

**The Power of Light: Λύχνος in the Ritual and Religious Life
of Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt as evidenced
by Greek papyri and *ostraka****

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give insight into the religious significance of oil lamps in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt through the examination of the surviving Greek papyri and *ostraka* as well as the sources of Greek and Latin literature. Firstly, we place emphasis on the terms denoting this artifact (λύχνος, λυχνία etc.), as well as the ritualistic process of its lighting (λυχναψία, λυχνοκαΐα). Another section is devoted to the particular role of λύχνοι in Egyptian rituals (worship ceremonies, burial practices etc.) and the continuation of their significance from the pagan era into the Christian.

Keywords

Oil lamps, religion, Egypt

The use of artificial-light sources reveals from a very early stage in history the human need to make up for the loss of natural light after sundown. The light given off facilitated the continuation of a wide range of activities, while forming a pleasant companion during the long night's dark monotony. A huge number of discoveries in archaeological excavations in the country of the Nile shows that among various lighting devices available the oil lamp was the most dominant.¹

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¹ The bibliography on this topic is quite extensive. See, e.g. Walters 1914, 15-16 et passim; Loeschke 1919; Shier 1978; Kadous 1992; Mlynarczyk 1997; Moutsianos 2011, 166-167 et passim.

Terminology²

The term λύχνος [root *leup- from λεύσσω, λευκός, etc. with suffix *-sno, therefore *λύκσνο-]³ – with a two-gender plural: λύχνοι (οἱ) and λύχνα (τά)⁴ – was widely used for the designation of oil lamps.⁵ Noteworthy is also the term λυχνάρια, which occurs, to the best of our knowledge, in P.Lond. V 1657 (4th/5th c. A.D., unknown provenance), l. 3, as well as in the inscription SEG 8. 215 (5th c. A.D., Jerusalem).⁶ At a first glance this derivative could be taken as a diminutive signifying the small size of this particular lighting device;⁷ nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that here we do not have to do with the diminutive suffix -αριον of classical Greek, which had by the late Roman and early Byzantine period become almost obsolete, but rather with the Graeco-Roman suffix -αριον (< -arium), which during this era is commonly found in Greek stem neuters designating utensils, instruments etc.⁸

No less interesting is the case of the derivative λυχνία (ἡ),⁹ alternatively known as λυχνέα¹⁰ or λυχνεία,¹¹ which often appears in the Greek papyri and ostraca in reference to lampstands.¹² In a number of documents¹³ λυχνία and λύχνος seem to have been used in different senses, which leads us to the conclusion that they were in fact two distinct objects. This view is further supported by information offered by Greek literary sources. According to Julius Pollux,¹⁴ the lampstand upon which the oil lamp (λύχνος) was placed was called λυχνία, while Oecumenius¹⁵ mentions that λυχνία was not the actual light source but the object supporting the lamp whence light was emitted.

Exceptional, however, is the case of the account SB XXII 15526 (5th c. A.D., Herakleopolites?), where it appears that λυχνία does not carry the aforementioned meaning exclusively, but is potentially

² Some preliminary remarks about the terminology regarding the oil lamps and their religious significance are presented in this paper solely from Greek archival material and literary sources. A further exploration of Egyptian texts would undoubtedly provide additional valuable information on this topic and we hope to be able to present this material in the near future.

³ Chantraine 1970, III, s.v. λύχνος.

⁴ Of special interest is the term [λύ]χναί, used in the papyrus P.Prag. II 178 (5th/6th c. A.D.; unknown provenance), col. II, l. 9, l. 11, which constitutes a first declension noun. We cannot state with certainty, however, whether the irregular gender noun λύχνος is to be considered heteroclitite or in this case was rather to do with scribal error.

⁵ See, e.g. P.Cair.Zen. I 59010 (259 B.C., Philadelphia), col. II l. 29; P.Cair.Masp. III 67340 verso (6th c. A.D., Aphroditopolis), l. 77.

