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A Greek Inscribed Early Islamic-Period Oil Lamp from Jerusalem

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A unique mold-made oil lamp dating from the Early Islamic period was found in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was inscribed in Greek on the upper and lower parts of its body, including the shoulder and the base. The lamp is of the Jerash type, produced between the late sixth and mid-eighth centuries CE. The lamp owner was most likely a Greek-speaking Christian—a resident of the city or a visitor from across the Jordan—on pilgrimage or on a commercial or social journey, attesting to a continuous presence of Christian visitors in the Holy City in the Early Islamic period.

Keywords: Jerusalem, Jerash, Christianity, oil lamp, Greek, epigraphy, names

Introduction[2]

Excavations conducted in the Dar el-Consul compound in the Old City of Jerusalem unearthed a unique oil lamp dated to the Early Islamic period.[3] The lamp (L112, B1054) is inscribed in Greek on the upper and lower parts of its body, including the shoulder and base. While the inscription on the upper shoulder is of a well-known formula and inscribed

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[2] We would like to dedicate this article to Father Stanislao Loffreda, OFM, as a mark of appreciation for his pioneer work on Greek inscribed lamps and for his help with the interpretation of this particular lamp. We approached him when we recognized the uniqueness of this lamp. Father Loffreda kindly deciphered the upper inscription and identified the type to which it belonged with reference to his classification (Tipo A 6.4; Loffreda 1989:106–107); his contribution triggered the study presented here.

[3] The excavation (Permit No. A-7976/2017), undertaken on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and funded by the Franciscan Custodia di Terra Santa, was directed by Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah with the assistance of Benyamin Storchan (archaeological supervision), Leah Di Segni (epigraphy), Vadim Essman (survey), Assaf Peretz (field photography), Dov Porotsky (plan drawing), Anna de Vincenz (pottery reading in the field), Josef Bukgenholz (artifact treatment), Carmen Hersch (artifact drawing) and Dafna Gazit (studio photography). For a preliminary report on the finds, see Weksler-Bdolah (2022). We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

in high relief, the inscriptions on the lower body and the base, written in shallow relief, contain an atypical invocation to Christ on behalf of three named men. This is obviously a personalized object, perhaps made by the potter for his own use or at the request of a client. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that such a lamp has been discovered, and its presence in Jerusalem may be of some importance (see below). Examples of similar lamps bearing Greek inscriptions are rarely known elsewhere in the region.

The Archaeological Context

The Dar el-Consul compound is located on 13 ʻAqabat el-Takiyya (Maʻalot Ha-Midrasha) Street, near its junction with Khan el-Zeit (Bet Ha-Bad) Street (Fig. 1). In 1856, the Prussians purchased this large building to serve as a consulate and residence for the consul, hence the building's name, Dar el-Consul (Taweel 2021). In 1882, the property was transferred to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Beginning in 2014, the complex underwent major renovation and restoration works under the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

Khan el-Zeit (Bet Ha-Bad) Street is a major north–south street in the Old City, commonly assumed to preserve the path of the Western Cardo, a colonnaded street from the Roman and Byzantine periods (Weksler-Bdolah 2020:67–69). Indeed, impressive paving stones of

