

Oil Lamps of Ancient Dardania

Vexing Illuminations

It is one of the many sweltering July days in Prishtina, Kosova. The heat has a way of slowing time, of slowing the body, of slowing the mind. I am in the administrative offices behind the main exhibition floor of the National Museum of Kosova (NMK). I am inputting data into an excel spreadsheet in preparation for upload to the Google Arts & Culture platform. The work is tedious, as I transfer sparse information culled from various archaeological sources and catalogues onto the document. Every other object is an earthen lamp. The dates are vague. The descriptions monolithic. Dust moves in waves within the shards of light that break through the window.

The heat of the day is replaced with a chill that rolls in from the surrounding mountains. Later that night I dream of these lamps. My grandmother Drita, from whom I inherited my name and whom I never met, is pouring oil into the neck. “Is that how it’s done?” I ask her. She looks up at me, but her face is a monolith too, the composite face of every woman, of any woman. I have a single photograph of hers towards the end of her life once her health had already taken a dire turn. She is attending my parents’ wedding. She is hugging my maternal grandmother who faces the camera. Her back is turned to the viewer. She is a ghost.

In this paper I will be contending with two entities that are refusing to respond: the Dardanian terracotta lamps of the National Museum of Kosova, and the ghost of my grandmother. Both have been presented to me as a corpus: the lamps as a mass of artifacts as shown in the museum, and my grandmother as the non-individuated compilation of Albanian “womanhood” as dictated by my father’s family. The body of this essay will alternate between

art historical disciplinary interventions for the lamps, and exercises in critical fabulation when contending with the memory of my grandmother. This chapter is a departure from the kind of heritage with which I have engaged so far in my studies-- it is an exploration of personal heritage. I am looking for alternative meanings as I move between the collective and the genealogical¹.

Scholar Avery Gordon frames hauntings as a sociological phenomenon in their book *Ghostly Matters*. Haunting is not merely the business of the dead, as it very much *lives within* the “taken-for-granted realities” (Gordon 2008, 8). A haunting does not merely reveal the breakages of the past, but also their ongoing persistence. A ghost is the haunting’s substantiation. Haunting is a social condition, the ghost a “social figure” (Gordon 2008, 8). An absence that makes its presence known. Why are these lamps visiting me in my dreams?

I feel a great responsibility to know who my grandmother was, to know who lives through me as I carry on her name. I ask my family about her. I am met with a shower of impassioned and contradictory information. She was kind, she was a harsh disciplinarian, she was quiet, she was a bitter housewife, she was an educated woman having taught grade school, she hardly taught at all, she was from Shkodra, she was born in a village *outside* of the city, “she taught me everything I know about running a household”, she was withholding-- the list goes on. A deep irony emerges when considering the meaning of our shared name, the word for “light” in Albanian—a synonym for illumination. In my dream she silently lights the wick of the lamp. She disappears.

¹ It is important to note at the onset of this paper its unique structure. The exercises in critical fabulation will be interspersed *throughout* the academic writing. Perhaps it is helpful to think of these interludes as (quoting Saidiya Hartman in an NPR interview) “historical poetics”. Somehow these poetics had a haunting persistence.

Eventually I give up. Exasperated, I had no choice but to pivot my line of questioning. It was no longer of crucial importance what the “truth” of her character was, but rather, what were the barriers obscuring its accessibility? Surely every person carries contradictions, but for a person to be qualified with scarcely any consistency? What are the circumstances surrounding her confused memory? Why was it so easy for everyone to project their own narratives onto her personhood? How can I use the holes in my personal genealogy to address these enigmatic lamps? How can I change my line of questioning within my discipline of art history? Where else am I asking the wrong questions?

Admittedly, I had reservations when beginning this paper. The case study of these oil lamps differs from my other academic explorations in many ways. Namely, unlike the *Goddess on the Throne* and the *xhubleta*, these lamps hardly register in the popular psyche. However, as objects of illumination I was fixated on both their material and spiritual implications—unsure of what those implications even entail at the onset of my research. They do, however, live in the national museum and thus surely must harbor some significance in the cultural milieu.

To address this, I chose to prioritize the use of lyrical time. This is an offering from lyrical poetry which proposes a temporary alternative to time, a suspension of time--the subject of which is still time itself. Precisely to make history’s presence felt, I am looking to weave one story into or within another. David Baker writes, “Poetry wishes. It may wish to stop or eliminate time by its eternal promises or by replacing chronology with epiphany” (Baker 2007, 31). I felt the pressing need to produce a parallel universe with its own temporality that activates the past and the present in me, through my family, through my identity, through epiphany. Besides, ghosts have a way of rendering time meaningless.

