

Λύχνος: Shedding light on daily life in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to examine the role of the oil lamp (λύχνος) in the daily life of the residents of Egypt through the documentation of Greek papyri and ostraca from the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods. Due to the fragmentary condition of the archival material, the sources of ancient Greek and Latin literature are also taken into consideration with a view to corroborating some uncertain points of detail. Specifically, careful scrutiny is given to aspects such as the oil lamp's price and material, its domestic uses, its role as pledge (ἐνέχυρον) and part of inheritance, as well as its function in various activities performed at night. The matters of its importance in the realm of theatre, its connection to theft, the side-effects of its use, and the exploration of the figurative use of the term λύχνος as a literary device are also examined.

KEYWORDS

oil lamps, domestic use, night works, theft, figurative speech

1. INTRODUCTION

The oil lamp (λύχνος), seemingly in use by the residents of the country of the Nile from the Predynastic era,¹ was part of Egyptian culture throughout the Pharaonic period.

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¹See e.g. BRUNTON–CATON–THOMPSON (1928) 43 and 61; ROBINS (1939b) 184–185; FORBES (1958) 143; STRONG (2018) 27–31, 38–39, 48–50 and 61.

The archaeological evidence, though limited,² reveals the association of this artificial lighting source³ mainly with ritualistic and religious practices, while testimonies regarding its more practical, everyday uses are even rarer.⁴ Conversely, a clearer picture emerges for the subsequent Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods. Initially, many finds from various Egyptian sites⁵ point to mass production and therefore a significantly wider use of this lighting device. This development may be explained on the basis of a technological innovation that was introduced in the 3rd century BC, namely the implementation of moulds in the manufacture of oil lamps, making the entire process considerably cheaper and easier in contrast to that of the traditional use of the pottery-wheel.⁶ A further contributing factor was the – at the same time – easier access of large parts of the population to various oil sources,⁷ a privilege restricted until then only to the upper social strata of Pharaonic Egypt.⁸

Greek papyri and ostraca constitute an additional, very important source of information for the significance of the *λύχνος* in the daily life of the inhabitants of Egypt. They reveal that it was an essential object in certain ceremonies of worship and various other rites featuring across the life journey (funeral, childbirth, and so on): it was associated with the ritualistic process of *λοχναψία* in temples and it played an important role in magic. Yet in addition to its occurrence in these spheres, which have hitherto attracted the interest of a number of scholars,⁹ the archival material reveals aspects such as the price of oil lamps, their uses in much more mundane contexts (e.g. their association with the domestic environment, their contribution to the execution of night work etc.), as well as the figurative use of the term *λύχνος* as a literary device. These issues – which have not been thoroughly examined and still remain a *desideratum* of research – will be the focus of the present article.¹⁰

²For the difficulties in identifying oil lamps with recorded finds from the Pharaonic period, see ROBINS (1939a) 48; ROBINS (1939b) 184–187; STRONG (2018) 28, 61–62, 73–81 and 91–92.

³For the artificial lighting sources used in the country of the Nile throughout the Pharaonic period, see STRONG (2018); STRONG (2021).

⁴STRONG (2018) 28, 61–62, 70 and 75–77. For the most possible practical uses of oil lamps during the Pharaonic period and the limited access of the lower social strata to this lighting device as well as artificial light, see PECK (2013) 91–92; STRONG (2018) 47–48, 56–57, 61–62, 71, 75–77 and 81–92.

⁵The bibliography on this topic is quite extensive: see e.g. WALTERS (1914) 15–16 and *passim*; BAILEY (1975) 239–284; MICHELUCCI (1975); SHIER (1978); PROVOOST (1984); BAILEY (1988) 1–3 and *passim*; KADOUS (1992); MLYNARCZYK (1997); XANTHOPOULOU (2010) 1–2, 7–14, 17–28 and *passim*.

⁶THOMAS (2015) 9–10 and 16–17.

⁷KNOWLES (2006) 314; THOMAS (2015) 2 and 17. For the different kinds of oils used for lighting purposes in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt, see e.g. MOSSAKOWSKA (1994); COPLEY-BLAND ET AL. (2005).

⁸STRONG (2018) 87, 90 and 92.

⁹For the role of oil lamps in the religion of Graeco-Roman Egypt, see OTTO (1905) 9–10; RUSCH (1940); MOSSAKOWSKA (1994) 122–123; MONTERRAT (1995) 435 and n. 13, 436; MOSSAKOWSKA (1996) 108–111; SCHMELZ (2002) 121–123; ABDELWAHEB (2015); MAKRI-DRAKOS (2022). For the uses of oil lamps in the context of various magical practices (PGM and PDM corpora), see EITREM (1991) 176–177; GEE (2003) 25–27; JOHNSTON (2008) 159, 166; DODSON (2009) 20–21; QUACK (2010) 47; ZOGRAFOU (2010); BORTOLANI (2019); NAGEL (2019).

¹⁰To the best of our knowledge MOSSAKOWSKA is alone in devoting a few lines to this topic in her article regarding the terminology of various lighting sources, see MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1552–1553.



2. Λύχνος IN EVERYDAY CONTEXTS

2.1. The price and material of oil lamps

The prices of oil lamps are rarely recorded in archival material. Only in a few selected accounts, lists and letters is cost mentioned, but without offering any additional information on quantity¹¹ or quality. This fact may have to do with the nature of λύχνος, which being one of the most widespread lighting devices in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt¹² and usually very cheap would normally not need to be recorded.

In P. Cair. Zen. I 59010 (259 BC, Philadelphia) col. II l. 29 – an account of an individual who travelled for commercial reasons between Alexandria and the Syrian coast – mention is made of an undefined number of oil lamps, the price of which is 2 drachmas. In SB XVI 12375 verso (180 BC, Arsinoites?) col. I l. 78,¹³ and in P. Berl. Leigh. II 39 recto (160 AD, Theadelphia) col. IV l. 57,¹⁴ among payments for various goods we read that the value of some oil lamps was 10 and 4 drachmas respectively. In an account for a feast in honour of the Dioskouroi, P. Lund. IV 11 = SB VI 9348 (169–170 AD, Bachias) col. I l. 18,¹⁵ the cost of λύχνοι – the quantity of which is likewise not specified – was 4 obols, while the household account, P. Mich. XI 619 (182 AD, Oxyrhynchus?) col. III l. 33, shows that oil lamps could be bought for the equivalent of 1 obol. In a private letter, SB XIV 11490 recto = P. Yale I (2nd/3rd c. AD, unknown provenance) ll. 4–5, we read that some λύχνοι cost 50 drachmas, while in P. Oxy. XVII 2144 (= Sel. Pap. I 190 = Feste 43), l. 21 – a list of payments of the 3rd c. AD – there is a record of 40 drachmas, intended for the purchase of oil lamps for the wedding of Apollonius. Additionally, in a property inventory, found in P. Tebt. II 406 (ca. 266 AD, Tebtynis) col. II ll. 11–12, the price of an oil lamp with its lampstand is recorded as [.]6 drachmas. The sum listed refers to both items, and therefore the exact price of each is unclear. Moreover, the *lacuna* in the document complicates matters even more.

Of special interest are some exceptional cases where more information is given. According to a fragment of the account P. Tebt. III.2 894 recto (114 BC, Tebtynis) fr. 2, col. I l. 9, one oil lamp, worth 100 drachmas, is included among other commodities, which were to be given by the members of a club to their association.¹⁶ Taking into consideration the value of other goods recorded in the papyrus, it is observed that the price of this lighting device was lower than a Rhodian jar of beer, which cost 300 (fr. 5 verso, col. II l. 13) drachmas, and even more so than one *keramion* of wine, whose price was 4000 (fr. 2 recto, col. I l. 6; fr. 2 verso, col. II l. 44), 3000 (fr. 6 recto, col. I l. 1) or 3400 (fr. 7 verso, col. II l. 2; fr. 10 recto, l. 3, l. 5) copper drachmas. In another fragment of the same document 100 drachmas were similarly assigned by the Egyptian

¹¹See also MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1556 and n. 94.

¹²For the lighting devices and their *paraphernalia* (terminology and characteristics) in the ancient world including Egypt, see e.g. XANTHOPOULOU (2010); MOTSIANOS (2011). Especially for Egypt, see MONTSEERAT (1995); MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016).

¹³SJIPSTEIJN (1979) 273–281.

¹⁴DREXHAGE (1992) 381.

¹⁵DREXHAGE (1992) 381.

¹⁶For accounting practices, the members of an association and their contributions in P. Tebt. III.2 894, see LAST-ROLLENS (2014) 441–450.



guild, but for an undefined number of oil lamps relating to some unspecified altars (fr. 10 recto, l. 10).¹⁷ Interesting also is the case of the ostrakon O. Narm. I 60 (2nd/3rd c. AD, Narmouthis), ll. 2–40, which reveals both material and quantity: one λύχνος made of iron cost both 16 drachmas and 6 drachmas. It would seem from the texts examined above, therefore, that the price of oil lamps was variable. Nevertheless, there is a *caveat* here, which has to do with the nature of the surviving material – namely, that the documents are relatively few in number and heterogenous as far as content and dating are concerned. In addition to this, we should consider that over the course of the centuries fluctuations in prices and inflation are inevitably observed.¹⁸ Caution is thus required, so as to avoid forming a misleading picture.