⁶ Apart from the two instances mentioned above, the term appears eight more times (in the two forms λυχνάριον, λυχνάρην) in Greek sources of the 12th c. A.D. onwards (according to the TLG, see [<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>], accessed 30.08.2020).

⁷ Chantraine 1970, III, s.v. λύχνος; LBG, V, s.v. λυχνάριον; Beekes 2010, s.v. λύχνος.

⁸ Palmer 1945, 83-84; Filos 2009, 331-341.

⁹ See, for example, BGU VIII 1854 (74/73 or 45/44 B.C., Herakleopolites), l. 11; P.Wash.Univ. I 58 (5th c. A.D., Oxyrhynchus), l. 20.

¹⁰ P.Bacch. 1 = SB VI 9319 (116 A.D., Bacchias), col. I l. 12. The confusion of ε and ι can be explained on the grounds of phonology. Gignac 1975, 251-252.

¹¹ See, e.g. P.Coll.Youtie I 7 recto (224 B.C., Arsinoites), l. 10. For the confusion of ε and ι, see Gignac 1975, 190-191.

¹² WB, II, s.v. λυχνία; Lampe 1961, s.v. λυχνία; Moutsianos 2011, 205 n. 1635, 223.

¹³ See, e.g. PSI VII 858 (3rd c. B.C., Philadelphia), ll. 46-47; P.Oxy. LVI 3860 verso (4th c. A.D., Oxyrhynchus), l. 34.

¹⁴ Poll., *Onomasticon* 10.115.6-7; cf. Aster. Soph., *Comment. in Psalmos* 11.3.13-14.

¹⁵ Oecumen., *Comment. in Apocalyps.* 40.11-13; cf. Moutsianos 2011, 269. A similar view was expressed by Arethas, see *Comment. in Apocalyps.* 516.48-50.

used as a hypernym including more specific terms (hyponyms), namely the lighting device and/or its equipment. This is indicated by the initial phrase of the document † γνῶ(σις) λυχνί(ων) (leg. λυχνι(ῶν)) οὔτ(ως), which refers to the following groups of objects:

i. various types of oil lamps as well as other lighting devices, including λυχνί(αι) ὑαλ(αῖ) or glass lamps (l. 2),¹⁶ κηρ(ιο)φάλα(α), which were possibly wax-lamps (l. 5),¹⁷ πλοιά(ρια) or boat-shaped oil lamps (l. 9),¹⁸ ὄρνιθά(ρια) or bird-shaped lamps (l. 10),¹⁹ κάνθαρο(ι), which were oil lamps shaped like the drinking cups with the same name (l. 11),²⁰ ἀναβήματα – most likely lamps for the bema (l. 15)²¹ – and κανίσκια, which were openwork or latticework lamps (l. 17).²²

ii. lamp support holders, such as πολυκάνδ(ηλα) or chandelier (l. 6),²³ στέφανος – perhaps a type of πολυκάνδηλον – and κηριαπτά(ρια), which could hold oil lamps or candles.²⁴ As far as the composite noun χειρ(ο)λυχνί(αι) is concerned, given the precise meaning of the two parts of the word (χείρ+λυχνία), it is reasonable to assume that it can be interpreted as a type of portable lampstand (l. 3). However, if we take into account the 25th line of P.Grenf. II 111 = Chrest. Wilck. 135 recto (5th/6th c. A.D., Ibion), where χειρολυχν(ία) is accompanied by the technical term μύξ(αι), that always refers to the oil lamps' nozzles for the wick,²⁵ the possibility that the term in question may refer to a portable oil lamp cannot be excluded.²⁶

iii. suspension equipment, for instance, chains ἀλυσ(ίδια) (l. 7).²⁷

iv. devices for extinguishing the lamps' light, such as κατασβε(στήρες) (l. 12).²⁸

The placement of oil lamps in temples

There are a number of documents, which inform us about oil lamps being located mainly within the interiors of temples. In the inventory BGU I 338 (2nd/3rd c. A.D., Arsinoites), it is mentioned that copper

¹⁶ Montserrat 1995, 440. For another interpretation of the phrase as «glass lampstands», see Motsianos 2011, 223.

