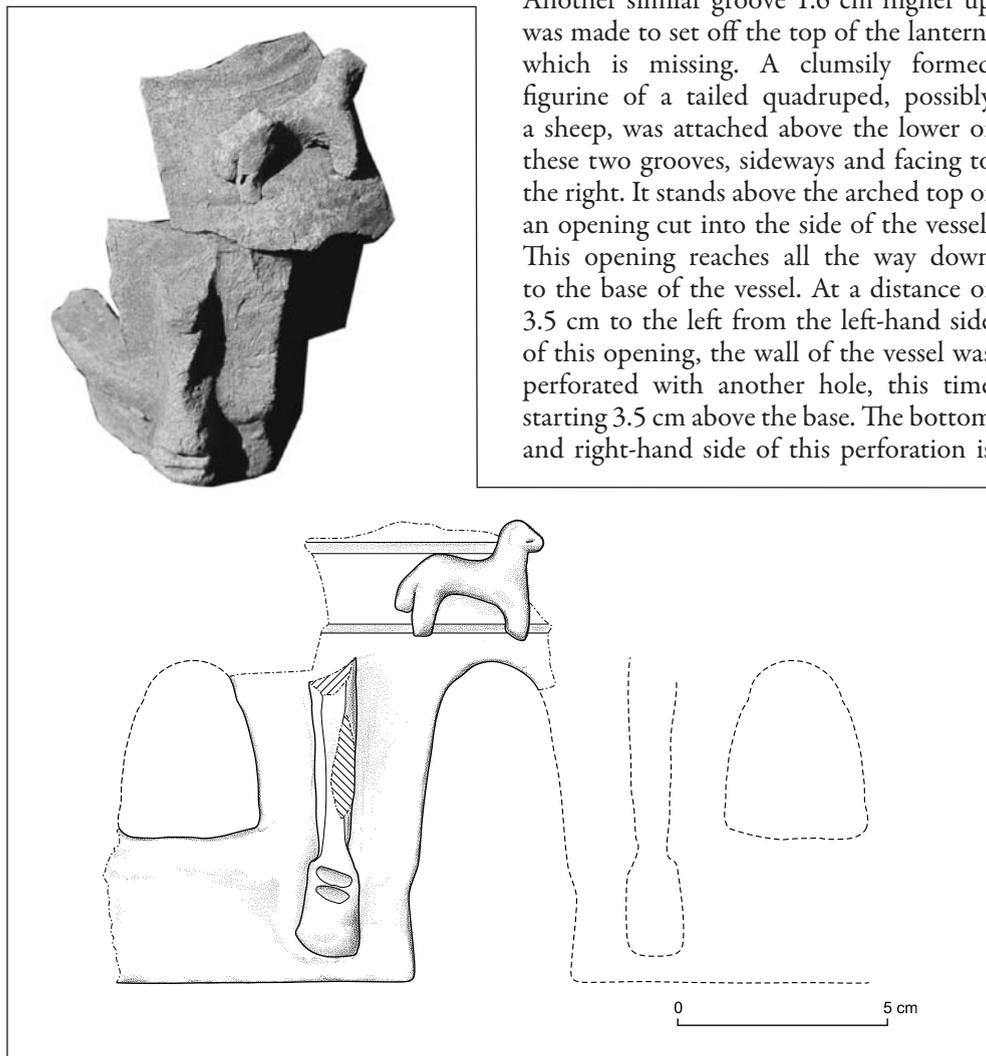


Fig. 1B. Roman clay lantern fragment with zoomorphic figurine; extended reconstruction (Drawing F.M. Stepiński; digitizing M. Momot; photos A. Reiche)

smooth, leaving no doubt as to a roughly triangular overall shape, but the excess clay from the piercing and cutting operation was left inside untrimmed. In the space between these two openings and evidently intended as a framing element for the bigger of the two openings, a plastic vertical element was added in the form of a thick roll of clay which was modeled, again clumsily, into a rudimentary column or pillar. At the bottom of this feature there is a broadening blob with two short horizontal indentations that give the overall impression of a column base. No effort seems to have been made, however,

