

Publication

Of Toddlers and Donkeys. Roman Lamps with Slaves and Self-Representations of Slaves

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Throughout this contribution, I have used images on Roman discus lamps as evidence to elucidate attitudes toward slaves, the construction of stereotypical slave characters, and possible discourse among slaves. I examined the kinds of self-representations slaves might have been proud of, which images they might have liked and laughed about, and what may have made them snigger to themselves. I have shown that Roman lamps are a medium that is most relevant to the discussion of slave iconography since the relationship between the lamp and the slave is so multi-faceted, and I am fully convinced that there is still a lot to discover in these miniature images. We have seen that lamps often exhibit the slaveholder's tastes, and, not surprisingly, this is more often the case with expensive bronze lamps than their cheap clay counterparts. The images testify to mechanisms of sanitization or to the downplaying of slave realities through 'cute' depictions of faithful slave children. The images are also used to display the slaveholder's wealth through the depiction of beautiful slaves. And, in other cases, they serve to distance slaves from the owner by emphasizing the assumed 'otherness' of stupid, fearful, and disabled slaves. Whereas images that conform to slaveholders' attitudes are relatively well known, I have embarked on new lines of investigation by interpreting less deprecating images of slaves that were produced as self-representations. Only in rare instances, like in some of the occupational portraits with identifying inscriptions, can it be solidly proven that the figures represent slaves. Otherwise we have to proceed on unstable and slippery grounds. But if we do so carefully enough, then I am convinced that what we gain is more than rewarding. It is a fascinating and rare glimpse into the slave's visual world, and it is a path that we can hardly afford not to continue exploring.

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