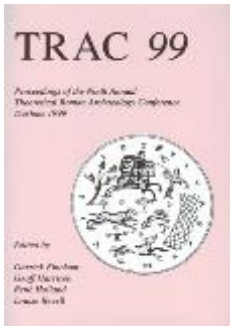

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Illuminating Roman Britain

by H. Eckardt

The question of how identities were constructed and negotiated in Roman Britain has been at the centre of archaeological debate for some time. Initially conceived almost exclusively in terms of a "Roman" and "Native" dichotomy, and more specifically in terms of Romanization, this discussion has centred on how we can identify and interpret the changes in material culture that undoubtedly occurred after the Roman conquest and increasingly on how we can address the ways in which modern perceptions influence our research (Hingley 1994; Millett 1990; Woolf 1998).

More recently, there has been a growing awareness that "identity" cannot be adequately understood as a simple Roman-native divide but encompasses a wide range of self-perceptions and allegiances. Different levels of identity (such as gender, status, regional and ethnic identity) can co-exist, overlap and are subject to change.

Of particular relevance is the concept that identity is constructed and negotiated through the daily and ritual use and experience of structures and objects (Bourdieu 1977). Material culture plays an active role in structuring individual and group identity and the choice and selection of particular objects can play an important part in the creation of social differentiation (Bourdieu 1984). Even in societies where production and consumption are almost wholly divorced, the very acts of selection and use can transfer an "object of price value and estrangement to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable emotions" (Miller 1987: 190).

Although the importance of material culture in the negotiation of identity has long been recognised on a theoretical level, the scale of analysis often does not allow for a detailed examination of objects with the result that the complex and often awkward evidence is forced into bland and generalized statements. I would suggest that such a very general theoretical approach underuses the potential of Romano-British material culture just as much as those - essentially antiquarian – find reports which simply list objects found on a given site.

Clearly, there is a need for more cognitive material culture studies [1] which move beyond mere identification to unravel an object's functional and symbolic connotations as well as the cultural context of its use.

The aim of this paper is to develop a methodology and present a case study of how material culture might be used to approach the subject of identity in a more fruitful way, using the specific example of Romano-British lighting equipment.

Why lighting equipment ?

The group of material culture chosen for this purpose is lighting equipment, that is lamps and candlesticks. Traditionally [2], lamps have been studied in terms of art-history, typology, chronology and economic history but I will argue that the use of lighting equipment represents a complex cultural practice with strong social and economic implications.

A certain level of technical expertise was needed to manage for example the wick which had to be trimmed to obtain maximum light and reduce smoke and waste. More importantly, the use of lighting equipment demands a continuous supply of fuel and regardless of whether the fuel was oil, tallow or wax, all artificial lighting therefore required the burning of what was essentially a food resource. The ability and choice to 'burn food' represents a significant level

of status and wealth, especially when we consider that substantial numbers of lamps might be needed to light a building.

The economic implications of providing artificial light are well demonstrated by a reference in the *Liber Pontificalis* (Davis 1989: 17) describing endowments made by Constantine to the early Roman church. The list includes several estates, the substantial income from which was designated to providing lights for the Constantinian basilica. More recently, in the case of an 18th century lighthouse at Eddystone, Plymouth "it was a matter of complaint that the keepers, who had to find their own provisions, were at times reduced to eating the candles" (Robins 1939: 137).

The desire for artificial light is in itself culturally significant and might well relate to social activities such as dining, reading and writing for which the already available hearths, fireplaces and torches were apparently no longer deemed adequate.

Using lighting equipment thus represents a significant cultural and technological choice and as a host of recent studies (e.g. Lemonnier 1993) illustrates, such a selection of a particular technology is not necessarily determined by its effectiveness and usefulness but rather embedded in social relations of power and identity.

Methodology

Lighting equipment from the whole of the province has been collected in a systematic literature survey. Such a project is still possible in Roman Britain because of the relatively low numbers of lighting equipment found here. Circa 1500 published lamps and candlesticks have been recorded from this province so far; in contrast, the collection of the Landesmuseum Trier alone comprises more than 2700 ceramic lamps (Goethert 1997: 9). This relative scarcity of lamps in Roman Britain might in itself be of interest for our understanding of the province.

The decision to collect all forms and materials of lighting equipment – which are normally studied by separate specialists – but were clearly all used to fulfil the same general function - represents an important aspect of my collecting policy. It is thus possible to observe changes over time and to contrast the differential usage of the closed oil lamps with that of the open tallow lamps and with candlesticks. It also allows us to identify potential regional variation in the use of lighting equipment.

In order to understand how the use of lighting equipment in Romano-British society relates to identity a deliberately contextual approach has been chosen. As originally defined by Hodder (1987), 'contextual' is here understood to include the function and action of an object as well as the particular, historically embedded, content of meaning it had within the framework and structure of contemporary material culture.

For the purpose of this paper I would like to focus on the cultural context in which lighting equipment was used and how that might have changed with time and in different regions.