But to speak briefly on chronology. The argument can be made that oil lamps are some of humanity's oldest technologies, curiosity surrounding the nature of light one of humanity's most persistent preoccupations. The earliest known oil lamp was found in the Lascaux Cave in France, dating to 15,000 BC (though archeologists theorize that the technology is most likely older) (Lascaux n.d.). These Upper Paleolithic caves may have then been perceived as portals, as liminal spaces, as doorways into the beyond. The images on the cave walls become activated by light, with the movement of the flame the figures come to life. The manipulation of earth to baked clay, the use of light as an agent of invocation, the transformation of space, begins the timeless dialogue between humanity, light, and its corresponding technologies. From Prometheus stealing fire, to Galileo's telescope, to Newton's particle theory, to the Hollywood screen, to the speed of light and the subsequent theoretical malleability of spacetime, the allure of harnessing light has promised a key to unlocking... well, what exactly? Afterall, the study of light led to the detonation of the atomic bomb, Oppenheimer's eerie recitation of the *Bhagavad Gita* bellows through the annals of history, "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds" (Weiss 1996, 159).

*Is to know
A manner of destruction
Is to speak
A manner of arrest
For once something is known
Once something is spoken
It ceases to be anything other than what we have determined as such.
What am I afraid I will find at the end of my search?
What am I afraid of not finding?
More importantly,
What am I afraid of destroying?*

Humanity's relationship to light is evidently ensnaring but let me be weary of producing yet another monolith. The specific relationship to this technology varies between spaces, cultures, and time. I now turn to our corpus of 14 lamps at the National Museum of Kosova. In the following section I will attempt to speculate the relationships that existed between communities and the lamps (that are classified as Dardanian) in our museum. Perhaps I will fail to build a complete picture, but hopefully my failures will succeed in shedding light on the places that reimagining need occur.

*Where there is light
There needs must also be shadow.
Together, the dance of illuminated surfaces
And rapture of darkness
Create a shifting, fragmentary visage
An apt metaphor (I feel)
For the nature of truth*

I feel at this juncture important to ground the discussion in some formal description. The oil lamps in the collection are relatively small and intimate—able to be held in the hand. The central disc has a hole in the middle (varying in sizes) (fig.1) within which is poured oil or animal fat. Protruding from the central disc is a neck (varying in number and sizes) (fig.2) within which is placed the wick. Where the wick hangs outside of this nozzle, the lamp is set aflame. Handles used to carry the lamp vary in the collection from some being intact, to others broken and missing, to some seemingly never having been molded into the initial form (fig.3).



(fig.1) *Lucernae*, dated II-IV AD, terracotta, 10 cm (l) x 5.5 cm (w) x 2 cm (h). National Museum of Kosova, Prishtina. The palmette as handle indicates the mold made *Ephesos* lamp tradition of Asia Minor, also appearing in Corinth, Athens and Delos (Rosenthal Sivan 1978, 12). This is one of two lamps in the collection with vegetal ornamentation.



(fig.2) *Lucernae*, dated III AD, terracotta, 9 cm (w) x 3.8 cm (h). National Museum of Kosova, Prishtina. Inv. 14. The only lamp in the collection with 3 nozzles, most likely a Late-Hellenistic-Roman lamp (Rosenthal Sivan 1978, 58).



(fig. 3) *Lucernae*, dated III-IV AD, terracotta, 6.5 cm (l) x 6 cm (w) x 3cm (h). National Museum of Kosova, Prishtina. Herodian lamp style, generally wheel-made (Rosenthal Sivan 1978, 78). No discernable handle.

What struck me about these lamps was their presentation within the museum framework as a corpus. They are classified as Dardanian artifacts, living in the chambers thematically framed as the “Roman Period”. The Roman Period (drawing from exhibition catalogues and their sources) is described as the moment in which the Roman Empire absorbed Dardania 28 BC (Shukriu 2008, 194) into their network of theology, government, and, notably, invested in road work that accelerated Dardania’s participation the vast trade occurring within the empire and beyond (Përzhita Peja 2006, 139). Control of the Danube and the region’s mines procured from the mountainous landscape became a target for the Roman Empire in securing militaristic and economic advantage (Tomas 2016, 25).