Document	Date	Place	Material	Quantity	Price
P. Cair. Zen. I 59010	259 BC	Philadelphia	–	–	2 drachmas
SB XVI 12375	180 BC	Arsinoites	–	–	10 drachmas
P. Tebt. III.2 894	114 BC	Tebtynis	–	1 oil lamp (fr. 2, col. I l. 9)	100 drachmas
P. Tebt. III.2 894	114 BC	Tebtynis	–	– (fr. 10, l. 10)	100 drachmas
P. Berl. Leigh. II 39	160 AD	Theadelphia	–	–	4 drachmas
P. Lund. IV 11 (= SB VI 9348)	169–170 AD	Bacchias	–	–	4 obols
P. Mich. XI 619	182 AD	Oxyrhynchus?	–	–	1 obol
P. Tebt. II 406	ca. 266 AD	Tebtynis	–	1 oil lamp accompanied by a lampstand	[.]6 drachmas
O. Narm. I 60	2 nd /3 rd c. AD	Narmouthis	iron	1 oil lamp	16 drachmas, 6 drachmas
SB XIV 11490 = P. Yale I	2 nd /3 rd c. AD	–	–	–	50 drachmas
P. Oxy. XVII 2144 (= Sel. Pap. I 190 = Feste 43)	3 rd c. AD	Oxyrhynchus	–	–	40 drachmas

Turning now to the material used for the production of oil lamps, the evidence offered by Greek papyri and ostraca is again rather limited. Only in a few of these documents, which mostly have to do with religious affairs,¹⁹ does a direct reference occur. Golden²⁰ lamps were used as offerings, silver as utensils in places where saints' relics were usually kept (μαρτύρια),²¹ and

¹⁷For copper deflation, see LAST–ROLLENS (2014) 453 and n. 48.

¹⁸For the monetary economy, see e.g. SEGRÉ (1940–1941); VON REDEN (2007) 31–78; VAN MINNEN (2008).

¹⁹See also MOSSAKOWSKA–GAUBERT (2016) 1553.

²⁰P. Oxy. XII 1449 (213–217 AD, Oxyrhynchus) fr. 1+2, col. I ll.15–16; fr. 3, col. I l. 36.

²¹P. Bad. IV 54 (5th c. AD, Hipponon) l. 5. For the μαρτύριον and its connection with oil lamps, see FRANKFURTER (1998a) 4; GROSSMANN (1998) 299; CASEAU (2007) 559; BOURAS–PARANI (2008) 23–24; MAKRI–DRAKOS (2022) 685.



bronze ones functioned as offerings²² or could be placed in a vestry (στολιστήριον).²³ Apart from these texts, bronze oil lamps are also recorded in the list of valuables contained in P. Hamb. III 323 (113 AD, unknown provenance) l. 10, as well as in the inventory of SPP XX 67 recto (2nd–3rd c. AD, Arsinoites) l. 11. In other archival documents, the term λύχνος is not accompanied by any other indicative of the material it was made from. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that in all such cases reference is being made to *clay* oil lamps,²⁴ the production of which was massive in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt. After all, the lower cost of production²⁵ owing to the perishable nature of the material rendered them much more readily available in comparison to metal lamps. And in this connection it is worth noting, moreover, that the scarcity of information about metal oil lamps in documentary and literary sources should most probably be interpreted as an indication that in Late Antiquity they were less numerous. One factor that can plausibly explain the smaller number of such finds is that, excepting their higher cost, in times of crisis these luxurious objects would be melted down for their precious metals.²⁶

2.2. The oil lamp in the domestic context

A second focus of enquiry here is the connection of oil lamps with the domestic environment. The λύχνος was indisputably an important part of household equipment, a supposition that can be firmly corroborated by the considerable quantity of oil lamps found in settlements and domestic remains on different sites of Egypt.²⁷ By virtue of their light, a broad array of domestic activities took place, not only at night but also during the course of the day²⁸ whenever extra light was desirable. Furthermore, highly interesting are cases of small oil lamps found among children's toys.²⁹ These items – alongside other miniature items such as boats, clay dogs, and a weaver's comb – could enrich children's imagination and help them form their idea of society, religion, work, agriculture, animals, and so on,³⁰ as well as prepare them for the future roles and tasks that they would undertake in maturity.

Details about the type of oil lamps intended for some households of Egypt emerge from the archival material at our disposal. According to the postscript of a letter in P. Oxy. LIX 3998 recto

²²P. Oxy. XII 1449 fr. 3, col. I l. 36.

²³BGU I 338 (2nd/3rd c. AD, Arsinoites) ll. 1–7. See MAKRI-DRAKOS (2022) 684–685.

²⁴See also DREXHAGE (1992) 379–381; MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1554.

²⁵For the lower cost of ceramic objects in contrast to those made of different materials, see MORELLI (2019) 169 ff.

²⁶MOTSANOS (2011) 180; BUSSIÈRE-WOHL (2017) 447.

²⁷Excavations have brought to light oil lamps from households on different sites in Egypt. For Lower Egypt: 1) Pelousion/Tell Farama (3rd–4th c. AD), see WASILEWSKA (2008) 121–123; 2) Naukratis (Ptolemaic Period), see THOMAS (2015) 16–17; 3) Tell Nebesheh (House No 100 – 3rd c. BC), see BAILEY (1975) 251 (Q 536); 4) Herakleopolis Magna-Ehnasya (Roman Period), see PETRIE (1905) 4ff. For Middle Egypt: 1) Arsinoites: a) Karanis (House No C42; 2nd–3rd c. AD), see ABDELWAHEB (2016) 86. See also for Karanis, SHIER (1978); BOURAS-PARANI (2008) 20. b) Tebtynis (House No 1100; 1st–2nd c. AD), see ABDELWAHEB (2016) 89. For Upper Egypt: 1) Medinet Habu (Roman and Coptic Period), see HÖLSCHER (1954) 63–64, 68–71; 2) Amheida/Trimithis (Dakhla Oasis; House No B2; 3rd–4th c. AD), see BOOZER (2015) 189–191.

²⁸PARISINO (2000) 19–20; MOULLOU (2015) 204 n. 48.

²⁹ROWLANDSON (1998) 140.

³⁰SWIFT-STONER-PUDSEY (2022) 276 and 277.



(4th c. AD, Oxyrhynchus), an “oil lamp which had a fox” (I. 37: τὸν λύχνον ἔχοντα ἀλώπηκα³¹) was included in an itemized list of goods that should have been received by Syras at the wish of her father, Thonis. It is known that the animal kingdom was a clear source of inspiration for the lamp-makers of Egypt. Λύχνοι decorated with animal motifs,³² and also oil lamps in the shape of birds,³³ fish,³⁴ dolphins³⁵ and four-legged animals,³⁶ were produced in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods. However, in this specific case it is not sufficiently clear whether reference is being made to a fox-shaped lamp, or to a lamp with the figure of a fox attached to it, or alternatively to a fox used as a decorative motif in relief,³⁷ though the latter two possibilities seem the more likely. In an inventory of property, P. Tebt. II 406, col. II, ll. 11–12, we read of a set consisting of a lampstand with an Eros and an oil lamp belonging to a wealthy citizen of Antinoopolis, Aurelius Paulus,³⁸ while he was alive (ἔστι δέ· | λυχνεῖα (leg. λυχνία) τελεία σὺν ἔρωτι καὶ λυχ[νί]ω³⁹). Despite the fact that the document in question does not provide information about the lighting device itself, it does offer details of its lampstand. Mossakowska-Gaubert suggests that being described in this document is a lamp holder in the form of Eros – or more likely a capital decorated with a carved figure of the god.⁴⁰ Nonetheless,

³¹According to Ioannidou, the use of eta instead of epsilon seems to be due to the incorrect declension of the noun, while the addition of nu at the end of the substantive is incorrect, see P. Oxy. LIX 3998 recto (comment on l. 37 of the edition).

³²See e.g. BAILEY (1975) 241–242; BAILEY (1988) 11, 53, 61, 66–89 and *passim*. For motifs of animals appearing on the lower part of a discus, mainly during the Roman period and more rarely later, see MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1554.

³³See e.g. EDGAR (1903) 67; KITZINGER (1967) 33; WILFONG (1992) 88; BOURAS-PARANI (2008) 56–61; XANTHOPOULOU (2010) 212, 214, 216, 219, 222; MOTSIANOS (2011) 193.

³⁴See e.g. BAILEY (1975) 269.

³⁵See e.g. EDGAR (1904) x, xi, 37, 74; BOURAS-PARANI (2008) 54–55; XANTHOPOULOU (2010) 199–205.

³⁶See e.g. MOTSIANOS (2011) 192.

³⁷For a fox used as discus motif in antiquity, see BAILEY (1988) 45, 73–74; P. Oxy. LIX 3998 recto (comment by IOANNIDOU on l. 37 of the edition); BUSSIÈRE-WOHL (2017) 45, 73–74.