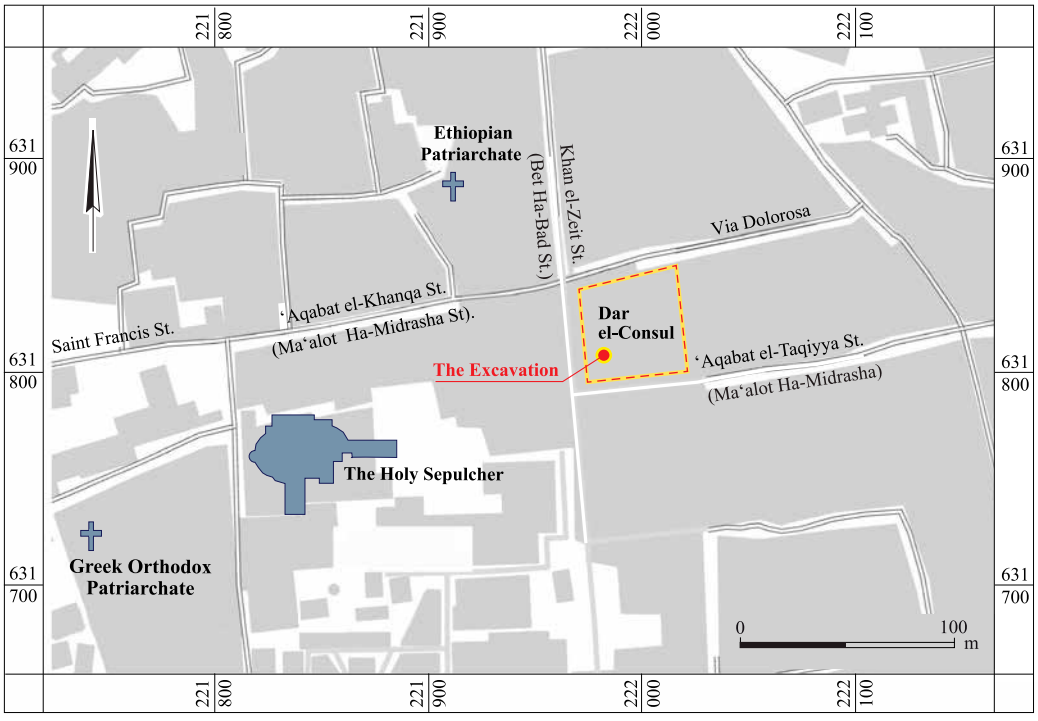

Fig. 1. Location map.

the ancient street and the central drainage channel installed beneath it were documented for 400 m along the present-day street (Johns 1948:94). In recent years, additional segments of stone pavement, possibly parts of porticoes, were discovered on the street's western and eastern sides.[4]

The lamp was found in Area A of the excavation (c. 10 × 10 m; Weksler-Bdolah 2022; Plan 1), immediately east of modern shops built along the adjacent street, and 30–40 m east of the eastern atrium of the Constantinian Basilica/Martyrion (Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Byzantine period; see Corbo 1981–1982: Pl. 3). The excavations exposed the remains of two small rectangular rooms (c. 3 × 5 m) with west-facing entrances. Parts of the walls were hewn into bedrock (up to a height of c. 1 m), subsequently thickened and raised with stone building blocks. The southern of the two rooms (L101) had a smooth rock floor, atop which were a number of flat stones (L101A), perhaps the remains of a floor pavement. The floor of the northern room (L105), and its wall foundations, were hewn in bedrock. A narrow, shallow westward sloping drainage channel, within which the inscribed lamp was found, was hewn into the bedrock floor of Room 105 (L104, L112; width 0.25 m, depth 0.2–0.3 m, length 6 m). The channel begins east of Room 105, where it slopes down to the west and enters the room under its eastern wall; it then curves slightly to the northwest. The channel was covered with flat stone slabs, only a few of which were preserved.

The inscribed lamp (B1054) was found at the bottom of the channel (L112) in Room L105, in an area where the covering stones were not preserved. It is most likely that the lamp reached the site after the channel went out of use. The earth and stone fill that accumulated above the rock floor inside the two rooms contained pottery fragments dated to the late Byzantine and the Early and Late Islamic periods. Rooms 101 and 105 may have been earlier than the channel, or contemporaneous with it. The proximity of the rooms to Aelia Capitolina's Western Cardo, and their resemblance to the shops found on the western side of the Eastern Cardo (see Weksler-Bdolah 2020:51), enabled us to identify them as part of a row of shops on the eastern side of the Western Cardo.