The new Roman Imperial world order that was being absorbed into the indigenous communities of the Balkans created a dynamic syncretism of language, customs, and spiritual practice. So too was Rome changing with the absorption of new frontiers. The confrontation and negotiation of diverse imperial subjects ushered in the dawn of European ethnography, for example, with Herodotus of Halicarnassos’s “Histories” (Geary 2002, 42). Herodotus was

looking to distinguish communities based on shared characteristics such as common traits, region, customs, political form, etc. However, it is important to note that though these elements may have helped to identify or distinguish, they “did not constitute the peoples as such” (Geary 2002, 48). Later historians like Pliny the Elder would draw from Herodotus’s methodology but arrive at, even weaponize, the very opposite conclusion. To construct and maintain the hierarchy of Greco-Roman cultural and political superiority, cultures needed to be frozen and essentialized, “the result was a sort of law of conservation of peoples- no people ever disappeared, no trait ever changed” (Geary 2002, 49). By arresting the processual nature of culture, the Roman Empire was launching a campaign of “othering” the diverse groups with which they were making contact. The absorption of Roman law and the imposed binary would catalyze “barbarians” to formally enter (infiltrate?) the Roman world through aristocratic or militaristic measures (even enacting constitutional changes) and thus destabilizing the empire’s self-prescribed “pure” ethnic mythos. Despite Roman machinations, the empire was abundant with dynamic exchange.

The lamps that live in the collection were all found at various necropoli located within what were then emerging urban centers of Roman military control such as Ulpiana, Venedis, and Municipium DD. The burial sites themselves are composites of various traditions, some remains entombed, others cremated, other buried beneath the earth (Bunguri 2006, 48-51). Why were these sites so socially and spiritually charged as spaces of return? Where the lamps placed within the sites to imbue the space with a sacral aura or as objects precious to the individual being remembered, or perhaps both? Do they imply beliefs regarding the nature of afterlife (perhaps imagined by Dardanians as a dark place)?

The anonymity derived from the grouping does little to address these questions that the lamps inspire, primary of which being, how and why they were used. A good portion of my

research was spent on matching the construction of the lamps to a specific region and period.

Perhaps in determining a stylistic continuum for this corpus, I could follow a thread of meaning.

In 2018, an exhibition opened at the National Museum of Kosova entitled “Ancient Dardania”. This culture is credited for encompassing the origins and later fluxes of the “Illyrian ethnos” (Përzhita Luci 2006, 29), and was situated in what is now modern-day Kosova. Dardania began emerging from the historical record around the middle of the 4th century BC (Bunguri 2006, 53), determined by historians to be the consolidation of Illyrian tribes present in the region since The Bronze Age (Përzhita Luci 2006, 29). This presence is determined through “stamps and tumuli-burial cemeteries” (Përzhita Luci 2006, 30).

Dardania became of interest to an ever-expanding Roman Empire due to its geological resources: its iron rich mines such as *Gjergjan* near *Drini I Bardhë (Kukës)* and fertile soils of *Rrafshi I Dukagjinit* (Përzhita Peja 2006, 139). Roman authorities began occupying the region towards the end of the 1st century AD, initiating a sequence of Roman urbanization upon the existing Illyrian settlements (Përzhita Peja 2006, 139). The lamps are classified under this “Roman Period”, spanning from the 1st century AD through to the 4th century AD.

A curious overlap occurs as Christianity appears in Dardania in the historical transcript of the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (Hoxha 2006, 205). The spread of Christianity, however, is indicated in even earlier periods with the martyrdoms of Florus and Laurus in the 2nd century AD (Hoxha 2006, 205). Dardania becomes formally absorbed into the Byzantine Empire once Emperor Justinian begins a series of fortification projects in the 6th century AD, though the region was embracing Christianity before this imperial sanction.

All of this historical context to illustrate that: these lamps are considered artifacts of Ancient Dardania, though the forms and styles of the lamps are diverse, they date to the Roman

Period, and the tail-end of their classification moves into the Byzantine. When presented as a static corpus, the rich cultural shifts happening around and through these objects is collapsed into a singular *chronos*, that is, a “continuous diachronic time” (Jordheim 2007, 137). And though museological institutions, and the academic disciplines that preserve their authority, compulsively subscribe to this notion of linear time’s facticity, periodization here seems to be failing us. Of whom, by whom, for whom are these objects really?

Displaying objects enshrined in cases, divorced in time and space from the activities that formed them, ultimately flattens the “diversity of artistic phenomena that appear in any particular time by giving them a unified label” (Kaufmann 2010, 3). All that is left of the objects is its perceived usage or technological ability, nothing of the experience of the object itself.