to smoothen the shaft and the top of this feature is broken unfortunately. Nonetheless, in reconstructing the form of the lantern, we have felt justified in recreating a mirror element on the other side of the opening under the animal figurine and putting another opening symmetrically on the other side. The two openings set symmetrically in the back of the vessel are pure imagination and are rather less likely. It would be well to keep in mind that the reconstruction as presented here is based on an estimated 20% of the circumference, fortuitously preserving most of the important elements.

## THE CONTEXT

The Roman attribution of the lantern is beyond question. It was found in a layer dated by coins, lamps and pottery to the beginning of the 3rd century AD, probably before AD 240 (Krogulska 1992). The amassed evidence has been interpreted as confirming the presence of a Roman garrison which would have been stationed on Bijan Island at a time when the Severans were building up the Roman military presence on the Middle Euphrates. Situated about 12 km south of Ana (where there was a Roman legionary camp), Bijan was the southernmost Roman military post in Mesopotamia (*Bijan Island* 1983). It may have been garrisoned by the same cohorts XX of Palmyrenians stationed in Dura, who also retained a force in nearby Kifrin lying below Ana on the left bank of the river. The small island outpost was evacuated or abandoned to the Sassanians in the 230s–240s (Invernizzi 1986; Lippolis 2006).

The Romans took over the island from the Parthians who had occupied a mound

of ruins long abandoned by the Assyrians, the first inhabitants and the builders of the original fort (in the first half of the first millennium BC). They made rational and expedient use of the standing architecture, rebuilding the old Assyrian circuit wall on the southern side of the island where there was a sandy stretch for docking boats [*Fig. 2*, top]. The area inside the walls was organized into a public area, barracks for the troops and stores. The gate complex in the wall on the southern side included a paved passage and a complex of rooms opening off this passage to the west [*Fig. 2*, bottom]. Just inside the gate, to the left, there was a small room with a bitumen floor, next to which there was a small rectangular unit lined with benches of a kind along the long walls. It was used apparently for storing various goods, and it was definitely not cleared when the troops abandoned the island.

The second layer from this unit, which yielded the lantern fragments and which corresponded to the abandonment of the