Predictably, there are a number of problems with such a contextual approach. These include the practical problems of changing site function and residuality and more importantly, the methodology and terminology with which Romano-British sites are traditionally approached. Much effort is still wasted attempting to fit the complex archaeological evidence into either modern classification such as 'Small Town' or into ancient status assessments such as 'municipium' or 'civitas capital'.

Instead I have chosen very broad categories to assess the archaeological contexts of lighting equipment from Roman Britain (see Fig. 2 below). Context categories were defined as 'Military Sites', 'Large Urban Centres' and 'Small Urban Centres' and 'Rural/Villa' sites. Clearly, these categories reveal only a very simplified picture of the cultural context of lamp usage in Roman

Britain and they will be further refined for more detailed analysis. In particular, London is so different from other large urban sites that it should really be in a category of its own and the 'Rural/Villa' category is heavily biased towards villa sites.

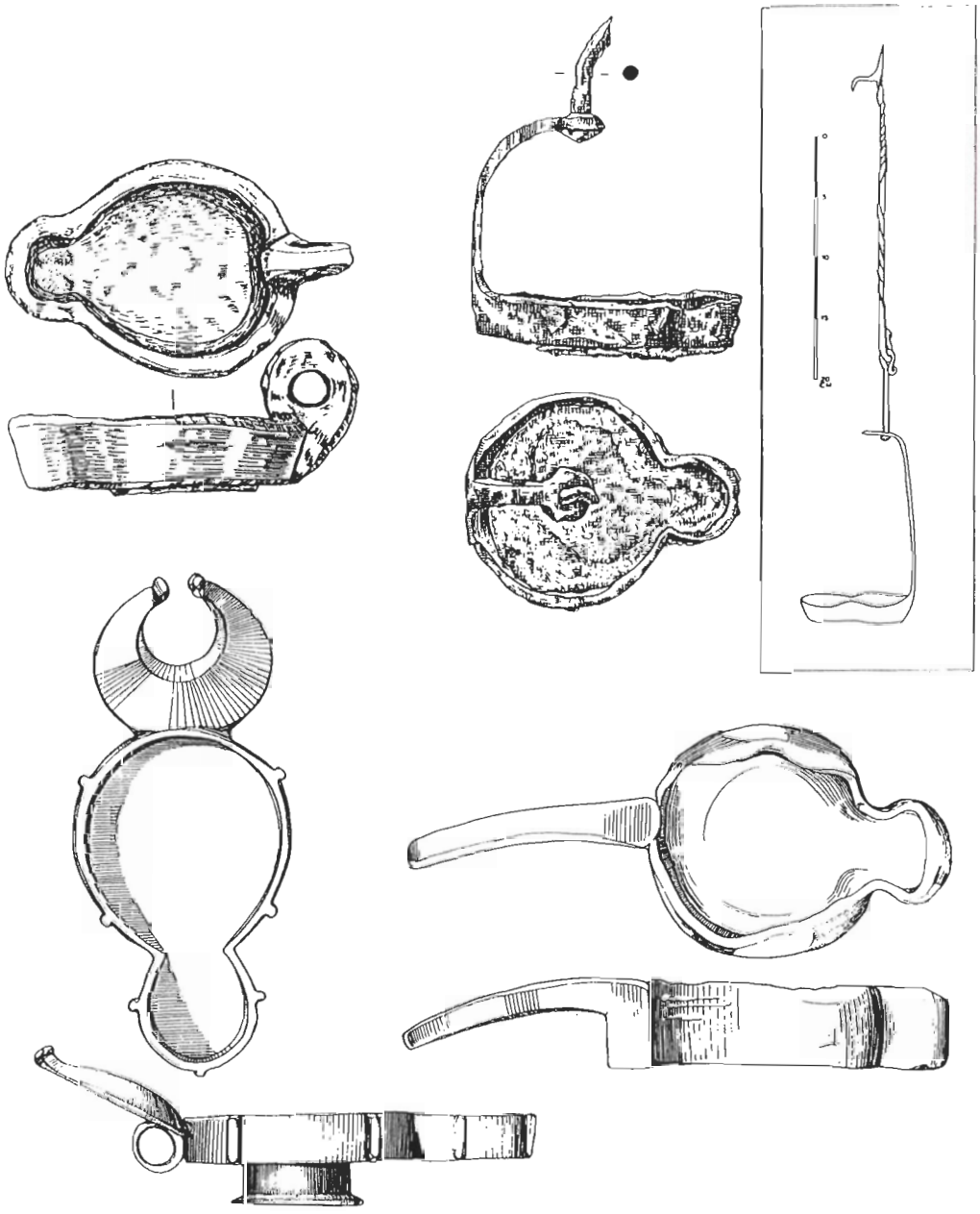

Figure 1 Characteristic forms of Ceramic, Iron, Copper-alloy and Lead Open Lamps (After Frere 1972: fig. 142.6; Bailey 1996: Q3754, Q3752, Q3762; Manning 1985:fig. 26).

A native kind of lamp?