¹⁷ Mango 1986, 65; Montserrat 1995, 440-441.

¹⁸ Walters 1914, 56 no. 391; Montserrat 1995, 441; Motsianos 2011, 194.

¹⁹ Montserrat 1995, 441-442.

²⁰ Mango 1986, 102-103; Montserrat 1995, 442; Ryzhov / Yashaeva 2019, 140, 146.

²¹ An analysis of this term is to be found in Montserrat 1995, 443-444.

²² Bouras 1985, 486; Montserrat 1995, 444; LBG, IV, s.v. κανίσκιον. According to Motsianos, κανίσκια constituted lamp support holders. See Motsianos 2011, 211.

²³ Motsianos 2019, 52, 54, 59-60.

²⁴ Montserrat 1995, 442-443; Maravela-Solbakk 2009, 141-142.

²⁵ Motsianos 2011, 205.

²⁶ Cf. Caseau 2007, 575.

²⁷ Motsianos 2011, 332.

²⁸ This term is not recorded elsewhere, but Montserrat's reading seems convincing, since the suffix -τηρ in the Post-Ptolemaic period is chiefly used in the formation of derivatives denoting instruments, see Palmer 1945, 108-109. However, an alternative reading could be κατασβε(στήρια). The suffix -τηριον during the same period is also used for the indication of instruments, see Palmer 1945, 109-110. In addition to this, the term σβεστήριον as a substantive refers to a means of extinguishing fire, see LSJ, s.v. σβεστήριος, α, ον.

lamps were situated in a vestry (στολιστήριο).²⁹ Yet it remains unclear whether these lamps were serving as a source of illumination or were simply being stored there among other ceremonial objects.

Furthermore, the oil lamp was closely associated with the sacrificial altar,³⁰ where most ceremonies took place. According to the extensive account P.Tebt. III₂ 894 recto (114 B.C., Tebtynis), among the expenditures of a particular Egyptian guild one hundred drachmas were assigned for the oil lamps of some unspecified altars.³¹ Noteworthy in this respect is 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 A.D., Arsinoites), an account of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus at Arsinoe. The repeated formulation εἰς λυχναΐαν ἐν τῷ σηκῷ is indicative of the location, where λυχναΐα³² plausibly took place. The reference to the oil lamps of σηκός, the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, can be explained on the basis of their particular ritual significance. Σηκός³³, was the main *cella*,³⁴ where the deity's cult statue was situated. The placement of lamps near the statue aimed to provoke the divine epiphany. The emitted light recalled the divine radiance of epiphany, as is well attested by Greek literary sources.³⁵ According to an inscription³⁶ from Stratonikeia in Karia, the epiphany of Zeus Panamaros was followed by the miraculous lighting of his temple's lamps. And thus the burning lamp, λύχνος καιόμενος, constituted a sign of the physical manifestation of his divine presence.

The importance of λύχνος is evident in documents which mention the specialized staff exclusively occupied with this particular object. The office of λυχνάπται, «lamplighters», is attested in two papyri and one mummy label.³⁷ Information surrounding their role is given in P.Oxy. XII 1453, which preserves the text of “the oath of the λυχνάπται” of the shrines of Sarapis, Isis, and Thoreris,³⁸ located at Oxyrhynchus. Among their basic duties were the supervision of lamps (ll. 14-16 προστατήσ[ειν] / τοῦ λύχνου τῶν προδεδηλωμέν[ων] / ἱερῶν) and the supply of a suitable quantity of a fine-quality oil for the ceremony of λυχναΐα (ll. 16-18 καὶ χορη[γ]ή- / σειν τὸ καθήκον ἔλαιον εἰς τοὺς καθ' ἡ- / μέραν λύχνους καιόμενους).³⁹ It should be underlined here that this specific office was not restricted

²⁹ Otto 1905, 84. For στολιστής, see Idem, 83-85.