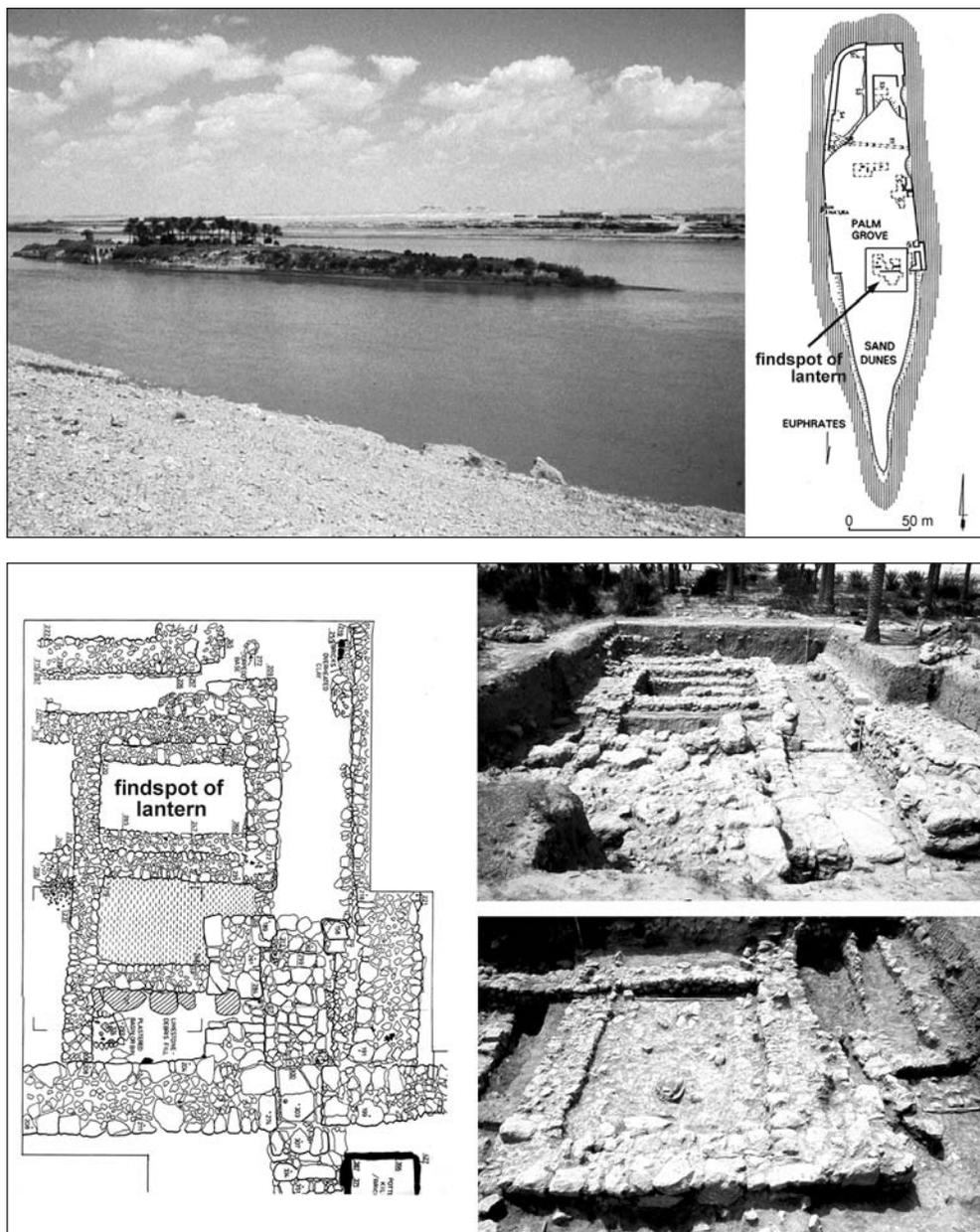


Fig. 2. Bijan Island on the Euphrates: top, plan and general view from the western bank downriver; bottom left, plan of the gate in the fortifications with adjoining rooms; bottom right, general view of the excavation from the south (above) and close-up of the room where the lantern was found (below) (Photos A. Reiche; plans M. Barański; digitizing M. Puzkarski)

outpost, also contained Roman brittle ware pottery, torpedo jars, Roman coins, which represented solely silver issues from North Syrian mints produced to cover soldiers' pay (identified by Aleksandra Krzyżanowska), and seven terracotta oil lamps (for a detailed discussion of the Roman lamps from Bijan, see Krogulska 1987). The assemblage includes one Syrian imitation of Roman figural lamps, made in Syrian workshops from second and third generation molds. Lamps of this kind are known from many sites in Syria. Ours bears a very blurred impression of two

busts, presumably Isis and Serapis (see also *addendum* below). Another is a derivative from 1st century AD Roman Bildlampen, but with appliqué and molded decoration. Lamps of the Euphrates type, four examples, circular, handleless, plain or with geometric decoration (Baur 1947: 26–27, type V), are also present in this set; at Dura Europos they have been dated to the first half or the middle of the 3rd century BC. Finally, there is a local wheel-made lamp in the Mesopotamian tradition deriving from Parthian lamps (Baur 1947: 58–64).