For this paper, I have chosen to focus only on open lamps. Open lamps are usually of a figure-of-eight shape and can be made of ceramic, iron, lead and copper-alloy (Fig. 1). They are sometimes interpreted as lampholders or lampstands for oil lamps but from the burial evidence and burning marks in the circular wick-rest of ceramic examples it seems almost certain that they functioned as lamps in their own right.

Open lamps are thought to have burnt animal fat or tallow, although in the case of the Beddington lamp the use of olive oil has been suggested (Adkins & Adkins 1983).

The nature of the fuel and the lack of sophistication and decoration of the open lamps have meant that they have traditionally been interpreted as the lighting equipment of the poorer, rural, non-military and less romanized population. Loeschke (1919: 146) describes iron open lamps as "stable-lamps" emphasizing their functional role as opposed to the aesthetic and cultural appeal attributed to the ceramic and bronze oil lamps. Leibundgut (1977: fig. 18) uses the proportion of oil versus tallow lamps as an indicator of Romanization (and of the presence of the military) on various sites in Roman Switzerland.

A study of the contexts of published open lamps from Roman Britain (Fig. 2a) indeed shows that open lamps were used in 'smaller' towns and the countryside. However, considering the traditional view of open lamps as indicators of a rural and 'less romanized' population, it is surprising how strongly open lamps are represented on military sites and the large urban centres.

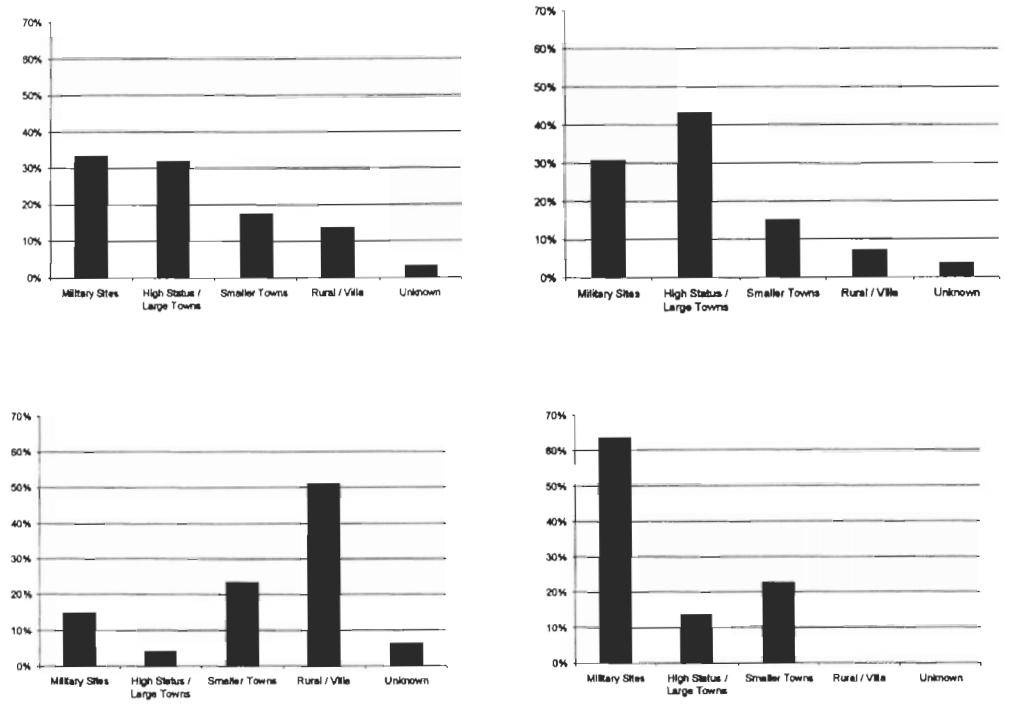

Figure 2 The contexts of Open Lamps in Britain: Figure 2a (Top left) The contexts of Open Lamps (regardless of material); Figure 2b (Top right) The contexts of Ceramic Open Lamps; Figure 2c (Bottom left) The contexts of Iron Open Lamps; Figure 2d (Bottom right) The contexts of Lead Open Lamps.

In order to reveal any further differentiation in the ways open lamps were used, the lamps were studied according to the material they are made of. Analysis by material will show that the overall context pattern for open lamps (Fig. 2a) in fact masks a complex and strongly differentiated usage of this type of lamp.

Circa three hundred open lamps have been recorded in a systematic literature survey; as expected, ceramic lamps are by far the most common but lead and iron open lamps also occur in significant numbers (Fig. 3). Copper-alloy (and stone) lamps are very rare.