³⁰ Hug 1927, 1586; Galavaris 1978, 73. For the connection between lamps and sacrificial altar in PGM, see also Zografou 2010, 279-281

³¹ Fr. 10, l. 10: λύχνων εἰς τοὺς βομοὺς (sic) ρ.

³² On the topic of λυχναΐα in the Capitoline temple at Arsinoe, see Otto 1905, 9-10; Otto 1908, 11; Montserrat 1995, 435 and n. 13.

³³ LSJ, s.v. σηκός.

³⁴ Miles 2016, 208. For σηκός, the inner room of the Greek temple, which should not be identified with ἄδυτον or ἄβατον, see Hollinshead 1999, 189, 207.

³⁵ Cf. *h. Cer.* 275-280, where the revelation of the divinity of Demeter is followed by astonishing dazzlement. For the relation between light and divine epiphany, see Gladigow 1990, 99; Steiner 2001, 100-103.

³⁶ IStratonikeia 10 (39 B.C.), l. 27.

³⁷ P.Oxy. XII 1453 = Sel.Pap. II 327 (30/29 B.C., Oxyrhynchus); PSI X 1151 = SB XXVI 16459 (107/108 A.D., Tebtynis), l. 6; T.Mom.Louvre 828 = C.Étiq.Mom. 1239 (2nd/3rd c. A.D., unknown provenance), ll. 1-3.

³⁸ For the Egyptian hippopotamus goddess Taweret, protector of the city Oxyrhynchus, see Chouliara-Raios 2003, 409-414.

³⁹ See also P.Oxy. XII 1453, l. 4 note. Montserrat 1995, 435 and n. 13; Dunand 1973, 222.

to men. In an Athenian inscription⁴⁰ connected to the cult of Isis, a woman bears the titles of *λυχνάπτρια* and *ὄνειροκρίτις*, «interpreter of dreams». It is also worth mentioning at this point that *λυχνάπτται* – as far as the Sarapeion of Memphis is concerned – were gathered in a special place known as *λυχνάπτιον*.⁴¹

Another term, likely denoting a sacred office is the *hapax* *λυχνοδότης*. In the Supplement to LSJ⁴² it is maintained that the noun refers to an Egyptian priest, an opinion confirmed by the context of P.Hib. II 213 (3rd c. B.C., Oxyrhynchus), where different ranks of the Egyptian priesthood are enumerated. The restoration of the 11th line *λυχνοδότων Σαραπίδος*⁴³ by W. Clarysse⁴⁴ reveals that they were priests of Sarapis. We may assume that the title *λυχνοδόται*, which means «lantern-givers», shows that they had an important though unfortunately unknown role in the ceremonies of Sarapis.

Λυχναψία and λυχνοκαΐα

A further angle on this matter requiring comment is the nature of the terms *λυχναψία* and *λυχνοκαΐα* within religious framework. A number of documents show that phrases such as *λύχνων ἀφή*,⁴⁵ *ἄπτω τὸν λύχνον*,⁴⁶ *λύχνος καόμενος*,⁴⁷ and *καῶσις τῶν λύχνων*,⁴⁸ as well as the composite noun *λυχνοκαΐα*, refer to the process of lighting the lamps, known as *λυχναψία*⁴⁹. Of special interest is the opinion of Cephesodorus⁵⁰, who connected the latter with *λυχνοκαυστία*, as we can see from the fragment preserved by Athenaeus in his *Learned Banqueters*. Nevertheless, it should be stated clearly that *λυχνοκαυστία* – at least as far as we have been able to investigate – makes no appearance in any papyri or *ostraka* of the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods.

Aside from its practical aspect, *λυχναψία* also constituted a ritualistic process that took place every day in the temples of Egypt, as is attested by lines 16-19 of P.Oxy. XII 1453. In fact, according to the petition BGU VIII 1854, oil lamps were apparently kept alight in temples for the entire duration of both day and night in honour of the gods: *ἀδιαλ[ίπτως* (leg. *ἀδιαλε[ίπτως*) *τὰς λυχνοκαΐας τοῖς θεοῖς* (l. 4).