## DISCUSSION

The lantern found on Bijan Island is not the typical cylindrical perforated kind with ring handle [*Fig. 3*, top and center rows] that “a number of” has been found, for example, in the excavations at Dura Europos (four examples catalogued, in two cases only ring handles, Dyson 1968: 35, nos 193–195 and 196, *Fig. 8* and *Pl. III*, also note 1 on page 35 mentioning a nearly intact example), although it does resemble it in general shape. Indeed, wheel-made lanterns with perforations in the bodies and tops appear to be fairly widely distributed chronologically and geographically, even if apparently not as frequent in the archaeological record from excavations as is commonly assumed. These vessels are made of

generally good quality clay, in the case of the Dura Europos examples resembling brittle ware. The loop handles are a fair indication of their function as lanterns that would have been carried most likely in the hand, evidently for the utilitarian purpose of lighting the ground in front of the user. They are commonly not decorated in any other way.

Lanterns with a flat button instead of a handle (e.g., Bailey 1988: Q 1997, *Pl. 40*; *Fig. 3*, top left) must have been intended for more or less stationary use. Those with just a small pierced hole through the top would have been carried on a stick of some kind or may have been intended to be affixed to a wall or other support with a long nail, for

*Fig. 3. Examples of lanterns from the Hellenistic and Roman periods: top row, from left: Hawara, 1st–2nd century AD; Cyprus, Hellenistic; Fayum, 1st century BC; center row, from left: Naqlun (Nd.90.070), mid 7th century AD; Dura Europos, first half of 3rd century AD; Salamis in Cyprus, Late Hellenistic/Early Roman; bottom row, from left: Egypt, 2nd–1st century BC; Egypt, 1st century BC(?); Fayum, 1st century BC/1st century AD (After Bailey 1988: Q1997, Q496bis, Q2357, except Bailey 1965 [top right]; Hayes 1980 [center right and bottom right]; courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum (bottom left and center); PCMA mission archives center left)*



instance. Considering that these examples nearly always represent some elaborate decorative form, lanterns of this sort were quite probably more than just utilitarian lighting devices.

To serve its purpose a lantern, regardless of whether it was cylindrical, conical or trapezoidal in shape, needed to be furnished with a bigger opening on one side, usually at the back, to permit the source of light, a miniature lamp as in the so-called “house lamps” [Fig. 3, bottom right] (see, e.g., Bailey 1988: Q 1997, Pl. 40; Hayes 1980: Pls 63, 68) or a candle, to be placed inside it.

The small round or triangular perforations, which can appear either indiscriminately all over the body or in ornamental patterns of a few together at specific points on the body and shoulders, were a common enough feature (although

the example from early Roman Hawara shows that the perforations could be done without, see Fig. 3, top left). They allowed the light to stream through, but one should consider the decorativeness of this arrangement versus its functionality. The Romans were already producing bronze lanterns with the sides made of translucent materials to provide good lighting and in any case, a whole range of torches of different materials and with different fuel strategies were available where good lighting was needed. On the other hand, we should remember that movement in the dark was fairly restricted, even until very recently, being more desired in the big cities than in the sort of small communities that the Bijan garrison undoubtedly represented.

While we should refrain from reading too much into objects that were of everyday utility, one cannot but notice the