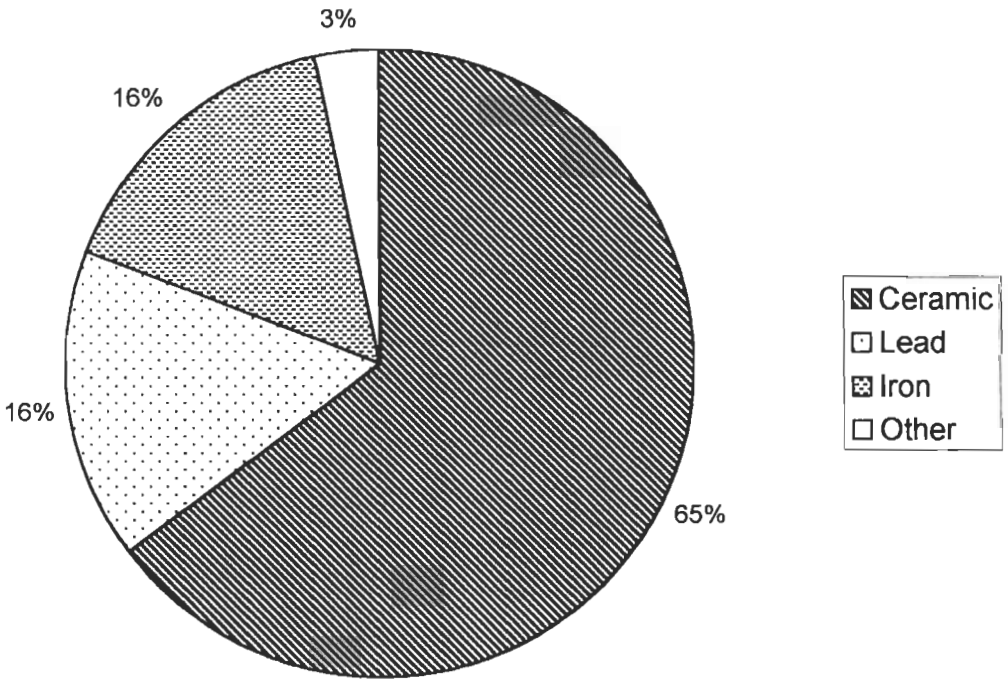

Figure 3 The materials of Open Lamps

Ceramic open lamps

The contexts of ceramic open lamps show a very strong military and urban bias; few ceramic open lamps appear to reach smaller towns and the countryside (Fig 2 b). This impression is confirmed when we examine only the most common type, those of a 'figure-of-eight' shape (Loeschke Type XI). Again the military and especially the urban bias is very marked, with more than half (54 %) of Loeschke XI lamps coming from London and the coloniae. In the countryside the few known examples all come from villa sites, and then usually from sites such as Ashtead, where there is also evidence for tile and pottery production. The distribution map (Fig. 4 a) illustrates the relatively widespread occurrence of ceramic open lamps across the south, and particularly the southeast, of the province.

Both the context graph and the distribution map to some extent mask the fact that the use of ceramic open lamps is very restricted. Even within the military and urban categories, very few sites – in particular London, Colchester, Verulamium and Usk – are dominant. This restricted distribution of ceramic open lamps could be due to chronological factors as the majority of ceramic open lamps might well be of a pre-Flavian date.