⁴⁰ IG II² 4771. Hug 1927, 1585; Dunand 1973, 222 n.7.

⁴¹ SB I 1934 (4th c. A.D., Memphis); Wilcken 1927, 35; LSJ, s.v. *λυχνάπτιον*. For the different views of previous scholars, some of whom suggested that *λυχνάπτιον* was not a structure but a useful object for lighting or holding the lamps, cf. Egger 1860, 120-125; Renberg 2016.

⁴² LSJ, s.v. *λυχνοδότης* (lantern-giver. Priest in Egyptian temple).

⁴³ Leg. *λυχνοδοτῶν Σαραπίδος*.

⁴⁴ Clarysse 2009, 243.

⁴⁵ P.Tebt. I 88 = Chrest. Wilck. 67 (115/114 B.C., Tebtynis), col. I ll. 12-13.

⁴⁶ P.Athen. 60 recto (4th-1st c. B.C., unknown provenance), ll. 4-6.

⁴⁷ P.Oxy. XII 1453 (30/29 B.C., Oxyrhynchus), ll. 17-18.

⁴⁸ P.Oxy. XII 1453, ll. 17-18.

⁴⁹ Rusch 1940, 420.

⁵⁰ Ath., *Deipn.* 15. 60. 136-137.

This very ritual was primarily connected with various Egyptian temples, where the cult of Osiris and Isis was central, including those of Isis in Soknopaiou Nesos⁵¹ and Cynopolis,⁵² of Senharpocrates in Hierakonpolis⁵³ as well as those of Serapis, Isis and Thoth in Oxyrhynchus.⁵⁴ The same also applied to the cult of Soknobraisis in Bakchias,⁵⁵ and that of Petesouchos in Kerkeosiris.⁵⁶ This practice – also attested in the Graeco-Roman temple of Apollo,⁵⁷ as well as Jupiter Capitolinus in Arsinoe,⁵⁸ and later in Christian churches⁵⁹ – illustrates that the ritualistic lighting of lamps (λυχναψία) survived and transitioned from the pagan into the Christian era.⁶⁰

The archival material at our disposal has not so far yielded any information as to the way that λυχναψία was carried out. A similar ceremony which is vividly described in the *Itinerary* of Egeria⁶¹ allows us to draw a helpful picture. According to this account, every day in Jerusalem – at the 10th hour of the night during the celebration of the vespers, known as λυχνικόν (licinicon) – the faithful assembled in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would light candles from the lamp that was burning day and night within the cave.

Moreover, the term λυχνοκαΐα strictly speaking does not always appear to be a synonym of λυχναψία, as can be gleaned from two papyri, where it clearly does not pertain to the daily routine of the ritual lamp-lighting in the temples, but may also refer to a feast. In P.Hib. I 27 (4th/3rd c. B.C., unknown provenance), ll. 165-167, the lighting of lamps is mentioned during festivities in honour of the goddess Athena/Neith in Sais, a practice that was probably rooted in the distant past. There is little doubt that this feast was the one minutely described by Herodotus in the second book of his *Histories*, known as Λυχνοκαΐα (II 62).⁶² According to this account, on the 13th of the month Ἐπεΐρ the Egyptians held oil lamps that burned all night long in honour of Athena/Neith, not only in Sais but also in all parts of Egypt. Entirely unclear, nonetheless, is the exact meaning of the term λυχναψία as it is transmitted among other feasts in BGU XX 2875 (75-125 A.D., Arsinoites), which is a calendar of feast days. This in itself could perhaps lead us to the conclusion that in this case λυχναψία constituted a distinct feast. Nevertheless, the possibility that it could also refer to the ritual lighting of oil lamps during any other feast cannot be *a priori* excluded.

⁵¹ P.Aberd. 62 = Chrest. Wilck. 149 (1st c. A.D., Soknopaiou Nesos), ll. 4-6.

⁵² SB XVIII 13763 (111 A.D., Arsinoites), ll. 5-10.

⁵³ BGU VIII 1835 (50/49 B.C., Herakleopolites), ll. 1-9.