The Oil Lamp

The inscribed lamp (9.5 cm long, 6 cm wide, 3 cm high) is almost complete, apart from most of its handle that is missing. It was made of a well-fired, levigated dark orange fabric and cast in a two-part mold, and its body is almond-shaped with a biconical section. Based on the size of the stump on the rear of the lamp, it is clear that it had a thick upward projecting tongue handle. The handle was made separately and attached to the lamp's body after its

[4] The pavements were revealed in excavations conducted on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority in shops located on both sides of Khan el-Zeit Street, near the Dar el-Consul complex (109 Khan el-Zeit Street, directed by Sivan Mizrahi; 146 Khan el-Zeit Street, directed by Annette Landes-Nagar). We thank the excavators for sharing this information with us.

Plan 1. Area A, plan and section.

casting. The nozzle has a channel outlined by a double rim, further embellished on its sides with a stitch-like pattern made of dots. Traces of black soot on the wick hole and channel indicate that the lamp was used.

The shoulder of the lamp bears a Greek inscription wrapped around the filling hole, the base of the letters written toward the hole. The inscription begins with a cross to the right of the nozzle and ends with a schematically drawn bird just to its left. Some letters seem to have been unintentionally smeared off the lamp's shoulder, when attaching the handle prior to firing; the finger impressions of the potter are clearly seen to the left of the handle. Above the inscription, on the left side of the channel and filling hole, a line of four half-loops adorned the small space at the channel rim.

Also the lamp base and side bear Greek inscriptions. The base of the lamp is flat and outlined with an elongated, pointed teardrop-shaped ring base. Similar to the channel, the ring base of the lamp is also embellished with a stich pattern. Unlike the inscription on the shoulder, the script here is small and disorganized and many of the letters, especially on the side of the body, are illegible; however, the letters that could be deciphered are clearly Greek (see below). The letters on the lamp's body seem to have worn off over time, or were not transferred properly from the mold during production.

The Inscriptions

The Shoulder Inscription (Figs. 2; 3:a, b)

1 ΦΟCXCANAC - -
2 XCΦOC

1 Φῶς Χ(ριστὸ)ς ἀνάσ[τασις]
2 Χ(ριστὸ)ς φῶς

Translation: "Christ (is) light (and) resurrection. Christ (is) light."

Similar phrases are commonly found on candlestick lamps of the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (for lamp typology, see Sussman 2017:104–107, Type B14.2.4; Magness 1993: Oil Lamps Form 3, Variant C, Large Candlestick Lamps and Early Islamic Channel-Nozzle Oil Lamps), sometimes called inscribed lamps (Nitowski 1974).

The Base Inscription (Fig. 3:c)

This inscription comprises four very irregular lines, read from the rounded end of the lamp toward the nozzle:

1 Ḳ - - ICẊE
2 MNAΛΦIOVKẠIAIAIAṆ
3 OYKAIAḄḎEΛA - -
4 . OYVIO. AMNN

1 Κ[ύριε] Ἰ(ησουῦ)ς Χ(ρισ)ὲ
2 μν(ήσθητι) Ἀλφίου καὶ Αἰαν-
3 οῦ καὶ Αβδελα [αὐτ-]
4 οῦ υἱο[ῦ]· ἀμ‹ή›ν

Line 2: cursive *alpha*; cursive *ypsilon* upside down.
Line 4: the second *ypsilon* is cursive; *ny* for *eta*, most likely a botched cursive *eta*.

Translation: "Lord Jesus Christ, remember Alphios and Aianos and Abdela [his] son, amen."