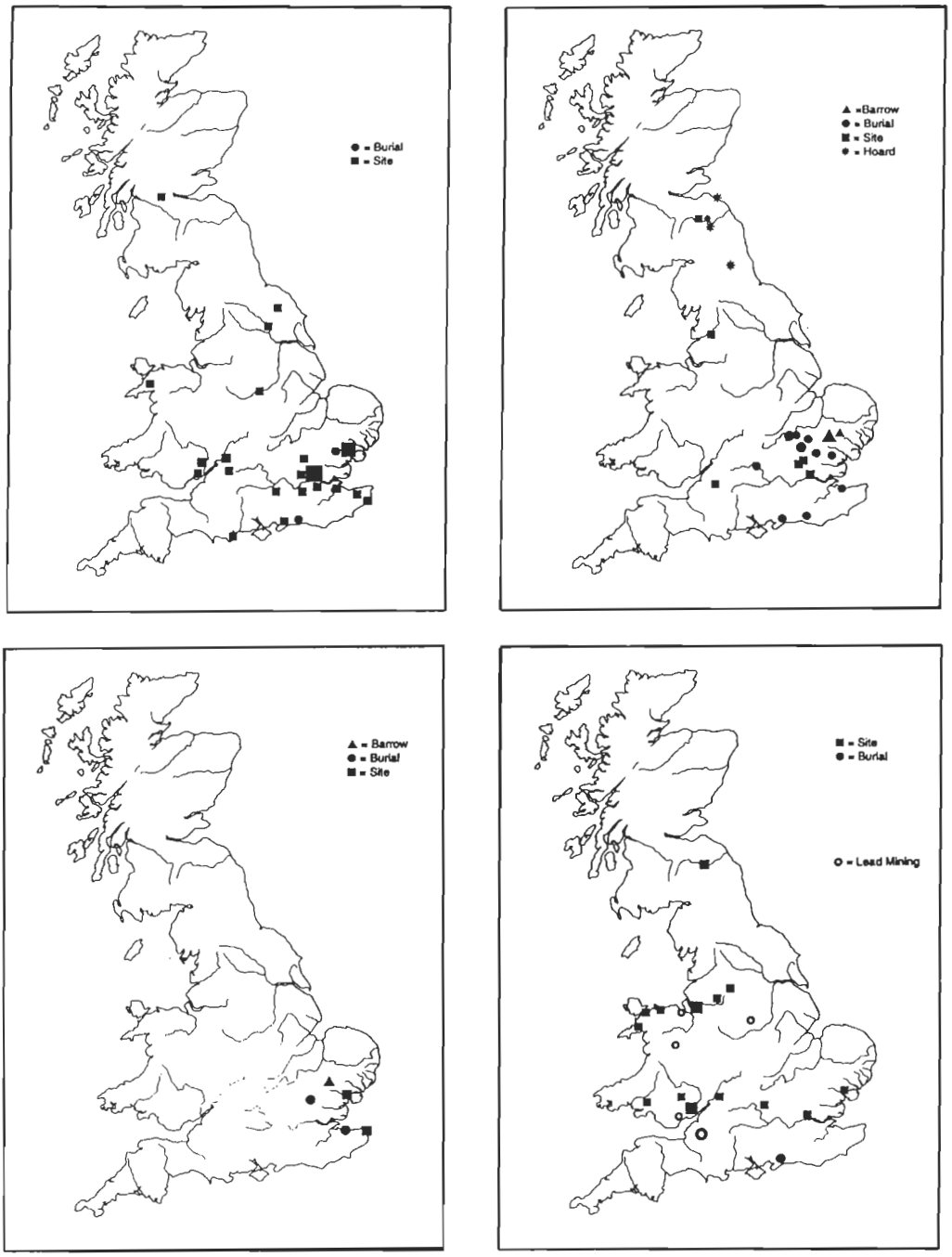

Figure 4 The distribution of Open Lamps in Britain: Figure 4a (top left) The distribution of Ceramic Open Lamps (Type Loeschke XI);Figure 4b (top right) The distribution of Iron Open Lamps (Hanging Lamps); Figure 4c (bottom left) The distribution of Copper-Alloy Open Lamps; Figure 4d (bottom right) The distribution of Lead Open Lamps (with horizontal handles)

In conclusion it could be argued that while ceramic open lamps might indicate a lesser degree of *Romanitas* on the continent, in Britain their use is restricted to a relatively small number of sites. These sites tend to be of a very urban character and are often, but not necessarily, military. Overall there is very little penetration into the countryside.

Iron open lamps

Compared to the ceramic examples, iron open lamps were clearly used by a different section of the Romano-British population. Military sites and towns are still strongly represented but a high proportion of iron open lamps comes from 'Small Towns' and especially 'Rural / Villa' sites (Fig. 2 c).

To avoid confusing the picture by comparing types of varying date, only the most common type of iron open lamp – the hanging lamp (Fig. 1 b) – was chosen for more detailed analysis. This type of lamp is attached to a rod that ends in a sharp point with an L-shaped hook set just below the top. It could be suspended by either hanging from a beam or ledge by the L-shaped hook or by piercing the pointed tip directly into a beam (Manning 1985: 99, fig. 26). These lamps could also be carried by holding the rod in a vertical position and if necessary they could stand on their flat base.

More detailed analysis of the contexts of these iron hanging lamps reveals an interesting pattern. The vast majority of examples come from burials, with a further five hanging lamps known from hoards; the type appears to be a rare settlement find (Fig. 5 a).

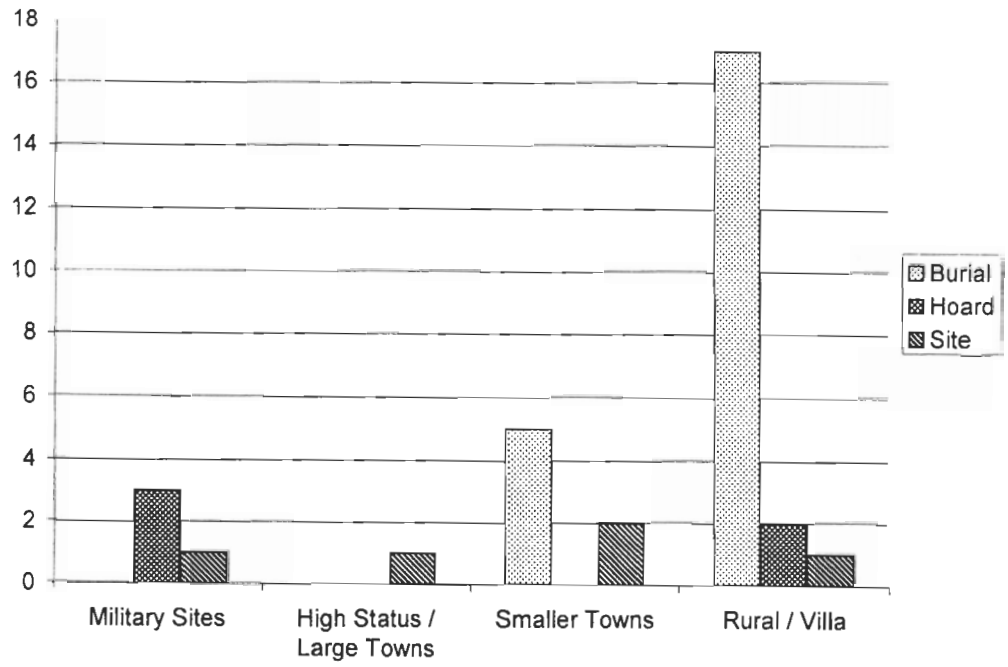

Figure 5a The detailed depositional contexts of Iron Open Lamps

This graph also illustrates that burials containing this type of lamp occur on particular sites, namely on 'Rural / Villa' sites and smaller towns. Mapping the spatial distribution of these