⁵⁴ P.Oxy. XII 1453, ll. 4-9.

⁵⁵ P.Bacch. 2 = SB VI 9320 (171 B.C., Arsinoites), *passim*.

⁵⁶ P.Tebt. I 88 = Chrest. Wilck. 67, col. I ll. 12-13.

⁵⁷ See, for example, SB XVIII 13626 (2nd/3rd c. A.D., Thebes), col. I, l. 3.

⁵⁸ BGU II 362 = Chrest. Wilck. 96 (215 A.D., Arsinoites), fr. 1, ll. 1-9.

⁵⁹ For example, P.Petra IV 48 (561 A.D., Petra?), ll. 1-3, ll. 21-25.

⁶⁰ For the religious significance of λυχναψία and the new symbolism acquired by the oil lamp after its transition from paganism to Christianity, see below.

⁶¹ Pétré 1948, 190.

⁶² See, for example, Rusch 1940, 422; Abdelwahed 2015, 32-33;

Ritual and religious uses of λύχνος. An example of symbolic transformation

So, what was the purpose of performing λυχναψία? The fragmentary BGU VIII 1854, ll. 2-4 informs us that Imouthes made a donation of oil for the lamps of the temple of Herakleopolis, so that the λυχνοκαΐαι for the gods could be carried out constantly. According to the restored text of the lines 17-18, the lighting of lamps seems to constitute an offering to the gods on behalf of the royal couple and officials (διοικητής, στρατηγός), in order for them to ensure divine favour and prosperity.⁶³

Two papyrial fragments link λυχναψία-λυχνοκαΐα with sacrifice, the religious practice *par excellence*. In the petition BGU VIII 1835 (50/49 B.C., Herakleopolites), ll. 5-9 priests of the temple of Senharprocates-Horus inform Strategos Soteles that they are praying for the well-being of his family in a daily performance of the necessary libations, sacrifices and λυχνοκαΐαι. In P.Tebt. I 88 = Chrest.Wilck. 67 (115/114 B.C., Tebtynis) – a list of shrines of Kerkeosiris – it is stated that crown farmers of land belonging to the crocodile-cemetery, which was a shrine devoted to the Egyptian god Petesouchos⁶⁴, were obliged to make a payment in kind of 5 artabas of wheat for the necessary sacrifices and lighting of lamps (ll. 12-13). In both passages λυχνοκαΐα is apparently considered to be the equivalent of a sacrifice. If we take into account that the primary meaning of θύω⁶⁵ is «offer by burning» and that many sacrifices consisted solely of burning fragrant substances and perfumed oils,⁶⁶ then we may venture to suggest that λυχναψία in the aforementioned papyri is a type of «bloodless sacrifice».⁶⁷ It is also worth noting that in Pausanias' description of a peculiar oracular procedure of Hermes *Agoraios* in Pharai (7. 22. 2-3), the expected animal sacrifice is replaced by the ritual lighting of the statue's lamps and the burning of λιβανωτός (frankincense).⁶⁸

In Roman times λυχναψία was connected with the Roman emperor. In CPR VII 1 (7-4 B.C., Soknopaiou Nesos), among various expenditures a certain sum features for the «burning of lamps» (l. 6) in honor of the emperor. The use of oil lamps in emperor-worship rites stems from the deification of the latter, as attested by the 5th line ὑπέ[ρ] τοῦ Θεοῦ Καίσαρος.⁶⁹

Furthermore, in the *ostrakon* O.Did. 402 (110-115 A.D., Didymoi), ll. 4-6, we observe the ritual use of λύχνος in relation to the joyous event of a child's birth. The lighting of lamps in honor of the

⁶³ For offerings on behalf of the royal family, see Jim 2014, 618-620. Donations supporting the lighting of temples' lamps are also attested in the Pharaonic period, see Leahy 1981.

⁶⁴ P.Tebt. I 88, introduction, 394. For this local form of the crocodile god Sobek, see Thissen 1982, 994; moreover, the mention of κροκοδειλοσταφείον leaves no doubt of the connection of Petesouchos with the cult of crocodiles, and his identification with Sobek or Souchos.