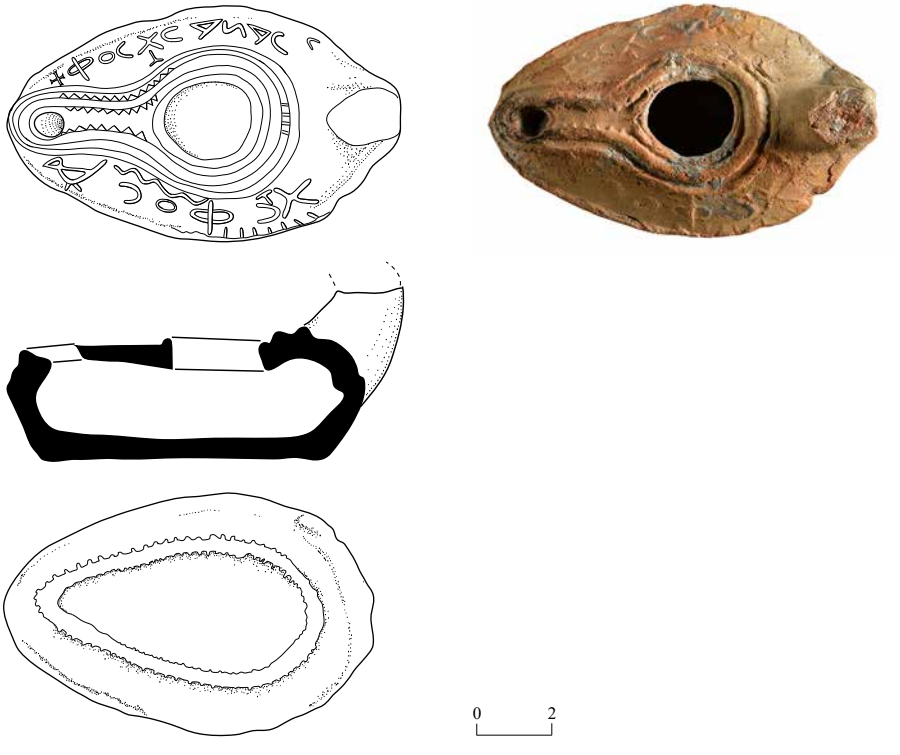

Fig. 2. The inscribed lamp.

The Side Inscription (Fig. 3:d)

The script on the lower body of the lamp could not be deciphered. There appear to be at least two lines of Greek text on one side of the lamp's body.[5] The letters are identical in size to those on the base, suggesting that they were written at the same time. From the few characters that can be identified, it appears that they were written from the rounded end of the lamp toward the nozzle in mirror script; that is, the inscription was incised in the normal way in the mold. The letters ΧΡΙϹ, with retrograde *rho* and *sigma*, can be made out at the end of one line, most likely a reference to Christ. In the next line, the characters ΔΟΥΛ are part of the word δοῦλος, 'servant (of Christ)', frequently found in Christian inscriptions. We can assume, therefore, that as with the inscription on the base, this inscription too was of a personal kind, probably a prayer.

Differences between the Shoulder Inscription and those on the Base and Sides

Several differences are noted between the inscriptions found on the lamp's shoulder and those found on its base and sides. As mentioned above, the shoulder inscription is similar in its content to phrases commonly found on candlestick lamps from the Byzantine period (for the typology of these inscriptions, see Loffreda 1989:106–107, Types A 6.4, A 6.5), a

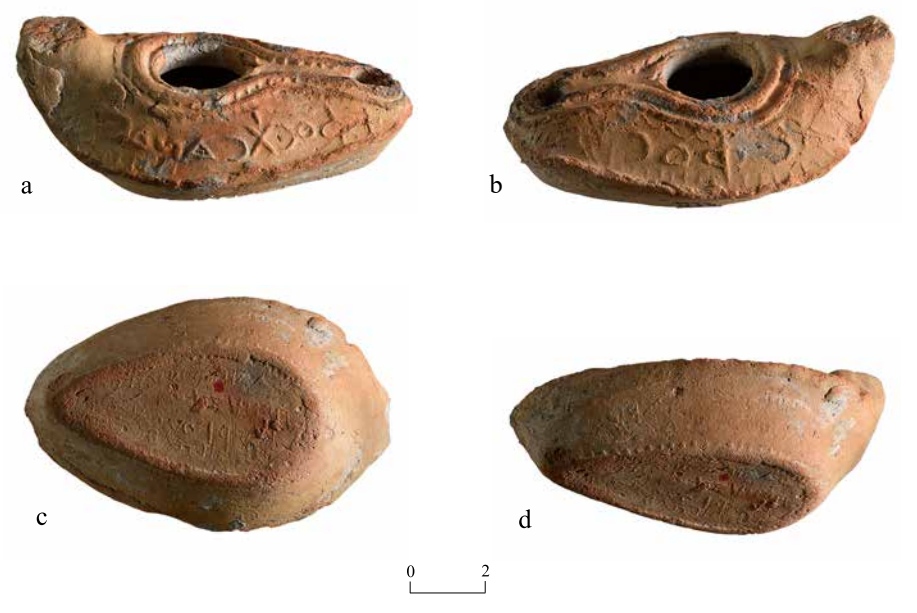

Fig. 3. The inscribed lamp: shoulder, Line 1 (a); shoulder, Line 2 (b); base (c); side (d).