³⁸HANSON (2005) 93.

³⁹Mossakowska-Gaubert apparently takes the term λυχνίω as the dative of the noun λύχνιον, the meaning of which is ‘lampstand’. Considering, therefore, that the use of the synonymous terms λύχνιον and λυχνία in the same sentence is nonsensical, she proceeds to the textual emendation of λυχ[νί]ω to λυχ[ν]ω, see MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1546 and n. 40. However, there is also the possibility that λυχ[νί]ω is the dative of the noun λυχνίον, which does not exclusively designate lampstand but is also attested in some sources as meaning ‘oil lamp’. In PGM VII (3rd–4th c. AD), both λυχνίον and λύχνος seem to be used interchangeably for oil lamp, which constituted the basic means for the implementation of a love spell. After taking the lamp, the conjurer performed the spell by firstly directly invoking it (ll. 376–378: λυχνίον λαβὼν ἐλλυχνιάσων καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγε· ἐξορκίζω σέ, λύχνε). For this spell, see BJÖRKLUND (2015) 36. In addition to this, if we take into account the connection of the substantive λυχνίον with the verb ἐλλυχνιάζω, the meaning of which is ‘furnish a lamp with a wick’, it becomes evident that λυχνίον refers to an oil lamp, see WB II s.v. λυχνίον; LSJ⁹, s.vv. ἐλλυχνιάζω, λυχνίον; DGE VII s.v. ἐλλυχνιάζω. Interesting also is the information offered by Pseudo-Zonaras that λυχνίον is an oil lamp: see *Lexicon* 1323.21. Finally, taking into consideration the phrase λυχνίον διμυξον ‘lamp with two wicks’ of the inscription ID 1442 (146–145/145–144 BC, Delos), l. 80, we observe that the term λυχνίον bears the meaning oil lamp. For the suffix -ιον of this term, see PALMER (1945) 80, 85.

⁴⁰MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1546 and 1547 fig. 6.



taking into consideration the additive sense of the preposition σύν⁴¹ used in the text, it is reasonable to assume that the figure of Eros was part of the lampstand attached to it.⁴² It is worth noting here that beyond their practical function, these oil lamps could be also used for decorative purposes within the domestic environment.

Description of the material and shape of one λύχνος is given in the list on SPP XX 67 recto (2nd–3rd c. AD, Arsinoites) l. 11; of particular note, a small bronze oil lamp was kept in the storeroom of a luxurious house belonging to a member of the Egyptian elite. It is probable that this lighting device constituted a spare item of furniture, used in the ground-floor rooms (bedrooms, living rooms etc.)⁴³ as circumstances required or when extra lighting was needed. Furthermore, the possibility that it was kept as a replacement in case of breakage cannot be excluded.

An additional part of the household equipment might be oil lamps that could be suspended, known as λύχνοι κρεμαστοί, and featuring in two papyri of the Byzantine period. According to the letter P. Oxy. LVI 3860 verso (4th c. AD, Oxyrhynchus) l. 34, Taesis asks her husband Tiro to instruct their friends to take care of the shipment of various goods (a lampstand, a good hand-basin, incense of high quality, honey etc.) from Oxyrhynchus. Among these items – which reflect the family's comfortable way of life – a suspended oil lamp is recorded.⁴⁴ In P. Ryl. IV 627 recto (4th c. AD, Hermoupolis Magna) col. III l. 55,⁴⁵ a hanging oil lamp is likewise listed among different household articles reflecting the prosperity of their owner. In both cases there is no reference to an accompanying means of suspension.⁴⁶

But how exactly were these λύχνοι used within the domestic environment? Firstly, their light facilitated the carrying out of a number of tasks. In the account P. Corn. 1 (= C. Ptol. Sklav. I 46 = C. Zen. Palestine 54 = C. Pap. Jud. I 7 = SB III 6796; 257 BC, Philadelphia), we see lamps being used for demanding and particularly painstaking chores such as the cleaning of silverware.⁴⁷ Furthermore, λύχνοι were associated with banquets and private feasts. In P. Tebt. III.2 894 recto, fr. 2, col. I l. 9, mention is made that one λύχνος would be used during a club banquet to be held at the home (store?) of Menoites.⁴⁸ From the trilingual (Latin-Greek-Coptic) colloquium C. Gloss. Biling. I 15⁴⁹ (= MPER N.S. XVIII 270; 5th–6th c. AD, unknown provenance) – a phrasebook designed for educational purposes and assisting language-learning in the multilingual environment of Late Antique Egypt – we learn that oil lamps were placed

⁴¹MAYSER (1934) 399–400.

⁴²An indicative example of this sort of lampstand is found in Dallas Museum of Art (object number: 2005.12.A-B.McD).

⁴³LEWIS (1983) 52.

⁴⁴See P. Oxy. LVI 3860, introduction, 124–125.

⁴⁵For the different view of some researchers on the content of this list, see MATTHEWS (2006) 42, 44.

⁴⁶See also MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1555.

⁴⁷Il. 194–195: Βανναῖαι ἐπὶ λύχνον ἐκτρίβοντι | τὰ ἀργυρώμ[α]τα κο(τύλ)ης (ἥμισυ).

⁴⁸LAST–ROLLENS (2014) 445 and 455.

⁴⁹We follow here the revised edition of the text by DICKEY (2015), who offers also a translation and textual notes. Concerning the layout and typology of the present text, see AMMIRATI–FRESSURA (2017) 20–21.



among the banqueters.⁵⁰ Traditionally, an abundance of lighting was a sign of luxury,⁵¹ and according to Bouras and Parani⁵² it “reflected the economic and social status of the host”. In the same document we encounter too the familiar motif of the faithful lamp-bearing servants (also known in the Roman world as *lanternarii*),⁵³ who were accustomed to accompany guests or their masters so that they might illuminate their homeward path (ll. 38–41: ἀνάψατε | τοὺς λύχνου[ς] | καὶ | προπέμψατε | πάντες).⁵⁴ In P. Oxy. XVII 2144 (ll. 20–21: Εὐμενεῖ ἰδίᾳ εἰς γάμους Ἀπολ- / λωνίου ὑπ(ἐρ) τι(μῆς) λύχνων (δραχμαὶ) μ), λύχνοι appear in the context of a wedding. As mentioned above, a certain sum was given for the purchase of some oil lamps for the wedding feast⁵⁵ of Apollonius. In the present case – according to Perpillou-Thomas,⁵⁶ – oil lamps may have fulfilled decorative purposes, and she makes the further suggestion that reference is being made here to ritual torches, usually used in Greek and Roman weddings. It should be stressed, however, that the ritual torches of the wedding processions⁵⁷ (δαδουχίαι⁵⁸) that

⁵⁰ll. 8–12: θέτε | εἰς τὸ μέσον | τὰ[ς] λυχνί[α]ς, | κ[αὶ] ἀνάψ[α]τε λου[...]. Whether the ending of the twelfth line was λου[... (κέρνας)] according to Schubart's reading – without a dot under the λ – or τοὺς [λύχνους], as Kramer suggests, either way it denotes ‘oil lamp’. It should also be noted that the Latin version employs the word *lucernas* (= oil lamps). For alternative suggestions on this passage, see [Dickey \(2015\)](#) 67. For the use of oil lamps in banquets and drinking-feasts in antiquity, see e.g. *Hdt.* 2. 133. 15–19. *X. Smp.* 7. 5. *Luc. Symp.* 21. 5–6. *Ath. Deipn.* 4. 70. 5–6; 10. 25. 12–14: καὶ ὅτι τρεῖς ἦσαν οἱ οἰνόπται, οἵτινες καὶ παρῆχον τοῖς δειπνοῦσι λύχνους καὶ θρυαλλίδας. ἐκάλουν δὲ τινες τούτους καὶ ὀφθαλμούς. Wecowski underlines the importance of lamps in the context of a *symposium*, see [Wecowski \(2014\)](#) 31 and n. 42.

⁵¹[Vössing \(2004\)](#) 141–142 n. 9 and 212 n. 6. Responsibility for the supervision of lamps at banquets fell to the *τραπεζοποῖς*, whereas in the Roman World this was assigned to *tricliniarches*. See [Vössing \(2004\)](#) 171–172 n. 6 and 212 n. 6.

⁵²[Bouras–Parani \(2008\)](#) 20.

⁵³The *lanternarius*, as the name indicates, was the holder of a lantern, which encased an oil lamp or a candle. [Forbes \(1955\)](#) 165; [Motsianos \(2011\)](#) 359–361. On the types of lanterns and their incidence in Graeco-Roman Egypt, see [Dunand \(1976\)](#).

⁵⁴*Mart.* 8. 59. 11 (oil lamp); 14. 61. 2 (lantern). [Hug \(1927\)](#); *Ath. Deipn.* 6. 28. 19, where a diner leaves a feast refusing the company of a lamp-bearing child.

⁵⁵According to Perpillou-Thomas, the meaning of the singular and the plural form of the noun γάμος is not the same. The first denotes the event of marriage, as emerges from the associated contracts. The plural form of γάμος (γάμοι), on the other hand, indicates the marriage celebration. See [Perpillou-Thomas \(1993\)](#) 16.