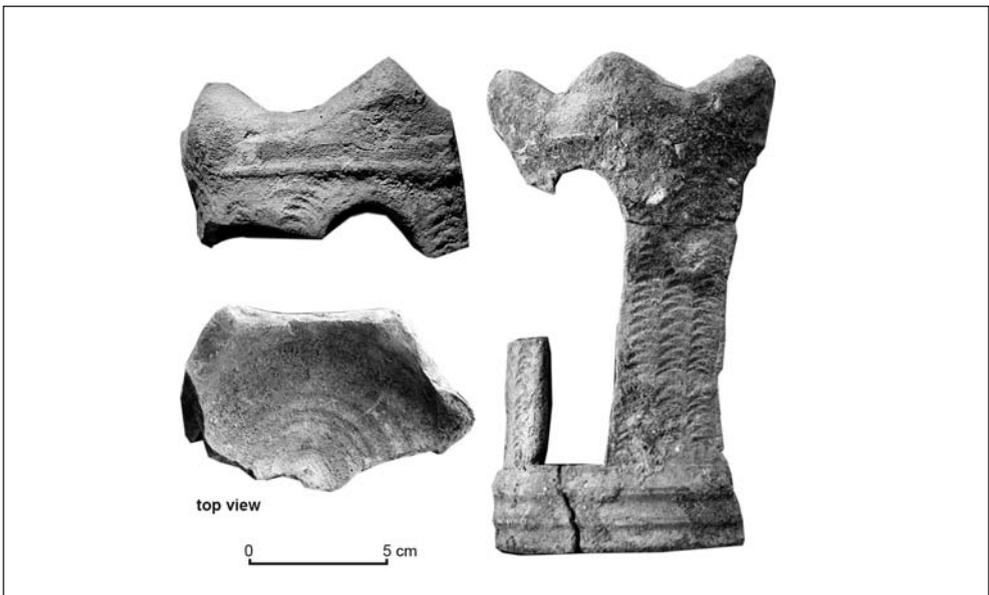


Fig. 4. Terracotta lantern/incense burner from Palmyra  
(Photo W. Jerke; PCMA mission archives)

difference between the “ordinary” lanterns and those that were decorated with certain iconographic topoi in mind. Carrying such lanterns would have been more ritual and religious/symbolic than functional — offering light to the gods rather than lighting up the way. Again, the variety of lantern finds from Egypt, taking on the shape of small naoi or monopteros temples with sculptured figures or busts of deities like Athena-Neith or Dionysos, or heads of Harpocrates, busts of a Greek-type figure, theater masks or animal figures (see Bailey 1965; 1988; Hayes 1980; Dunand 1976; Szymańska, Babraj 2000: Cat. 76, 100), suggests that they were intended for use at the various religious festivals involving the presence of light. Herodotus (II,62) described a festival involving the burning of lamps (*lychnokaie*) at the sanctuary of Athena-Neith in Saïs, which in his time took place in the late autumn (Dunand 1976) and light was also present in the context of burial practices (Szymańska, Babraj 2000: No. 87 on page 151; see also Török 1995: 175ff.). Primarily, however, lanterns of this kind would have been used in domestic space, as lamps and incense burners in domestic shrines, hence the form of small temples and the iconographic repertoire encompassing images of diverse gods — this was the domestication of cults by miniaturization, as David Frankfurter so rightly put it (Frankfurter 1998: 134ff. and especially 137; see also the section on cult in Christopoulos *et alii* 2010: 237ff.).

A “lantern”/incense burner, which would have filled this role well, is represented by this terracotta piece from Polish excavations in Palmyra [Fig. 4]. It has the open chamber inside for a miniature lamp or candle and a small bowl-like depression in the top, perhaps for liquid incense,

which the minimal heat of the flame inside would have spread. The flickering light coming through the opening would have exemplified the apotropaic character of the flame in such a domestic religious context.

The same could be said of our Bijan lantern, which can be dated by the context to the first half of the 3rd century AD. In the case of the Bijan example, the handle is missing, but a ring handle should rather be presumed. Consequently it was rather not an incense burner. Its findspot, by the gate entrance to the island garrison, corresponds to its use for purely practical purposes, lighting the way for night arrivals.

On the other hand, the coroplastic addition above the opening in the wall would suggest that the lantern was made with a ritual function in mind. It may have been stored away in the room by the gate for this reason, being used perhaps to provide minimal lighting inside the gatehouse, while assuring the favor of whichever deity it was dedicated to. The terracotta animal figure falls well within the Mesopotamian coroplastic tradition and it might have been a symbol of a local deity. The difficulties with its identification as a sheep are due more to our overall visual unfamiliarity with these animals on a daily basis. Nonetheless, despite its rough form, the species is recognizable.