[5] A few worn marks on the opposite side of the lamp's body may indicate that another inscription was written along this side.

practice which continued with the appearance of Early Islamic Channel-Nozzle lamps bearing Greek or Kufic script on their shoulders (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:133, Islamic Lamps Group 1, Variant A(d), Inscribed Lamps; 135–136, Islamic Lamps Group 1, Variant B(d), Inscribed and Pseudo-Inscribed Islamic Lamps). The letters of this inscription are larger, better organized and executed in a higher relief than the other inscriptions on the lamp, and it seems likely that it was part-and-parcel of the mold archetype used to cast the lamp. In contrast, the poorly executed inscriptions on the base and sides of the lamp, in low relief, indicate that the script was haphazardly scratched into a hardened mold. It may be suggested that the inscriptions were scratched into the mold in the pottery workshop wherein the lamp was made, perhaps to make a few lamps for themselves before discarding the bottom mold. Alternatively, the potter may have etched the inscription following the request of a client. Either way, this mold could not have been used to make additional lamps after a personalized message was impressed into it. The location of the script on the base and sides of the lamp was probably chosen to avoid ruining the fine upper mold, or perhaps with the intention to conceal the script, a phenomenon documented by Naveh (1988:43) regarding religious or incantation texts. The latter possibility is less likely, however, for there seems to be no reason to wish to conceal a simple invocation.

Identification of the Lamp Type

This inscribed oil lamp belongs to a group of Early Islamic lamps, known as Jerash-type lamps (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:139, Islamic Lamps Group 4; Scholl 1986; 1991; Hadad 2002:68–71, Type 29;). Jerash lamps, named after their production center, were produced between the late sixth and mid-eighth centuries CE. They are typified by an almond-shaped body, with a high curved handle and occasionally a zoomorphic head at the top (Gawlikowski 1995:669). The large, upturned handles of Jerash lamps are a key feature, distinguishing this lamp group from other inscribed lamps of the Early Islamic period, which feature conical or tongue-shaped handles.

The earliest form of the Jerash lamp dates to the late sixth century CE, and is considered a morphological development of Byzantine almond-shaped lamps (Scholl 1986; 1991: Groups II–IV; Costa 2010:78–79; Uscatescu 2021:77–94). The early Jerash lamps bear two voluted lines on the nozzle, while the bottom—a small round ring base—is undecorated or bears a pair of voluted lines (Scholl 1991:65). In general, inscribed lamps with conical handles from the early Umayyad period bear short inscriptions within the lamp's channel nozzle, such as the name of God, الله (Allah) (Hadad and Khamis 1998:67–72, Nos. 1–11). Occasionally, the inscriptions on these lamps are long and occur on the lamp shoulder (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:133, Nos. 542–544). Unlike these early varieties, inscribed lamps from the late Umayyad–Abbasid periods feature a tongue-shaped handle and usually bear long passages on the lamp shoulders (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:135–136, Islamic Lamps Group 1, Variant A[d]); however, some of the inscribed lamps of this period bear a

one-word inscription in the channel nozzle, as was common in the earlier varieties (Hadad and Khamis 1998:72–76, Nos. 14–19).