burials with iron hanging lamps reveals a regional cluster in the south-east of England, with finds from Essex, Suffolk, Kent and Hertfordshire (Fig. 4 b).

The issue of source criticism is obvious. Iron lamps are large metal objects and as such will survive only under exceptional circumstances; effectively, we might be mapping the distribution of a particular burial custom rather than the extent of usage of these lamps. I would suggest however that the inclusion of iron open lamps in these burials is significant with regard to the perception and use of lamps by a particular section of the population. A more detailed study of these burials may thus prove worthwhile.

Burials with iron open lamps are set apart from other, poorer burials in the area by the choice of grave-goods and in some cases by the construction of barrows.

In Britain, Roman barrows are found mainly in the south-east but it is now clear that their distribution is not restricted to that area (Dunning & Jessup 1936; Jessup 1959; Foster 1986: 188-195). Roman barrows occur singly or in groups and are usually cone-shaped with a flat top; they appear to be located preferentially in the vicinity of villas and minor roads. Burial is usually by cremation. The glass or pottery vessel containing the cremated remains is placed with the often very rich grave goods in a wooden or brick burial chamber; stone chambers are relatively rare (Wigg 1993 a).

The majority of these barrows are dated to the period from the late 1st to the mid/late 2nd century; some 3rd century barrows are also known (Foster 1986: fig. 45; Jessup 1959: 2).

The similarities between the barrows of England and Belgic Gaul are well known and might well represent the far-reaching contacts existing between native elites before and after the conquest. A connection with Belgic Gaul is also evident in some of the gravegoods chosen for these Romano-British high-status burials; this is especially true for enamelled vessels, such as those from the Great Barrow at Bartlow Hills and from a rich burial at Elsenham, which are thought to have been produced in Belgic Gaul (Johns 1993).

It should be noted however that Dunning & Jessup's (1936: fig. 2) distribution map rather overstates this connection with Belgium and reflects the degree of research at that period rather than any real distribution. Barrows in fact also occur in the Middle-Rhine area and the Danube provinces (cf. Amand 1985; Wigg 1993 b).

There are essentially two schools of thought regarding the overall interpretation of these rich barrow burials. One interprets the barrows as a provincial transformation and interpretation of Roman mausolea and tumuli while the other views them as the continuation of pre-conquest customs, perhaps even within the framework of native 'resistance' (Wigg 1993 b: 15-17). Neither interpretation is completely convincing. The 'continuity' theory in particular struggles with the fact that the barrows occur in an area conventionally regarded as very romanized. Barrows are often associated with villas and their topographical location varies from that of prehistoric barrows (no false-cresting, for example [3]). Reference to 'ancestral' barrows might nevertheless be intended, as seems possible in Holborough where a Roman barrow is located on the hill beneath a Bronze Age barrow (Jessup 1954: 2). It should be noted however that the 'ancestral' barrow at Holborough is dated to the Bronze Age; barrows are not generally a feature of rich Iron Age burials (Foster 1986: 197).

The 'Roman influence' theory on the other hand fails to explain why there is such a substantial time lag between the supposed Augustan prototypes and their provincial copies, which are mainly of Hadrianic date.

Rather than forcing the evidence into either Roman or native categories, it might be more useful to see what the selection of gravegoods and construction of barrows in themselves appear to signify in the provincial context of the late first and second century AD.

The most obvious statement these barrows make is one of wealth and status; many clearly were very substantial structures. More specifically, many barrows appear to represent a *Domus aeterna*, or eternal house. Most have a brick or wooden chamber and at Rougham, Suffolk the spike of an iron lamp had actually been driven into the wall of the brick burial chamber just as it would have been in a house (Henslow 1874).

High status can also be expressed through folding chairs, which can be interpreted as symbols of office and were found in the Great Barrow at the Bartlow Hills and at Holborough (Jessup 1954: 22-33). Another important feature of these burials are strigils, objects associated with personal hygiene and the baths (cf. Hill 1997) and thus ultimately with the presentation and perception of the body (Shilling 1993).

Perhaps most importantly, there are objects associated with feasting and drinking. The choice of objects is culturally specific and appropriate to a Roman triclinium. Amphorae and cooking equipment (such as fire dogs and gridirons) are no longer common; there is however a recurring group of objects in some of the richest burials, that of jug and patera (cf. Nuber 1972). These vessels were used as a handwashing set before meals and sacrifices and their inclusion in burials as a set might well indicate a detailed knowledge of the cultural meaning these very Roman objects held.