⁵⁶[Perpillou-Thomas \(1993\)](#) 18.

⁵⁷On the torch-lit wedding processions in the Greek world, see [Erdmann \(1934\)](#) 258; [Oakley–Sinos \(1993\)](#) 26–27; [Reinsberg \(1993\)](#) 50. [Parisinou \(2000\)](#) 30–34. According to the latter (pp. 24–28, 38), λύχνοι, which were usually used in the private domestic sphere, were connected with the intimate moments of lovers, namely love-making. The erotic connotations of λύχνος are evident in the epigrams of Greek Anthology as well as in the romances of Late Antiquity. It is worth mentioning that according to Musaeus, who told of the tragic love of Hero and Leander, the priestess of Aphrodite would light a lamp every night at the top of her tower, guiding Leander across the dangerous waters of Hellespont and simultaneously alluding to the forbidden union of the two lovers. *Musae. Hero and Leander*, vv. 1–15, 221–224.

⁵⁸*Ach. Tat. Leuc. Clit.* 1. 13. 6. *Scol.* in *E. Tr.* 315: νόμιμον γάρ ἐστι τῇ μητρὶ δαδουχεῖν ἐν τοῖς γάμοις τῶν θυγατέρων. See [Erdmann \(1934\)](#) 258 n. 44.



accompanied the bride to her new residence were called λαμπάδες⁵⁹ or δαΐδες,⁶⁰ and not λύχνοι, “oil lamps”. Without excluding the possibility that decorative oil lamps are recorded in this document as is posited by Perpillou-Thomas, it seems most likely that their primary use was practical – namely, to provide light. This is also seemingly attested by the archival material, which informs us that wedding festivities⁶¹ usually centred on a banquet,⁶² where illumination was obviously needed.⁶³

Private domestic shrines also benefitted from the light of oil lamps. In the letter P. Athen 60 (4th–1st c. BC, unknown provenance),⁶⁴ Apollonia and Eupous advise their younger sisters, Rasion and Demarion, to light the lamps – probably in front of a figurine or upon an altar – of private domestic shrines.⁶⁵ The motive for this action remains unclear. Did the lamp-lighting occur on the occasion of a festival,⁶⁶ or did it constitute a daily or regular ritual aimed at venerating⁶⁷ the gods and thus ensuring the protection and well-being of the family?

⁵⁹E. Hel. 722–724: νῦν ἀνανεοῦμαι τὸν σὸν ὑμέναιον πάλιν καὶ λαμπάδων μεμνήμεθ’ ἄς τετραόροις ἵπποις τροχάζων παρέφερον. For the term, see MOTSIANOS (2011) 81. In documentary papyri also the word bears the same meaning, see MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1535–1536.

⁶⁰Hom. Il. Σ’ vv. 491–493: ἐν τῇ μὲν ῥα γάμοι τ’ ἔσαν εἰλαπίναι τε, νύμφας δ’ ἐκ θαλάμων δαΐδων ὑπο λαμπομενάων ἡγίνεον ἀνὰ ἄστυ, πολλὸς δ’ ὑμέναιος ὁρώρει. See also MOTSIANOS (2011) 47.

⁶¹According to the Egyptian tradition, a wedding ceremony in addition to a written contract was not prerequisite for marriage, on which see ROWLANDSON (1998) 156–157. The details of Egyptian rituals concerning marriage are as yet unknown: see PESTMAN (1961) 6–7. ROWLANDSON–LIPPERT (2019) 341. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, there is no trace of a specific marriage ceremony in the documents of Graeco-Roman times, but influences from Greek custom, such as a torch-lit procession, cannot be excluded. MONTERRAT (2011) 92. On the other hand, marriage contracts find sufficient documentation in the papyri of the Graeco-Roman period. On marriage contracts, see e.g. WOLFF (1939); KATZOFF (1995) 37–45; RUPPRECHT (1998); YIFTACH-FIRANKO (2003) esp. 259–268.

⁶²It seems that feasting was an essential part of the marriage celebration in Graeco-Roman Egypt, and it was a common custom to issue invitations to wedding banquets. See P. Oxy. III 524 (= C.Pap. Hengstl 74; 2nd c. AD, Oxyrhynchus), ll. 1–4: ἐρωτᾷ σε Διον[ύσι]ο[ς] δεῖπνῃ- | σαι εἰς τοὺς γάμους τῶν τ[έκνων] | ἑαυτοῦ ἐν τῇ Ἰσχυρίῳ(νος) ἀ[ύριον], | ἥτις ἐστὶν λ, ἀπὸ ὥρας [θ]. ROWLANDSON (1998) 313, 319.

⁶³Lamps at wedding feasts are also mentioned in the literary tradition. Athenaeus, who describes the luxurious wedding feast of Pirithous, refers to an oil lamp – perhaps with more than one nozzle – hanging from the ceiling: καὶ τὸν λύχνον ὁμοίως <τὸν> ἐκ τῆς ὀροφῆς ἐξηρητημένον, ἀνακεχυμένας ἔχοντα τὰς φλόγας, see Ath. Deipn. 11. 48. 28–30. For the necessity of lamps at banquets in general, see above.

⁶⁴ll. 4–6: κα[λῶς] | δὲ ποιήσεις τοῖς ἱεροῖς λύ- | χνον ἄπτουσα. See BAGNALL–CRIBIÖRE (2006) 374–375; MAKRI–DRAKOS (2022) 689.

⁶⁵For domestic shrines in Graeco-Roman Egypt, see P. Athen 60 note 5–6; BARRETT (2015) 406–407; ABDELWAHED (2016) 89, 46–56, esp. 36, 52 for P. Athen 60.

⁶⁶FRANKFURTER (1998b) 137, assumes that the lamp-lighting in question may have taken place during the festival of Λυχνοκαΐα in Sais, which is described by Herodotus in the second book of his *Histories* (II 62). For this festival, see RUSCH (1940) 422; MOSSAKOWSKA (1996) 106; ABDELWAHED (2015) 32–33.

⁶⁷For the honorific use of lamplight, see CPR VII 1 (7–4 BC; Soknopaiou Nesos) ll. 5–6; BGU II 362 (col. III–VIII = Chrest. Wilck. 96 = Feste 41; col. V, ll. 1–18 = Sel. Pap. II 340; col. VI–VIII = Sel. Pap. II 404; 215/216 AD, Arsinoites) *passim*. WILCKEN (1885) 457; Babr. *Myth. Aesop*. 10. 6–8: τὴν δ’ Ἀφροδίτην ὥσπερ αἰτὴν τούτων λύχνοις ἐτίμα. For Christian times, see Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2. 17. 1–3: καὶ τὴν Κωνσταντίνου εἰκόνα, τὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ πορφυροῦ κίονος ἱσταμένην, θυσίαις τε ἐλάσκεσθαι καὶ λυχνοκαΐαις καὶ θυμιάμασι τιμᾶν, καὶ εὐχὰς προσάγειν ὡς θεῶ. See also, HUG (1927); BOURAS–PARANI (2008) 21.



The context of our papyrus does not offer us adequate information to answer with certainty. Furthermore, as Frankfurter points out, lamps continued to be part of the domestic rituals of Roman Egypt – where they often acquired the shape of a temple – a period characterized by “a process of domestication-through-miniaturization of temple cult”.⁶⁸

2.3. Oil lamps as pledges (ἐνέχυρα) and part of inheritance

The role of oil lamps as pledges (ἐνέχυρα)⁶⁹ is also revealed in the archival material. A pawnshop record in P. Lond. II 193 verso (= SB XVI 12421; 2nd c. AD, Arsinoites) records that jewellery, kitchenware and clothes were pawned by women⁷⁰ needing a loan. Among the various objects itemised our attention is caught by a reference to an engraved lampstand (χαρακτήν λυχνίαν) as well as an oil lamp (λύχνον διφάνιον),⁷¹ both given by Tabus to a pawnbroker on the 10th day of the month of Hathyr for a loan of 60 drachmas and 2 obols. It is known that money in the form of a loan could be provided by a creditor to a borrower only as security, so that financial losses would be limited or avoided altogether.⁷² In this case a contract seems not to have been concluded,⁷³ since the amount of the loan was not very high.⁷⁴

Λύχνος could also be part of an inheritance. According to the document P. Tebt. II 406, Pasigenes inherited the property of his deceased brother Paulus, after he managed to question the legitimacy of the latter's daughter, Paulina.⁷⁵ Recorded in the meticulous list of items delivered to Pasigenes is an oil lamp with its lampstand. Details about the material of the two objects are not provided, and it is not feasible to discern their exact value. Nevertheless, the papyrus shows that the lampstand in question was elaborate.⁷⁶

⁶⁸FRANKFURTER (1998b) 134–135, 137–138.

⁶⁹It is worth noting that portable objects, such as clothes, jewellery, household utensils, and implements could be given as ἐνέχυρα by borrowers who needed to cover short-term needs and unforeseen expenses. See VON REDEN (2007) 162; RUPPRECHT (2014) 248–250.