By the mid-eighth century CE, Jerash lamps developed slightly and were usually made with almond- or teardrop-shaped bases (Scholl 1986:65). Common features of these Jerash lamps are decorated bases and sometimes inscriptions (Scholl 1986; 1991: Group V; Uscatescu 2021:113–114). Such lamps are often decorated with stitch-like patterns on the channel nozzle that also appear on the lamp from Dar el-Consul (see Khairy and ʼAmr 1986: Pl. XLI:8–9, 12, 15; Gawlikowski 1995: Fig. 2; Bar-Nathan 2011: Fig. 11.54:1; Uscatescu 2021:100, Fig. 3.9, Lamps L-24.1 and L-24.2;). Thus, the Dar el-Consul lamp belongs to this late sub-group of inscribed Jerash lamps designated Group V by Scholl (1991:66).

Jerash lamps have a limited distribution, and are mostly found in the Decapolis area, extending along the western mountain range of Jordan (Costa 2010: Fig. 26; Uscatescu 2021:95, Map 3.6). Kufic inscriptions, often appearing on Jerash lamps, sometimes mention the lamp maker's origin from Jerash (ʻAmr 1988:148; Schick 2012:186;); however, two molds of Jerash-type lamps from Bet She'an indicate that they were also produced in other centers (Hadad 2002:127, Nos. 500–501).

Only a few Jerash lamps were found in the Jerusalem region, well beyond their main area of distribution. The few examples include a lamp from the Church of Dominus Flevit (Bagatti 1970: Figs. 1:10; 2:6; Uscatescu 2021:93, n. 429), another from Bethany (Bagatti 1970:87; Uscatescu 2021:94, n. 437) and one from the Monastery of Theodorus and Cyriakos on Mt. Scopus.[6] None of these lamps bear writing in Greek as in the present example. It can be presumed that these lamps were not made in the Jerusalem region, but originated in the area of Jerash.

While most inscribed lamps from the Umayyad period bear passages written in Kuffic, a few bearing Greek inscriptions are known. One lamp found at Nesher-Ramla was inscribed on the upper shoulder with a composition of random Greek letters (Vincenz 2015:168–169, Fig. 2.25:84). According to Vincenz, the unclear nature of the text suggests that this lamp was produced in the late Umayyad period, after Arabic replaced Greek as the common vernacular of the region. Another Jerash-type lamp from Bet She'an was inscribed with the Greek word ΚΑΛΑ (Bar-Nathan 2011: Fig. 11.54:1). Similar to the Dar el-Consul inscription, the inscription on this lamp recalls a literary formula that commonly decorated Byzantine-period candlestick lamps, meaning "Beautiful little lamps" (Nitowski 1974: Group IIa; Loffreda 1989: Types C 6.1–6.7), or "The light of Christ shines for all. Good (evening)" (Nitowski 1974: Groups IV–V; Loffreda 1989: Types A 2.1–2.5). Another inscribed Jerash-type lamp bears a Greek inscription on its lower body, indicating that it was made by a lamp maker named Bisher, the son of Ṣamid, in Jerash, in the year 211 H

[6] While the lamp was not described as part of the excavation report of this site (Amit, Seligman and Zilberbod 2003), it was identified as a Jerash type by Hadad (2002:71, n. 252).

(826 CE; Khairy and ‘Amr 1986:150, Fig. 10:12, Pl. XL:11; Uscatescu 2021:115–116).[7] Here, the inscription encircles the base of the lamp, which also bears a depiction of two human figures with arms upstretched in prayer above their heads, located below two birds flanking a palm branch and above another bird. The shoulder of this lamp is embellished with a Kufic inscription. The nature of the text on inscribed oil lamps of this type varies, often involving religious formulas and blessings, or the name of the lamp maker (Khairy and ‘Amr 1986:143);[8] occasionally, the year in which the lamp was made is also indicated (according to the Hijra calendar; ‘Amar 1988:148; Schick 2012:186).

A few Jerash lamps found at Jerash have an upper part with an almost identical shape to that of the Dar el-Consul lamp, indicating that they were made from the same upper mold. Two such lamps were reported as part of the joint Yale and British School excavations at Jerash, one described in detail (Day 1942:78, Pl. 14:1)[9] and the other mentioned in a footnote (Day 1942: n. 44; see also Khairy and ‘Amr 1986:150–153, No.15, Fig. 12, Pl. XLI:14; Loffreda 1989:106–107, Tipo A 6.4)[10]; a detailed description of the latter appears in Schick’s (2012:186–187, Lamp 126C) study of inscribed Jerash lamps. According to Schick (2012:187), the finding of these two identical lamps, made from the same upper and lower molds, indicates “that this lamp was not just a onetime product”.