Finally, let us turn to lighting equipment which is in fact present in many barrows; thus there is a lampstand in Welshpool (Boon 1961), a ceramic lamp in Riseholme (Thompson 1954) and a bronze lamp in Thornborough (Liversidge 1953/4). Lamps also occur in barrows in the Middle-Rhine area (Wigg 1993 b: 90).

Lamps in burials are often interpreted as evidence of ritual and artificial light indeed played an important part in Roman funerary rites (Menzel 1953; Nilsson 1950; Rushforth 1915). But one could also argue that that they were perceived as an important aspect of highly cultured domesticity and included in these rich burials as an expression of cultured living and dining within the ritual context of the eternal and symbolic banquet so well known from Roman funerary art.

It is also worth noting that while lamps are present in many burials, the custom of including iron open lamps appears to be more regionally and culturally specific. It is possible that the selection of iron relates to the symbolic meaning iron held for the Romano-British population in the area, both in terms of iron production and iron objects (Hingley 1997; more generally: Herbert 1993; Hosler 1994; Shennan 1995).

In summary, we can see that Roman material culture was used in very knowledgeable and subtle ways to express high status and a high degree of *Romanitas* by the provincial elite in southeast England. It is an interesting paradox that this elite investment into a truly Roman lifestyle is expressed by the deposition of feasting equipment in high-status burials, a custom which is very 'Un-Roman' and essentially a continuation of pre-conquest beliefs. It is clear that Roman material culture and complex forms of behaviour had been adopted but had also been transformed into local or regional customs according to the social needs of the people using these lamps.

Hoards are another important context in which iron hanging lamps have been found, with hanging lamps forming part of the Blackburn Mill, Eckford, Newstead and Corbridge hoards (Fig. 4b). These hoards contain a range of iron fittings, tools and weapons and belong to a group of large ironwork deposits known from the north of the province (Hunter 1997; Manning 1972; Piggott 1953). The Blackburn Mill and Eckford hoards were deposited in 'water contexts' and can almost certainly be accepted as votive (cf. Bradley 1998) while the Corbridge hoard is usually interpreted as the result of the concealment of 'fabrica' material which could

not be moved during troop withdrawals (Allason-Jones & Bishop 1988: 109-110; cf. Pitts & St Joseph 1985: 289-299). The Newstead pits are more difficult to assess (Clarke 1997; Curle 1911; Hutcheson 1997; Manning 1972).

Regardless of whether their presence in hoards is explained in terms of votive offerings or concealment, we again observe a marked regional clustering and an at least potentially ritual context for the deposition of iron open lamps. But again we are also faced with the strong possibility that the inclusion of iron hanging lamps in these hoards and their absence on settlement sites could simply be explained with the recycling bias normally operating against large iron objects.

To establish whether the distribution and contexts of iron open lamps relate to regional, status related or ritual customs rather than just the survival of large metal objects in the archaeological record, let us lastly examine the distribution of other metal open lamps in more detail. If their distribution really is merely a reflection of survival we would expect to find copper-alloy and lead open lamps in similar contexts and areas as iron open lamps.

Copper-alloy and lead open lamps

Only five copper-alloy open lamps (Fig. 1 c) have been recorded from Roman Britain. Their use and spatial distribution appears to be very similar to that of iron open lamps, with all examples recorded coming from the south-east of the province; most were found in burials (Fig. 4 c). Lead open lamps on the other hand appear to have been used very differently. Again, only the most common type of lead open lamp – which is of a figure-of-eight shape with a horizontal handle (Fig. 1 d) – will be studied in detail to avoid chronological distortion.

The context graph (Fig. 2 d) shows a very marked military bias in the use of these lead lamps, with no example so far recorded from a 'Rural / Villa' site. The overall context pattern could hardly be more different from that of iron open lamps.

The distribution map (Fig. 4 d) also shows a very different regional distribution, with lamps of this type occurring mainly in Wales, which of course bears a direct relationship to the observed military bias in the use of this lamp type.

To some extent, the distribution pattern might relate to the exploitation of lead in this area (Fig. 4 d). Lead mining in the Mendips, South Wales, Flintshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire began soon after the conquest of the province (Elkington 1976; Nash-Williams 1939; Webster 1952/3). Lead and, by implication, silver extraction were ultimately under imperial control and while mining rights could be granted to civilian lessees, some form of military control has often been suggested (Elkington 1976: 184-186; Webster 1952/3: 10-14). It is noticeable that Caerleon, Usk and Chester produced relatively high numbers of lead open lamps and in Usk a number of examples have been interpreted as unfinished wasters (Marvell 1996: 72). While this higher incidence might relate to the sites' status as legionary fortresses, it could also be linked to the lead mines located in the immediate vicinity of these sites.

While the military –even if not directly involved in extraction- clearly would have been an important consumer of this locally available lead, it would be simplistic to argue that the lamps' distribution pattern is purely a product of the availability of the raw material. Lead was widely used in all areas of the province, for example as a building material and for manufactured objects such as lead coffins (Taylor 1993: 209-212; Toller 1977). It is also interesting to note that lead candlesticks occur exclusively in the southeast of the province.