⁷⁰BOWMAN (1996) 117.

⁷¹In the 30th line of P. Lond. II 193 verso, col. II Kenyon (1898) there occurs λυχνον διφανι᾽ ἄ. According to the editor, who observes that the proper form of the adjective may be uncertain, the phrase refers to a lamp with a double light, see P. Lond. II 193, l. 30 note. PREISIGKE-KIESSLING (1925–1931) mentions that the epithet in question here, διφάνιον(ος), is connected with the term δίφας, which bears the meaning “a kind of serpent”, and translates the phrase as “a lampstand in the form of a snake”, see WB I s.v. διφάνιος. Sakellaridou-Soteroudi does not find Preisigke's approach convincing, and adopts Kenyon's interpretation considering it unlikely that a pawnbroker, most probably uneducated would use a term as rare as διφάνιος. Furthermore, she very reasonably regards this λύχνος as an oil lamp with two spouts (διφάνιος) rather than a lampstand, see SAKELLARIDOU-SOTEROUDI (1979) at verso, col. II l. 30 note. Mossakowska-Gaubert prefers the reading λύχνον διφάνιον. In her view, this would be a composite noun, with the second compound φάνιον a diminutive of the term φανός designating the light or source of the light, and thus she translates the phrase as “a lamp with a double light, namely a lamp with two nozzles”, see MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT (2016) 1554 and n. 81. For an extensive analysis of the noun φανίον as diminutive, see MOTSIANOS (2011) 362–364.

⁷²On pawnbroking see HUSSELMAN (1961); RUPPRECHT (2014) 248–250.

⁷³For loans based on pledges, see VON REDEN (2007) 162–171; RUPPRECHT (2014) 248.

⁷⁴See P. Lond. II 193 verso, introduction, 245; JOHNSON (1959) 458.

⁷⁵For the legal content of this case, see HANSON (2005) 94–96.

⁷⁶On this type of lampstand, see below.



2.4. Lighting night work

Daylight was not always sufficient for the completion of indoor and outdoor activities. In particular, once the sun went down, the use of λύχνοι offered a way of prolonging working time, the light they emitted being useful for the accomplishment of a range of different tasks.

Papyri reveal the use of oil lamps in the field of animal husbandry, and specifically their role in horse-keeping.⁷⁷ In the accounts P. Theon. 21 (160 AD, Oxyrhynchites), oil is purchased for a lamp burning at the entrance to a stable (ll. 6–8: *τειμῆς (sic) ἐλαίου εἰς λύχν[ον] | πυλῶνος τοῦ αὐτ(οῦ) [ι]ππῶ- | νος*), most likely in order to facilitate access to the building after sunset. Another oil lamp in a stable for the horses of Amyntas⁷⁸ – a member of the court of Apollonius – is mentioned in accounts relating to a stable, P. Cair. Zen. IV 59689 (257–256 BC; Zenon archive) l. 8 and further details about the role of oil lamps in this context emerge in accounts relating to oil in P. Corn. 1, where portions of castor oil are provided to two equerries: firstly, to Herakleides,⁷⁹ who was in charge of the horses of Apollonius' estate,⁸⁰ and secondly to Solon,⁸¹ responsible for the horses of Amyntas. The formulation ἐπὶ λύχνον τοῖς ἵπποις in ll. 140, 142, 186 leaves no doubt that the oil was not destined for the horses themselves, but for lamps,⁸² the light of which obviously facilitated activities connected with the care of the animals. One of these activities is described in l. 187 (διὰ τὸ γραστίζεσθαι⁸³ κο(τύλης) η), where the illumination of λύχνος⁸⁴ assisted the feeding of the horses. In the receipt P. Petr. II 25 (a) (= P. Petr. III 61 a = P. Lond. III 558 descr.; 226 BC, Arsinoites), the charioteer Kephalaon acknowledges that he has received certain provisions for drivers, grooms and horses as well as two *kotylae* of castor oil for lamps (l. 14: εἰς λύχνους κίκιος κ(οτύλας) β.). Though the text does not specify how these lamps were to be used, it is not improbable that they might have been employed in horse-keeping.

⁷⁷On horses, horsemanship and cavalry in Ptolemaic Egypt, see SCHNEBEL (1925) 331–332; VANDORPE (1997); FISCHER-BOVET (2014) 125–133. For the Roman Period, see ADAMS (2007) 58–60 with further bibliography.

⁷⁸For Amyntas, see ROSTOVITZ (1922) 29–31; WESTERMANN (1924) 238. PESTMAN ET AL. (1981) s.v. Ἀμύντας 6 (p. 284).

⁷⁹WESTERMANN (1924) 241; PESTMAN ET AL. (1981) s.v. Ἡρακλείδης 9 (p. 337).

⁸⁰On horse-breeding in Apollonius' estate, see ROSTOVITZ (1922) 111–112, 167–168.

⁸¹WESTERMANN (1924) 242; PESTMAN ET AL. (1981) s.v. Σόλων (p. 418).

⁸²WESTERMANN (1924) 237; SAMUEL (1963–1964) 37. It was not uncommon to anoint sick horses with oil, cf. P. Petr. II 25 a, ll. 12–13. Castor oil was also used as ingredient of unguents applied to horses: Append. ad Hippiatr. Berolin. 7. 41.

⁸³Westermann defines γραστίζειν as 'to graze' and suggests that in the aforementioned line the ἵπποκόμος Ἡρακλείδης sends the horses out to graze with the help of a lamp. See WESTERMANN (1924) 236–237. However, γράστις (or κράστις) denotes 'green fodder', and κραστίζομαι (another form of γραστίζομαι) has the general meaning 'consume green fodder'. LSJ⁹, s.vv. γράστις, κραστίζομαι. Furthermore, in Hippiatr. Berolin. 97 – a treatise dedicated to the care of horses – the process of γραστίζειν τοὺς ἵππους, namely providing green fodder or grass, could take place either inside the stable or out in the open. Moreover, in P. Petr. II 33, (= P. Petr. III 143 = P. Lond. III 571 descr.; 3rd c. BC; Arsinoites; ll. 33–34, γράστεως τῆς ἀγορασθείσης τοῖς / ἵπ[π]οῖς) γράστις is bought for horses. In the present case, the place of feeding is not specified, so, the possibility that the animals are fed inside the stable cannot be excluded.

⁸⁴However, Aristoteles HA 604b 29–30, discussing the ailments of horses, notes that the smoke produced by an extinguished oil lamp could provoke the premature termination of a mare's gestation, leading thus to miscarriage. The same view is confirmed also in the Hippiatr. Berolin. 15. 2.



The light of λύχνοι was also significant in relation to certain types of military activity. In O. Claud. II 294 (142–143 AD; Mons Claudianus), ll. 2–5, one στρατιώτης named Ptolemaios is set to receive a λυχνήν⁸⁵ (*sic*) – very likely an oil lamp or a lampstand – for the price of 3 drachmas. Although the ostrakon does not specify that the object is to be used in a military context, it is tempting to assume that lighting devices listed among the personal equipment of a soldier were thus intended, a view supported by the mutilated UPZ II 204 (134 BC, Thebes), according to which orders are given for supplying oil and wicks to soldiers under the command of the στρατηγὸς Βοηθός. Apart from providing light within a camp, the lighting of lamps was part of wider military tactics. Aeneas Tacticus,⁸⁶ mentions that they serve mostly for defensive purposes such as citadel-guarding, and at the same time provide an easy and obvious form of signalling, especially in the case of hostile movement or invasion. Conversely too, when a sudden attack is being prepared, troops are ordered to extinguish lamps and remain under the protection of darkness.⁸⁷

In another – more public – context, night work or repairs relating to a city's water-supply system⁸⁸ necessitated the use of lamp-light. Indeed, it was for this very purpose that oil was purchased for night-time lamps in Arsinoe, as indicated in P. Lond. III 1177⁸⁹ (113 AD, unknown provenance), ll. 74–75 et *passim*. It is worth mentioning that the sum assigned to lamp oil remains the same for the months Παχών, Παῦνι and Ἐπίφ (12 drachmas), but for the following period there is a gradual reduction (Μεσορή: 7 drachmas; Θώθ: 4 drachmas).⁹⁰ Habermann⁹¹ underlines the fact that the level of oil consumption depended on the hours of night work undertaken at water installations. Thus for the first three months more time was required for pumping water – and this could be all night long since the water level was very low for this period. Rather than being carried by workers, the lamps were placed at specific spots, illuminating the areas where work was needed.⁹² A somewhat interesting parallel is found in

⁸⁵The editor of O. Claud. II 294 mentions that it is not clear from the surface of the ostrakon whether the reading should be λυχνήν or λυχνήον. He suggests that the first term λυχνήν probably denotes λυχνεῖον (= lampstand) and not λυχνίον (= lamp), in accordance with the term ἀγὴν – ἀγγεῖον. However, it should be mentioned that in the Roman Period both εἰ and η correspond to /i/ through the process of itacism, see ALLEN (1968) 74; GIGNAC (1975) 235–241. Furthermore, the ending -ήν could correspond to the abbreviated form -iv = -iov, as for example ῥωσιτάρην = ῥωσιτάριον, ἐνεχύρην = ἐνεχύριον (O. Petr. Mus. 479; 3rd c. AD), ὀψάρην = ὀψάριον (P. Ness. III 49; 6th–7th c. AD, Nessana). For the suffix -iv, -iov, see, PALMER (1945) 79–86; GEORGACAS (1948); HARRAUER–SIJPESTEIJN (1983) 73 n. 15. From this perspective we cannot exclude the possibility that in the aforementioned ostrakon λυχνήν is an orthographic variation of λυχνίον (= lamp). On the other hand, the second term λυχνήον could denote either λυχνίον (oil lamp) or λυχνεῖον (lampstand).