The local character of the object is corroborated by the fabric and manner of execution. It was found in the context of a Roman military outpost, where only all garrison could be expected. This could lead us to assume that the deity involved would have been one filling the spiritual needs of soldiers manning the station. Equally well, the lantern could have been a mundane object perceived primarily in its utilitarian, rather than ritual function.

## ADDENDUM

One of the lamps found in unit B, layer II, together with the fragments of the lantern discussed in this article, was published originally with a tentative identification of the discus decoration as busts of Baalshamin and Allat (Krogulska 1987: 94–95, Fig. C and 30) [Fig. 5].

Upon reconsideration, it should rather be interpreted as a lamp from Tarsus, Goldman's group XVI, characterized by a round nozzle without volutes, plain narrow shoulders, occasionally with side lugs (Goldman 1950: 35, 95, 114–116, 132, No. 448, Fig. 13). The relief decoration on the discus in these lamps is blurred as a rule and lacks clear-cut lines and precision. The motifs are of a universal nature, but there seems to be a particular interest in guardian divinities, especially in the 2nd and early 3rd century AD (see Oziol 1977: 192–193, Nos 566–569; Bailey 1965: 72, No. 254, 1956–1901 BGM, Pl. XI). According to

D.M. Bailey, lamps of this type (group XVI A, corresponding to Loeschke type VIII) were imported from Tarsus to Cyprus, Egypt and the Levantine coast; they were imitated in Egypt and Jerash (Bailey 1988: 320, Pl. 72, nos Q 2623–2627).

Despite the form being heavily blurred, the busts, a male one in a *kalathos* on the right and a female one in a high head-dress on the left, can be recognized as representations of Sarapis and Isis. The motif was very popular in the Roman world, reflecting a strong Roman interest in Egyptian cults which persevered over the ages and which was particularly common among the troops (most recently and comprehensively, Podvin 2011). Thus, the lamp from Bijan, which was evidently carried to Bijan by Roman soldiers, can be added to a growing corpus of lamps with Isiac and related motifs found all over the Roman world.

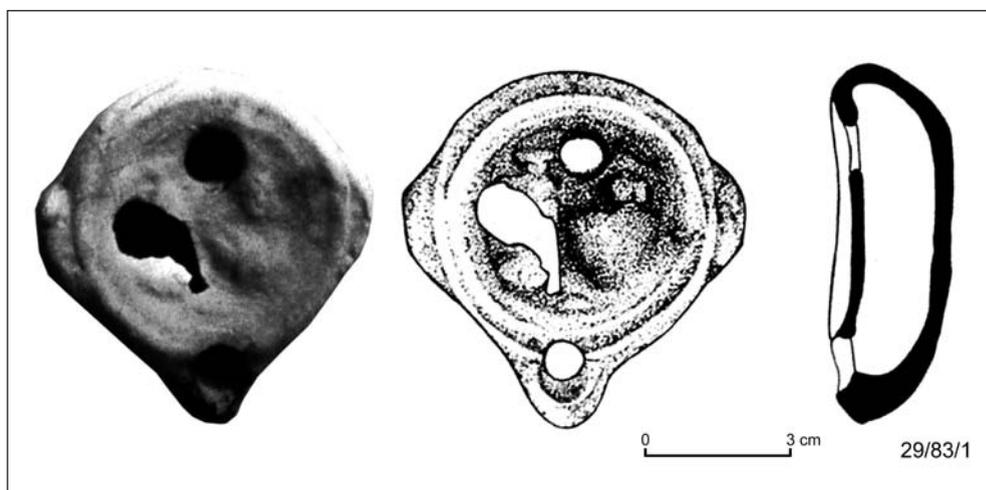


Fig. 5. Lamp from Bijan Island with discus decoration of Isis and Serapis  
(Drawing F.M. Stepiñowski; photo A. Reiche)

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