It might be more convincing to argue that lead lamps were objects made and used by, and therefore identified with, a particular group of society, namely the military. It is also noticeable that there is a marked difference in the detailed depositional contexts (Fig. 5 b) in which lead as

opposed to iron open lamps are found. In contrast to iron open lamps, which commonly occur in burials and hoards, lead open lamps are only rarely deposited in such contexts. The vast majority are settlement finds and probably derive from occupation and rubbish deposits. As with iron open lamps this category however also comprises lamps for which no detailed contextual information is available.

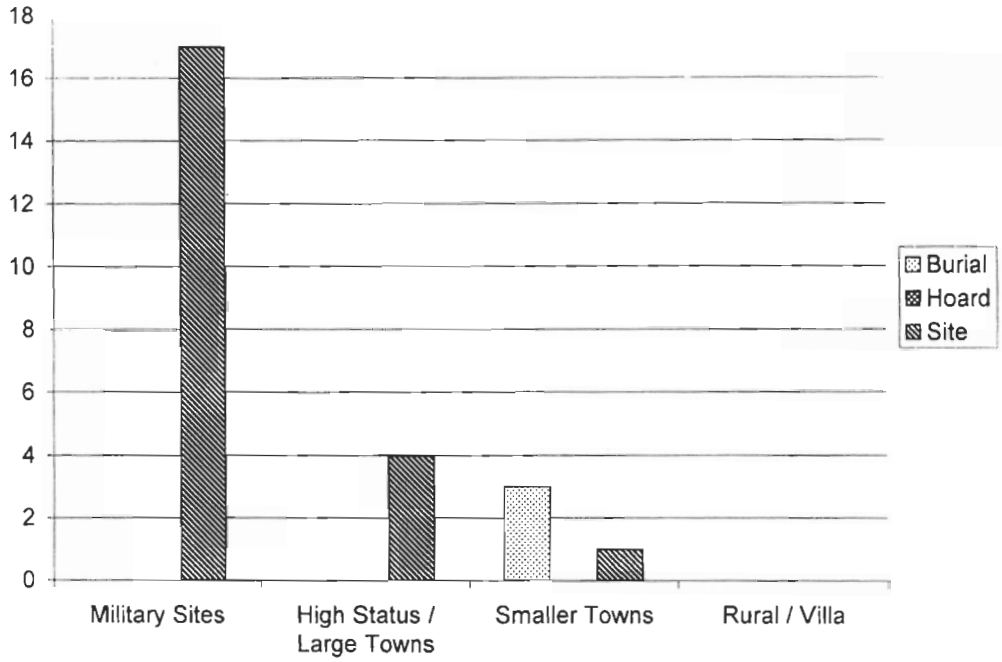

Figure 5b The detailed depositional contexts of Lead Open Lamps

Rubbish deposits are of course not always necessarily the result of mere discard; Hill (1995) has demonstrated for the Iron Age that much of the archaeological record is formed by structured depositions with a possible 'ritual' significance and the same may well be true for the Roman period. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is a difference in the degree to which iron and lead open lamps were imbued with ritual significance. Thus, while iron open lamps are found in very overtly ritual contexts such as hoards and burials, this is clearly not the case for lead open lamps.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that a cognitive and above all contextual approach to Roman material culture can add significantly to our understanding not only of a group of objects but also to our understanding of the ways in which these objects relate to Romano-British social identity.

We have observed how a lamp type traditionally interpreted simply as "native" can in fact reveal a whole range of different meanings. Lamp usage appears to have been governed by layers of meaning such as regional traditions, status (both in terms of wealth and *Romanitas*), military practice, urban and rural styles of living as well as 'ritual' and 'functional'

connotations and these layers often overlap and certainly do not fit neatly into Roman-Native categories.

Identities were constructed and negotiated using Roman material culture which was employed according to locally and culturally specific social conventions. Using lamps (and indeed different types of lamps) was a complex social statement made by knowledgeable agents and it represents a cultural choice rather than being merely a reflection of the availability of these objects and their survival in the archaeological record.

In conclusion I would argue that we can only exploit the richness of the Roman material record and discover such multiple layers of identity by a contextual analysis of material culture which is both detailed and theoretically informed.

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Endnotes

[1] These questions have begun to be addressed; see e.g. : Creighton 1990; Ferris 1995; Haselgrove 1987; 1997; Hawthorne 1997; 1998; Hill 1997; Hingley 1990; Jundi & Hill 1998; Meadows 1994; Willis 1997.

[2] But see Leibundgut (1977) who identified a strong military bias in lamp usage in Roman Switzerland.

[3] The relationship between Roman barrows and their surrounding landscape and settlement pattern is an area clearly in much need of more research. For example, Roman barrows sometimes do occur on ridges, as on Borough Hill (Brown 1977) where their location within an Iron Age hillfort might also be of significance (Williams 1997: 75-76).

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