⁸⁶*Poliorcetica* 10. 26. For the term λυχνίον, see above.

⁸⁷Anna Comnena, *Alexias* 7. 3. 6.

⁸⁸The water system of Arsinoe comprised a number of *shadufs* as well as Archimedes screws (κοχλίας). BRUUN (2003) 311–313. The Archimedes screw is attested only in the present document as far as papyrological evidence is concerned, see MALOUTA–WILSON (2013) 292–293.

⁸⁹ll. 74–75: τιμὴς ἐλαίου κα[ύ]σεως λύχ[ν]ων τοῖς διὰ νυκτὸς ἔργα- | ζομένοις (δραχμαὶ) ιβ (διώβολον).

⁹⁰HABERMANN (2000) 161.

⁹¹HABERMANN (2000) 161.

⁹²HABERMANN (2000) 161–162.



Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*:⁹³ in Roman times the use of lamps in public works⁹⁴ – such as the regulation of water streaming from silver deposits – constituted a reliable means of measuring the working hours of labourers (a practice probably initiated by Hannibal). It should be noted also that in a broader context the association of lamps with time was a well-known *topos*, with oil lamps being used as an indicator of time's passage. Expressions such as ἤδη λύχνων καομένων⁹⁵ and λύχνων ἀφάς⁹⁶ in the documents – denoting the lighting of λύχνοι – refer to dusk and are characteristically used to specify the moment when an event took place. The formula λύχνων ἀφῆ is especially common in Greek literary sources.⁹⁷

In addition to manual work, oil lamps facilitated intellectual activity. The assignment of oil to members of Apollonius' retinue in charge of clerical work is recorded in the accounts of P. Corn. 1. Two *kotylae* of castor oil (κίκι)⁹⁸ were to be provided for the illumination of the accounting office of Demetrios, where some clerks of a certain Dioscourides needed to work at night on business matters relating to Apollonius' estate⁹⁹ (ll. 95–99: εἰς τὸ Δημητρίου λογιστήριον | προσγενομένοις τοῖς παρὰ | Διοσκουρίδου γραμματεῦσιν | καὶ σ[υ]γκαθημένοις τὴν νύκτα | ἐπὶ λύχνον κο(τύλαι) β). Castor oil was also assigned for the lighting of other offices – including the accounting offices of Athenagoras, Demetrios and Dionysidoros (ll. 4–7), and the scribes' offices of Iatrokles and Artemidoros (ll. 8–10). However, it is impossible to state with certainty whether in these cases the offices were insufficiently lit by normal daylight, or whether the work itself took place or continued after sundown. The light emitted by an oil lamp could also be company for pupils studying through the night. An interesting case occurs in the *Colloquium Harleianum* P. Prag. II 118 recto (5th c. AD), ll. 13–16¹⁰⁰ where a student who ought to have prepared himself better at the urging of his tutor, knowing that his father would come to check on his progress, “lit the lamp and studied at night”. Naturally, oil lamps were also used in the ancient world to facilitate writing projects. Two distinguished but nonetheless characteristic autobiographical writers merit our attention in this respect: namely Saint Jerome (4th c. AD) and Anna Comnena (12th c. AD). The first mentions in one of his letters (*Ep.* 117. 12)¹⁰¹ that his stenographers had been trying to keep up with his dictating a thirteen-page letter in the middle of the night by the light of a small oil lamp, and the latter states in her *Alexiad*¹⁰² how she wrote during the course of the night in the company of her λύχνος.

⁹³Nat. 33. 97. 1–5.

⁹⁴Similarly, according to Diodorus Siculus, miners in Egypt illuminated the dark passages of goldmines with lamps attached to their foreheads, D.S. 3. 12. 6.

⁹⁵P. Hels. I 2 (195–192 BC, Arsinoites), l. 6.

⁹⁶P. Oxy. LXI 4126 (3rd–4th c. AD, Oxyrhynchus), l. 6.

⁹⁷See e.g. Hdt. 7. 215. 4; Ath. *Deipn.* 12. 31. 16–17;

⁹⁸For the use of castor oil for lighting purposes, see SAMUEL (1963–1964) 32–33; MOSSAKOWSKA (1994) 109, 113–117, 119 and 129–131.

⁹⁹WESTERMANN (1924) 248.

¹⁰⁰For this document, see DICKEY–FERRI (2012).

¹⁰¹ALLEN–NEIL (2020) 28.

¹⁰²1. 15. 6. 21–23: ταῦτα ἐνθυμουμένη μοι μειδιᾶν ἐπέρχεται καὶ γέλως ἐπιτρέχει τοῖς χεῖλεσι πρὸς λύχνον ἐπισυρούση τὸν κάλαμον. See also MOTSIANOS (2011) 201.



2.5. Lamps and theatre

The oil lamp's importance in the realm of theatre¹⁰³ is similarly evident in the archival material. Actors seem to have used oil lamps as the needs of their roles suggested but, in addition to this, the possibility that they were also brought in as a device for scenic effect whenever conditions required cannot be excluded. Particularly noteworthy is the document SB XXVI 16648¹⁰⁴ (5th–6th c. AD, unknown provenance), where equipment necessary for the performance of a mime is itemised. In the second scene,¹⁰⁵ references to a ship, a mast, oars and a lamp evoke nautical imagery. According to S. Perrone,¹⁰⁶ the lines of the papyrus may refer to a secret nocturnal naval operation. One example of such an operation is described in detail by Procopius.¹⁰⁷ The latter states that the placement of oil lamps on the leading ships' sterns – those belonging to Justinian's general Belisarius and his escort – facilitated the safe progress of the fleet in unfavorable weather. Moreover, archaeological finds¹⁰⁸ prove that the 'world of spectacle' inspired local lamp-makers to produce oil lamps in the form of a comic actor or a theatre mask.¹⁰⁹

2.6. Λύχνος and theft

The connection of oil lamps with theft constitutes another topic meriting attention. The archival material attests to their use not only by individuals breaking into houses in order to steal, but also by police officials trying to find and apprehend thieves and burglars during the small hours of the morning.

An interesting case occurs in BGU I 22 (114 AD, Arsinoites), ll. 25–34, a petition addressed by Tarmouthis – victim of a robbery – to Apion, *strategos*¹¹⁰ in the division of Herakleides of the Arsinoite nome.¹¹¹ Reference here seems to be made to detection – by means of an oil lamp – of certain valuables in Tarmouthis' house. According to the petitioner seeking justice, the perpetrator Ammonios came under the pretext of looking for her husband, though the real motive for

¹⁰³For theatre forms of late antiquity, see MILES (1999); REVERMANN (2017) 6–8.

¹⁰⁴This papyrus was first brought to general attention by MANTEUFFEL (1929).

¹⁰⁵ll. 28–34: β ἰς (*leg. εἰς*)... δαι με καὶ τοὺς τεταρ [-ca.?-] [-ca.?-] | φαλιτάρια (*leg. φαλητάρια*) β | φουὰς β | ἄρμενον· πλοῖον | λοῖχνον (*leg. λύχνον*) κοκούλλια [-ca.?-] | κώπας· κουρικόν | φάγιν (*leg. φάγιον*)· χόρτον.

¹⁰⁶PERRONE (2011) 134–135.

¹⁰⁷*De bellis* 3. 13.

¹⁰⁸For similar lamps originating from Egypt, see BUSSIÈRE–WOHL (2017), no. 593, 601. There is an interesting category of “bronze lamps that have a mask on the end of an arching handle”: see GREEN (2012).

¹⁰⁹MENZEL (1969) 7, argues that the field of drama was also a cherished theme in the context of oil-lamp ornamentation in antiquity. This particular category of lamps offers not only representations of scenes from well-known tragedies and comedies and lost plays too, but also constitutes a significant source as far as theatrical costumes and actors' masks are concerned.

¹¹⁰Apart from the arrangement of administrative and financial matters, *stratego*i were also tasked with resolving disputes related to civil law. For the role of *stratego*i during the Roman period, see e.g. ERMAN–KREBS (1899) 133–134; ALY (1950) 292–306; WHITEHORNE (1981); WHITEHORNE (1988); DERDA (2006) 85–87; KRYLOVA (2014); FISCHER–BOVET–SÄNGER (2019) 176; KRUSE (2019) 127–132.

