

FOUR ROMAN LAMPS WITH GLADIATORIAL THEMES FROM KOCAELİ (NORTH-WESTERN TURKEY)

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*Dedicated to the victims of the 1999 Kocaeli earthquake
on its 27th anniversary*

Keywords: Terracotta lamps, gladiatorial themes, iconography, lamp studies, Roman period, Kocaeli, Nicomedia, Bithynia, Turkey, Anatolian archaeology, Roman archaeology

Abstract: Gladiators were a popular subject on Roman lamps in Asia Minor between the early first and late third centuries AD. In the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Kocaeli, in north-western Turkey, four mould-made pictorial lamps are exhibited, depicting gladiator-related scenes and equipment on their concave discus. Two lamps figure gladiatorial duels, i.e., two gladiators engaged in combat; one is decorated with a frieze of gladiatorial armour and the other displays a gladiator (or a hunter) striding to the right, thrusting forward with a spear and fighting against a bear. Although the provenance of these four pictorial lamps is unknown, they most probably originated from funerary contexts in Roman Bithynia.

Cuvinte-cheie: opaițe de teracotă, gladiatori, iconografie, studii despre opaițe, perioada romană, Kocaeli, Nicomedia, Bitinia, Turcia, arheologie anatoliană, arheologie romană

Rezumat: Gladiatorii au fost un subiect popular pe lămpile romane din Asia Mică între începutul secolului I și sfârșitul secolului al III-lea d.Hr. În colecția Muzeului Arheologic din Kocaeli, din nord-vestul Turciei, sunt expuse patru opaițe realizate în matriță, care înfățișează scene și echipamente legate de gladiatori, dispuse pe discurile lor concave. Două opaițe înfățișează dueluri între gladiatori, adică doi gladiatori angajați în luptă; una este decorată cu o friză cu armuri de gladiatori, iar cealaltă înfățișează un gladiator (sau un vânător) mergând spre dreapta, înaintând cu o sulită și luptând împotriva unui urs. Deși proveniența acestor patru opaițe este necunoscută, cel mai probabil acestea provin din contexte funerare din Bitinia romană.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Roman period gladiatorial scenes appear, e.g., on stone monuments, wall paintings, mosaics and objects of daily use such as metal (especially silverware), ceramic and glass vessels¹. Representations of gladiators and their paraphernalia became a subject on lamps mainly in the Early Roman period and continued on into the Late Antiquity². In Asia Minor numerous groups of combatants, either fighting each other or against animals, also appear frequently on terracotta lamps which are already described

and discussed extensively (for their distribution, cf. Map 1)³. Especially two fighting gladiators, i.e., “gladiatores duo cum scutis” (two gladiators with shields), were a popular decorative theme on Roman lamps overall⁴. As Donald M. Bailey observes, this scene appears with greater frequency on pottery from the Flavian to the Trajan era, which is also the period in which many amphitheatres were built throughout the Empire, evidently in connection with great popular favour for these activities⁵.

Repeated use of gladiatorial themes in the iconographic repertory of the terracotta lamps is seen in numerous sites in Asia Minor (Map 1), especially in its western, north-western and southern parts, which closely copied lamp shapes introduced in other centres in the West

¹ Generally, on the iconography and materiality of Roman gladiators, cf. (in chronological order) Robert 1940; Coulston 1998; Coarelli 2001 (and other papers in Regina 2001); Lopez 2005; Vujović 2011.

² For the studies of lamps with gladiatorial themes, cf. Wollmann 1917; Couissin 1930; Blázquez 1958; Goldstein 1969; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1981; Hellmann 1987; Puya García de Leaniz 1988; Morillo Cerdán 2001; Caron 2003; Williams 2004; Bémont 2005; Dejean 2011; Miączewska 2015; Genot 2020. In Williams 2004, the fragments from Egypt, where there was a famous gladiatorial school in Alexandria, from the Moustaki Collection, were partially Italian imports and partly local copies; these have not studied in Egypt either. For lamps with gladiatorial themes in the British Museum, cf. Bailey 1980, p. 51–55, pl. 75, fig. 1342, pl. 84, fig. 1400; and *idem* 1988, p. 55–58; and from Delos, cf. Broneer 1930, cat. no. 644, pl. 10, fig. 507.

³ A brief, but useful study on Roman lamps with gladiatorial themes in Asia Minor is on the lamps from the slope houses in Ephesus, cf. Ladstätter 2002 published in an exhibition volume dedicated to gladiator related evidence from Ephesus. Also cf. note 6 below.

⁴ Gladiators were sometimes used on lamps as symbols of the uncertainty of life: a burial from Southwark, London contains the remains of a woman with pinecones etc, a gladiator lamp and three depicting Anubis, almost certainly a follower of Isis who is attested epigraphically in Southwark.

⁵ Bailey 1980.