The lamp from Dar el-Consul and the two above-mentioned examples from Jerash were cast in the same upper mold, the only difference between them being the smearing of some letters in the upper inscription of the former lamp. The lower parts of these lamps, however, were made in different molds. The lower body of the two lamps from Jerash bears a Kufic inscription, reading “In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful,” and decorated with palm fronds, a bird and fish (Khairy and ‘Amr 1986:152; Schick 2012:187), while that of the Dar el-Consul lamp bears a personal prayer, engraved in dense Greek script. It is likely that the Dar el-Consul lamp was made in the same workshop as the lamps from Jerash, using two-piece molds of which the lower part was apparently interchangeable.[11] The Dar el-Consul lamp, with all its inscriptions written in Greek, is very much exceptional compared to the known corpus of inscribed lamps from the Islamic period.

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[7] Khairy and ‘Amr could not decipher the inscription, which was later read by Loffreda (1989:130, Tipo C 4.2), who reconstructed two Greek phrases: ‘God created all things’ and ‘Blessing of the wood’ (i.e., the cross).

[8] Examples in Schick (2012:186) include: “Made by Habrun son of Yusuf in Jerash year 135, Blessing from god for whoever has light from this lamp”; “Blessings from God whoever had light and listened”; “Abu Hassun made it. God bless the maker”, while other examples are given in Khairy and ‘Amr (1986:148–149, Nos. 8, 9): “Many blessings from Allah for Sa’id”; “Blessings from Allah for ‘Amer son of Khrj”.

[9] This lamp is now held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Cat. No. 1929.674) and can be viewed online: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/478160.

[10] This lamp is registered in the Jordanian Archaeological Museum collections (Reg. No. J. 12244).

[11] According to Schick (2012:187), the two lamps bearing inscriptions in both Greek and Kufic represent an atypical combination of Christian and Islamic writing on one object.

Discussion and Summary

The inscribed lamp from Dar el-Consul joins the very small number of Jerash lamps found in the Jerusalem region. The lamp was discovered in a fill within a small water channel together with pottery fragments dating to the late Byzantine/Early Islamic (the seventh–eighth/ninth centuries CE) and the Late Islamic periods. Based on dated parallels for the lamp among the group of Jerash lamps we may confidently assign this item to the early eighth century or slightly later. The lamp was probably made in or near Jerash, where it was customized at the initiative of the potter or at the request of the client by the addition of inscriptions of personal nature on the lamp's side and bottom.

The contents of the inscriptions on the Dar el-Consul lamp and the presence of a cross, allow us to assume that the lamp maker was a Greek-speaking Christian from the Jerash region. As is attested by epigraphic finds from the Early Islamic period in the Near East, Greek was still used for writing, and presumably spoken, until the end of the eighth century (Di Segni 2009). The owner of the lamp was most likely a Greek-speaking Christian as well, and may have been a resident of Jerusalem or a visitor to the city from across the Jordan, the lamp brought on a pilgrimage or in a journey undertaken in the context of commercial or social ties.

Christian inscriptions referring to Jesus, as in the lamp from Dar el-Consul, and iconographic representations, as those of humans standing in prayer (Khairy and 'Amr 1986: Pl. XL:11) and fish (Khairy and 'Amr 1986: Pl. XLI:15), occasionally appear on Jerash lamps. The establishment of Muslim rule in the early part of the Early Islamic period did not bring substantial changes to Christian life in the region (Schick 2012).[12] The lamp from Dar el-Consul in Jerusalem offers another piece of evidence of the continuous presence of Christian visitors in the Holy City.

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[12] For information on the population of Jerusalem in the Byzantine period see, e.g., Di Segni and Tsafrir 2012; for information on Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages to Jerusalem see, e.g., Limor 1999.

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