¹¹¹For *stratego*i of the Arsinoite nome, see DERDA (2006) 83–112 with an extended bibliography.



this unwanted visit was nothing other than theft.¹¹² Tarmouthis describes in vivid terms how he entered her home having previously removed her lamp, and then stole a pair of silver bracelets worth forty drachmas in weight. The lighting device in this case seems to have been a useful tool at the disposal of the offender, a means of guiding him towards the house's valuables.

Nonetheless, the episode seems in general terms to represent an exception, since the majority of literary sources make it clear that a λύχνος might rather constitute an obstacle to potential thieves. The power of its light – throwing everything into visibility – would either prevent them from approaching their victims' homes¹¹³ or otherwise restrict their freedom of movement during the very act of night-time burglary. There was thus a tendency to take preliminary precautions: specifically, thieves were careful to make sure that all the unsuspecting residents were soundly asleep¹¹⁴ and any household lamps had been similarly put out before they entered. This customary nightly action might be explained not only by a desire to save oil¹¹⁵ but also by the householder's concern to protect their house from accidental fire.¹¹⁶ However, in cases where oil lamps were kept alight, or even where they were lit again unexpectedly, thieves would immediately attempt to extinguish them.¹¹⁷ In a passage of the homily *De Profectu Evangelii* by Saint John Chrysostom,¹¹⁸ we read that when a robber was met with the sudden lighting of a lamp, he would rush to put out its light and break the lampstand, thereupon making off with his loot in all haste. It is reasonable to surmise that the motivation here was primarily to avoid detection, and thus to escape into the night eluding any form of punishment. Evidently, the case in the aforementioned papyrus is altogether different, since the woman Tarmouthis – unprotected and unable to defend herself – knew only too well the person who had brazenly stolen bracelets from her home. For this reason, the possibility that the λύχνος of the document could also have belonged among the stolen items cannot be excluded.

Coming at the matter from the other direction, it appears also that oil lamps were a key part of the equipment used by officers on night patrols. According to one case described in papyrus P. Brem. 40 (2nd c. AD, Hermopolis Magna), policemen in Apollonopolites Heptakomias used

¹¹²In a petition in relation to theft, destined for police officers, the injured party pursued the arrest and punishment of culprits as well as the restitution of any stolen property. See TAUBENSCHLAG (1955) 457–458.

¹¹³Chrys. *ep. Eph.* 62. 122. 13–14: Καθάπερ γὰρ λύχνου κειμένου πάντες φωτίζονται, καὶ ὁ ληστὴς οὐκ ἂν ἐπεισέλθοι; Euth. Zigab. *Com. in Paul. ep. Eph.* 5. 13. 7–8: Καὶ καθάπερ, λύχνου φαίνοντος ἐν οἴκῳ, φωτίζεται μὲν πάντα τὰ ἐνδον, οὐκ εἰσέρχεται δὲ ληστὴς.

¹¹⁴Chrys. *prof. evang.* 51. 314. 1–2: Καθάπερ γὰρ τις ληστὴς τῆς οἰκίας ἐπιβάς, καθευδόντων ἀπάντων, τὰ πάντα ὑφαιρούμενος.

¹¹⁵Plutarchus in his *Quaestiones Convivales* mentions that Romans of the present day were in the habit of extinguishing the light of oil lamps so as not to waste oil, see Plu. *Quaes. Conv.* 702d. 9–11: τοὺς δὲ νῦν εὐθὺς ἀποσβεννύναι μετὰ τὸ δεῖπνον, ὅπως μὴ μάτην τοῦλαιον ἀναλίσκωσιν.

¹¹⁶It is worth noting here information offered by a passage in the homily *In Matthaëum* by Saint John Chrysostom which refers to people taking care to extinguish oil lamps at night for fear of fire. See Chrys. *hom. in Mat.* 58. 653. 45–47: ἃ πολλοὶ δεδοικασιν, τοὺς λύχνους μετὰ ἀκριβείας κοιμίζοντες, μὴ που σπινθήρ ἐμπρήσῃ τὴν οἰκίαν.

¹¹⁷Chrys. *ep. Corinth.* 61. 92. 22–24: Καθάπερ γὰρ ληστὰς καὶ τοιχωρύκται, ἐπειδὴν τὶ τῶν τιμίων λαβεῖν θελήσωσιν, τὸν λύχνον κατασβέσαντες τοῦτο πράττουσιν; Isid. *Pel. ep.* 1818. 6–7: καὶ ληστὰς τοὺς λύχνους σβεννύντες ἐπὶ τὸ ληστεύειν τρέπονται.

¹¹⁸Chrys. *prof. evang.* 51. 314. 2–5: ἐπειδὴν ἴδῃ τινὰ λύχνον ἄψαντα, καὶ τὸ φῶς σβέννυσι, καὶ τὸν λυχνούχον ἀναρεῖ, ἵνα μετὰ ἀδείας αὐτῷ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὑφαιρεῖσθαι καὶ ἀρπάξῃ ἐξῇ.



oil lamps in the middle of the night to try to locate some ruthless burglars who had broken into the house of the deceased Kollauthis, entirely ransacking it and leaving nothing behind.

But can it be said that oil lamps in themselves attracted the attention of potential thieves? Λύχνοι are not recorded explicitly as loot in the Greek papyri and ostraca at our disposal. However, it is worth nothing – as already indicated – that oil lamps made of clay were cheap and readily available items in comparison to their metal counterparts, providing a plausible explanation why robbers refrained from stealing them. Nevertheless, reference is indeed made to the theft of their accompanying paraphernalia – and more especially lampstands (λυχνίαι)¹¹⁹ which were made of metal. We are informed in the letter P. Coll.Youtie I 7 recto (224 BC, Arsinoites), l. 10, that a copper lampstand (λυχνίαν χαλκήν) featured among various items stolen from a looted flat-bottomed boat.¹²⁰ Furthermore, in the petition P. Hamb. I 10 (2nd c. AD, Theadelphia), which provides information about a robbery with murder,¹²¹ lampstands are included in the list of stolen objects made of bronze or copper, known as χαλκώματα.¹²²

2.7. The side-effects of the use of oil lamps

In spite of the usefulness of oil lamps in the everyday life of the residents of Egypt, there were also circumstances where the light they emitted needed to be avoided. In the medical text *P. Ant.* II 64 (6th c. AD, Antinoopolis), ll. 14–18, we find a recipe regarding the preparation of ἰάτον, a πρόπομα of ‘wine scented with violets’¹²³ and helpful for those suffering from kidney disorders¹²⁴ or paralysis (πάρεσις).¹²⁵ Following the instructions given in l. 18, the prepared beverage was to be placed away from a lamp’s light.¹²⁶ The last enigmatic phrase of l. 18, οπου λυχνος ουκ εισφεννει (*sic*), may perhaps be explained on the basis of the product’s sensitivity to the lamp’s light or warmth. However, the paucity of an oil lamp’s emitted light and heat, as well as the lack of relevant documentation from other sources, renders this view rather unlikely. Relevant in this instance is a passage of Pliny’s, who in the context of the storage of wine – a procedure denoted in our papyrus with the term ἀπόθου¹²⁷ – notes that “all objects with a strong smell should be avoided, as it very easily passes into wine.”¹²⁸ It seems, therefore, that reference is being made here to the odour produced by an oil lamp. Indeed, literary sources

¹¹⁹PREISIGKE–KIESSLING (1925–1931) WB II, s.v. λυχνία; LAMPE (1961), s.v. λυχνία; MOTSIANOS (2011) 205 no. 1635, 223; MAKRI–DRAKOS (2022) 653–654 with further bibliography.

¹²⁰The phrase ὡχοντο δ’ ἔχοντες in lines 6–7 is used to designate this crime, see TAUBENSCHLAG (1955) 453.

¹²¹For the offence of robbery with murder, see TAUBENSCHLAG (1955) 433.

¹²²LSJ⁹, s.v. χάλκωμα.

¹²³For ἰάτον and other *vina fictitia* in the Greek papyri, see FOURNET–MAGDELAINE (2001); MARAVELA–SOLBAKK (2010) 262; MARGANNE–DE HARO SANCHEZ (2014) 98.

¹²⁴Alex. Trall. *Therap.* 2. 473. 9.

¹²⁵Alex. Trall. *Therap.* 1. 585. 9.

¹²⁶*P. Ant.* II 64, n. in l. 17. Of special interest is the reference of the recipe to a lamp, given the fact that this detail is absent from its variants in the medical literature, where neither lamp nor lamplight are mentioned: Apicius, *De re coqu.* 1. 4. 1. 9–10; Orib. *Collect. Med.* 5. 33. 6; Palladius, *Op. agric.* 3. 32; 5. 5.

¹²⁷LSJ⁹, s.v. ἀποτίθημι; ANDORLINI (2017) 143 n. 5.