⁶⁵ LSJ, s.vv. θύος, θυσία, θύω.

⁶⁶ Casabona 1966, 72, 111-13.

⁶⁷ For the distinction between «blood» and «bloodless» sacrifices, see van Straten 1995, 163-164; Eckhardt 2014. For the different types of sacrifice (θυσία, σφάγια, καθάρσια, ὀλόκαυστα etc.) in ancient Greek religion, see Parker 1983, 10, 209 ff., 259, 283 n. 11; Hughes 2003, 4-6.

⁶⁸ Lapatin 2010, 139-140; Zografou 2010, 276-277.

⁶⁹ Heinen 1995, 3164-3165. On the topic of deification (*apotheosis*) of Roman emperors, see Taylor 1975; Beard 1997.

goddess Aphrodite – associated with fertility⁷⁰ – was especially focused on the successful outcome of childbirth.⁷¹ According to the *Scholia vetera*⁷² on Aristophanes, the protector and supervisor of childbirth, known as Γενετολλίς,⁷³ was a minor deity and a companion of Aphrodite. In addition, the cult epithet Κουροτρόφος⁷⁴ provides strong evidence that the goddess was responsible for the protection of infants. In John Chrysostom's⁷⁵ times, a child's birth was followed by the pagan practice of lighting several oil lamps, to which different names had been given. Subsequently, the newborn was named after the lamp with the longest lasting flame, as this was considered a harbinger of longevity.⁷⁶

What needs particularly highlighting is the lamp's ritual passage from the public religious sphere to the private domestic cult, as is attested by the letter P.Athen. 60 (4th-1st cent. B.C., unknown provenance), ll. 4-6. The reference to the lighting of lamps in a private shrine – probably on the occasion of a feast⁷⁷ – could also constitute a daily procedure similar to the rite of λυχναψία in public temples.

Oil lamps were likewise apparently necessary in funeral ceremonies. In SPP XXII 56 (2nd/3rd c. A.D., Soknopaiou Nesos), which is an account of funeral costs, the purchase of wicks⁷⁸ (col. II, l. 17 ἐνλυχνίων)⁷⁹ for oil lamps is documented. The light of λύχνοι was used not only during the burial procession accompanying the dead to his final resting place, but at the subsequent funeral as well.⁸⁰ According to the religious beliefs of the native residents of Egypt, the lamp-light guided the soul into the afterlife and protected the diseased from evil spirits.⁸¹

Despite the initial reservations of a small number of Christian authors – whose view was that the oil lamp was an artifact closely associated with heathen practices⁸² – the reference to the performance of λυχναψία in Christian churches in two papyri⁸³ from the Byzantine period proves that λύχνος gradually transitioned from paganism into Christian worship in Egypt. Bouras and Parani have

⁷⁰ Furtwängler 1993, 397-400.

⁷¹ For lamps used in Aphrodite's worship, see also Babr., *Myth. Aesop.* 10. 6-8.

⁷² Schol. vet. in Ar., *Nu.* 52.

⁷³ Hesychius; Suidas; LSJ, s.v. Γενετολλίς; Furtwängler 1993, 400.

⁷⁴ The epithet Κουροτρόφος refers to the mythological narrative of Homer's *Odyssey*, v, 67-69. For the same term, cf. Ath., *Deipn.* 13.61.10.

⁷⁵ In *Ep. I ad Corinthios hom.* 12, PG 61, 105.

⁷⁶ Hug 1927, 1588.

⁷⁷ P.Athen. 60, ll. 5-6 note. For domestic cult and shrines in Graeco-Roman Egypt, see Otto 1905, 169; Barrett 2015, 406-407; Abdelwahed 2016, 46-56.

⁷⁸ WB, I, s.v. ἐλλύχνιον; DGE, VII, s.v. ἐλλύχνιον. See also Montserrat 1997, 40.