¹²⁸N.H. 14. 133. 7 – 134. 1: *omniaque odoris evitandi facillimo in vina transitu*. We follow here the translation of RACKHAM (1960) 275.



frequently comment on the foul smell of an extinguished lamp's lingering smoke, known as βδόλος or ἡ δυσωδία τοῦ λύχνου, which was listed amongst the most malodorous smells.¹²⁹ Furthermore, the possible usage of inferior quality or ill-smelling oils – such as castor oil and some types of locally produced olive oil¹³⁰ – could lead to a similar effect even when the oil lamp was lit. Again, violets (ῖα) were a type of plant with ἀσθενεῖς ὀσμά, ¹³¹ namely one whose scent faded quickly after cutting, and according to Aetius¹³² their perfumed oil – named also ἰάτον – could easily lose its refined fragrance if the instructions of the recipe were not followed to the letter. So, it is possible that the placement of the beverage away from a lamp constituted a precaution against the ill-smelling smoke of an extinguished or perhaps burning λύχνος, which could alter the drink's scent or even its taste.

3. THE USE OF THE TERM Λύχνος IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

A final point of interest lies in the presence of λύχνος in figurative language. Expressions such as λύχνον ἐν μεσημβρία ἄπτεις,¹³³ used for untimely actions, and λύχνου ἀρθέντος γυνὴ πᾶσα ἡ αὐτή,¹³⁴ which expresses a somewhat condescending view towards women, are both very well-

¹²⁹Aret. CA 2. 3. 5–7: ὁσμὴ κακωδέων / πίσης ὕλης, τριχῶν, εἰρίου κεκαυμένων, λύχνου φλογὸς ἐσβεσμένης, / καστορίου. Ps.-Zonar. s.v. βδόλος: Τὸν βδόλον οὐκ ἔσθ' ἥτις ῥίς ὑποστήναι δύναται. EM, s.v. βδόλος: Τὸν βδόλον οὐκ ἔσθ' ἥτις ῥίς ὑποστήναι δύναται. Etym. Symeonis, s.v. βδόλος: καὶ βδόλος μὲν ἐστὶν ὁ ἀπὸ / τοῦ ἐλλυχνίου καπνὸς καὶ ἡ δυσωδία, καὶ γίνεται, ὡς εἴρηται, ἀπὸ / τοῦ ὄζω.

¹³⁰Castor oil is by nature a strong oil with an unpleasant odor. Hdt. 2. 94. 2: ἔστι δὲ πῖον καὶ οὐδὲν ἥσσον τοῦ ἐλαίου / τῷ λύχνῳ προσηνές, ὁδμὴν δὲ βαρέαν παρέχεται. SAMUEL (1963–1964) 32; MOTSIANOS (2011) 386. There are also testimonies which confirm that olive trees grown in some regions of Egypt produced under certain circumstances oil of a less pleasing smell. Thphr. HP 4. 2. 9. Str. Geogr. 17. 1. 35. 11–15. LUCAS (1948), 386. However, in the archival material of the Roman and Byzantine periods the kind of oil used in lamps is rarely specified. MOSSAKOWSKA (1994) 131. In terms of what was customary in Egypt, the contribution of archaeobotanical studies on oil residues has been significant. Radish oil has been detected in ceramic lamps from Late Antique Antinoe as well as from a Coptic Church in Bawit, Egypt, COLOMBINI–GIACHI–MODUGNO–RIBECHINI (2005); ROMANUS–VAN NEER ET AL. (2008). The analysis of a number of lamps excavated from Qasr Ibrim – an adjacent site that was for a period annexed to Egypt – prove that castor, radish, sesame, and linen oil, as well as animal fat, were used as illuminants, see COPLEY–BLAND ET AL. (2005) 870. Traces of animal fat seem also to have been identified in late-Roman to early-Byzantine lamps from Sagalassos, Turkey (see KIMPE–JACOBS–WAELEKENS [2001]), a fact which certainly prompts the question whether animal fat was also employed as an illuminant in the land of the Nile. To the best of our knowledge, the absence of relevant documentation from Egyptian sources does not allow us – at least at this moment in time – to answer this question with certainty. In any case it is perhaps relevant that the burning of animal tallow emits a strong smell. MOULLOU (2002) 16 n. 101. For animal tallow as illuminant in antiquity, see MOTSIANOS (2011) 380–381.

¹³¹Thphr. CP 6. 14. 11. 1–2.

¹³²1. 118. 6–8: εἰ γὰρ ἐπὶ πλέον ἡλιωθεῖ τὸ κρίνινον ἢ τὸ ναρκίσσινον ἢ τὸ ἰάτον ἢ ἄλλο τι τῶν μὴ ἰσχυρὰν καὶ μόνιμον ἔχόντων τὴν εὐωδίαν, ἄνοσμον ἀποτελεῖται.

¹³³Paus. Attic. Ἀττικῶν ὀνομάτων συναγωγή, lambda 29. 1–2: λύχνον ἐν μεσημβρία ἄπτεις· ἐπὶ τῶν ἐν καιρῷ ἀνεπιτηδεῖν τι ποιοῦντων.

¹³⁴Mich. Apost. Collectio paroemiarum 10. 90. 1–6: λύχνου ἀρθέντος γυνὴ πᾶσα ἡ αὐτή: τοῦτο πρὸς τοὺς μοιχικοὺς καὶ ἀκολάστους εἴρηται καλῶς. τὴν δὲ γαμετὴν δεῖ μάλιστα τοῦ φωτὸς ἀρθέντος εἶναι μὴ τὴν αὐτὴν ταῖς τυχοῦσαις γυναιξίν, ἀλλὰ φαίνεσθαι τοῦ σώματος μὴ βλεπομένου τὸ σῶφρον αὐτῆς καὶ ἥδιον τῷ ἀνδρὶ καὶ τεταγμένον καὶ φιλόστοργον.



known proverbs in antiquity.¹³⁵ Yet, sayings of this type are absent from the archival material accessible to us so far. Nevertheless, an instance of special interest presents itself in the simile τὸ παιδὶν (*leg.* παιδίον) | ἐπείμβλεψον (*leg.* ἐπέμβλεψον) ὡς λύχνον, found in the letter SB XII 10799 (24 BC–14 AD, unknown provenance), where a soldier urged his wife to arrange for the protection of their son during his absence: “Take care of the child as (you would) with the lamp.”¹³⁶ The use of the specific phrase was certainly not a random choice, but rather a manifestation of soldier Heraklas’ fear and apprehension for the fate of his little child, emotions stirred of course by paternal love. It should be observed nonetheless that the context of this fragmentary papyrus does not leave much room for clarification regarding the exact resonance of the simile, and we cannot be entirely certain whether an analogy is being drawn here between the child and the oil lamp itself, or whether the child is being likened to the light that the lamp emits. And even though Heraklas by means of the phrase ἐπὶ λῆϊον ἀ[γ]ωνιῶι περὶ υἱῶν expresses concern also for his wife, his seemingly top priority was to make sure of the safety and well-being of his child, possibly in both physical and mental senses.¹³⁷ Finally, interesting is the phrase λύχνον οὐχ ἦψα οὐδὲ προσ- / [φ]άγειν ἦψηκα (I have not lit a lamp nor have I cooked food), which appears in the ostrakon O. Krok. II 194 (98–138 AD, Krokodilo) ll. 13–14. This phrase seems to have been used metaphorically expressing the intense emotions of a woman, specifically her sadness, for the departure of a person named Didymos.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Greek papyri and ostraca testify that λύχνος played an important role in the daily life of the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods. It was a *sine-qua-non* household item used for lighting and sometimes for decorative purposes, but it also features among the articles which could be given as an inheritance or pledged in case of need. Furthermore, oil lamps were associated with the more significant events of private life, such as banquets and wedding celebrations, while they seem to have formed part of the private shrines of the house. Moreover, the light they emitted facilitated the completion of a variety of manual and intellectual tasks performed at night or in closed spaces when daylight was insufficient. However, the lighting of oil lamps was not always desirable. It seems that they constituted an obstacle in the case of thieves who were trying after dark to perpetrate illegal acts, undetected by their victims or the police. The archival material also shows the negative effects of the lighting of an oil lamp. The smell of fuel could negatively

¹³⁵For the use of proverbs, see e.g. FOUFOPOULOS–LITINAS (2005); LAZARIDIS (2007); CHOUILIARA–RAIOS (2017) with an extended bibliography.

¹³⁶For this letter, see KOTSIFOU (2012) 76.

¹³⁷A similar concern is expressed in a passage from the first homily *De Anna* of Saint John Chrysostom, where a scene from everyday life is drawn upon in order to emphasize by analogy the need to safeguard the souls of young people, which are likened to oil lamps. More specifically, just as servant girls tasked with the lighting of the lamps must keep them away from flammable materials such as reeds, hay etc. to ensure that the house remains protected from the possibility of a spark starting a fire, in the same way should children be advised and kept away from indecent influences – immodest servant girls, immoral young women, licentious slave girls and so on – to avoid traumatizing their souls. Thus, children are likened to oil lamps, flammable material to indecent women, the spark that starts a fire to a spark caused by bad influences, and the fire itself and the ensuing destruction of a house to the upset and the irreparable damage caused to their souls, see *De Anna* 54. 642. 18–33.



affect the quality of a product by altering its taste and smell. Finally, another interesting aspect also revealed by Greek papyri and ostraca is the use of the term *λύχνος* in figurative speech, contributing to the expression of emotions and rendering speech more vivid.

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