⁷⁹ It should be noted here that in the papyri of this period v before the liquid λ consonant often remains unassimilated. Gignac 1975, 168-170.

⁸⁰ Hug 1927, 1586; Bouras / Parani 2008, 22.

⁸¹ Rusch 1940, 421-422; Abdelwahed 2015, 34.

⁸² Tertullian, *De Idol.* 15.4; 15.10. In the above passages, Tertullian condemns the Roman pagan custom of lighting lamps in front of house doors in honor of the emperor. He asserts that it is not the Roman sovereign who is truly being honored, but covertly the demonic powers. Lact., *Div. Inst.* VI, PL 6, 638.

⁸³ P.Petra IV 48 (561 A.D., Petra), ll. 2-3; P.Petra IV 49 (564 A.D., Petra), ll. 25-26.

suggested that the lighting of lamps was of great significance as far as the cult of martyrs is concerned.⁸⁴ The six silver lamps recorded in P.Bad. IV 54 (5th c. A.D., Hipponon), l. 5, which is a church inventory,⁸⁵ attest to this very fact, since in our opinion the lamps are indubitably connected with the term μαρτύριον⁸⁶ – the place where saints’ relics were usually kept – in the first line of the document. Equally, it is well known that oil lamps would be burning in μαρτόρια and it was a common custom for pilgrims to take home some lamp-oil in the form of a blessing, εὐλογία.⁸⁷

Finally, this transition from paganism to Christianity did not affect considerably the ritual uses of the oil lamp’s light (honorific, funerary etc.), but the object itself was invested with a new symbolism.⁸⁸ The word πλοιάρια (ship-shaped lamps) in O.Petr.Mus. 603 and P.Grenf. II 111, bring to mind the new symbolic significance of λύχνος, which was traditionally related to the mysteries of Isis and Sarapis.⁸⁹ Their presence in the above-mentioned church inventories offers proof that they had acquired a new resonance and, more particularly, had come to reflect the established simile of the Church as a ship.⁹⁰ Thus λύχνος, from a pagan emblem of the eye of Horus and the Osiriac-Isiac cult in Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman Egypt,⁹¹ is transformed in the Christian era into a new symbol of the divine light, of Church and of Jesus Christ himself.⁹²

⁸⁴ Bouras / Parani 2008, 23-24.

⁸⁵ For Egyptian church inventories, see van Minnen 1992 with further bibliography on this topic. On λύχνοι (Coptic ⲙⲏⲥ/hēbs) in Greek and Coptic church inventories in Egypt, see Schmelz 2002, 121-123. Furthermore, it is worth noting that from the eighth century onward oil lamps were gradually replaced by candles as far as the ecclesiastical lighting is concerned. Montserrat 1995, 436.

⁸⁶ Caseau 2007, 559; Bouras / Parani 2008, 23-24.

⁸⁷ Frankfurter 1998, 4; Grossmann 1998, 299; Caseau 2007, 559; Bouras / Parani 2008, 23-24.

⁸⁸ Bouras / Parani 2008, 15, 21-29.

⁸⁹ Griffiths 1975, 46; Ciceroni 1989-1990; Podvin / Veymiers 2008, 65-66. Michaelides 2009. Ships played an important role in Egyptian religion, especially in the rites of Osiris, who is often depicted on a boat. Moreover, during ceremonial processions the cult images were carried in barques. Rusch 1940, 422. Griffiths 1975, 36-42.

⁹⁰ Hippol. Rom., *De Antichristo*, PG 10, 777. Bouras / Parani 2008, 12.

⁹¹ Dümichen 1883, 14; Rusch 1940, 421; Abdelwahed 2015, 34-35. According to Dunand 1973, 222, who cites Kees 1941, 269, the burning lamp was a symbol of uraeus, the cobra-shaped royal emblem of the Pharaohs’ that protected Osiris.

⁹² Origen, *Frag. in Lucam* (in catenis) 122; Max. Conf., *Ad Thal.* 63.57-67; Galavaris 1978, 72-74. Bouras / Parani 2008, 26.

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