A helpful philosophical intervention can be found in *kairos*, a multilayered reconceptualization of time that considers not only a linear temporal progression but the moments of change that demarcate a distinct before and after *in tandem* with *chronos* (Jordheim 2007, 116). In this way, an object can be perceived as a participant responding to a distinct cultural, artistic, spiritual need, as well as part of a traditional continuum. As these lamps live in the socially constructed space of the museum’s subsequently essentialist historical treatment (as museums are like to do), what is lost are the “centerless and infinitely expansive...historical traditions in various kinds of contact” (Summers 2003, 23). What we do not know is how these objects may have shifted in, and conversely impacted, meaning through the negotiations of local pagan and cult practices, Romanization, and ensuing Christianization that required a conceptual shift from one imperial locus to another.

Though these lamps pre-date the Byzantine iconicity about which Bissera Pentcheva writes by a hair, I found her exploration of the function of light to be a helpful teleological basis

for my intervention. Pentcheva positions her discussion of the Byzantine icon as distinct from Western modernism's understanding of an icon as a semiotic phenomenon, as one that is merely representational. The Byzantine mixed-media icon (images comprised of metallic surfaces, precious gemstones, paint) integrate light, air, and human presence to animate the inanimate. In other words, these elements enter a "circle of agitation and response" (Pentcheva 2010, 123), in which the subject and object exchange positions. This interplay is the main departure from representationalism, these icons were not representative or imitative of presence, rather they simulated and performed it. Icons did not stand in for a presence, they *were* the presence. This invocation brought the faithful clergy closer to the divine.

Light and space are key players in this vibrancy. The Greek word *poikilia* "denotes the synesthetic corporeal experience of the presence effects played out on material surface exposed to shifts in ambient condition" (Pentcheva 2010, 140). *Poikilia* is only achieved through the synergy of body, surface, and the "ambient condition", i.e., space. Thus, a cacophony of sensations is only made possible through situating the objects in their appropriately conceived "social space" (Summers 2003, 19). As these lamps both produce light and activate space, could they have been a nexus of *poikilia* for Dardanian persons?

Though we are unable to place these lamps precisely in their spaces of origin (as they have been lost to the erosions of time), we can perhaps take a page from Pentcheva's book. In what ways can these objects be reimagined beyond a stagnant pile of artifacts? To be reconceived as not merely tools or vessels, but as heralds *themselves* of the spiritual realm. Afterall, to quote Summers in *Real Spaces* once again, "When the assumptions of Western representationalism in any of its phases...are brought to traditions of art making to which they

have no historical connections, the result can only be fundamental cultural incomprehension”
(Summers 2003, 27).

What is necessary is a reframing but again, we must move away from the modernist sense of the term “frame” as a demarcation of boundary or periphery. Pentcheva provides words denoting “frame” in the Byzantine sensibility: “*sympexis, systasis, synthema, and synthesis*” (Pentcheva 2010, 146). These terms all determine framing to be an act of creation, or weaving, “the *poesis* of matter” (Pentcheva 2010, 146). I am attempting, through my own imagining, to weave language and materiality in the hopes of uncovering new meanings that delight in the ephemeral experience, in *kairos*, in variation.

Variations on the Word Light

Gradually emerging from darkness
Gradually emerging to light
The birth of stars

Reflection// refraction
Deflecting densities and the surfaces that cradle them
Transparency// Opacity
Obstructions of meaning, the meaning of which may be obstruction itself

Vibrancy
Lightning// power
The strength and resonance of forces in space
Heaven
The strength and resonance of forces out of space

Flame
Desire
Dematerializing immateriality

Blinding²

² Vocabulary sourced from Bissera Pentcheva’s chapter “Transformative Vision: Allegory, *Poikilia*, and *Pathema*” in *The Sensual Icon*. Methodology was inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s chapter “Wayward: A Short Entry on the Possible” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

Another rich proposition of meaning is offered by Uzma Rizvi writing on arrowheads of the 3rd millennium and thus is discussing an entirely different technology and geography in their book *The Affect of Crafting: Third Millennium BCE Copper Arrowheads from Ganeshwar, Rajasthan*, I found the framework helpful in reflecting on the lamps not merely as objects of study but sites of community building. The manipulation of earth and fire is a collaboration between both peoples and the landscape. Rather than thinking of the objects as belonging to a specific community, I am instead thinking through how the community may have belonged to the lamps (Rizvi 2018, 65). In other words, how does the making of the lamps determine belonging?

Thus, I turned to the craft itself. Save for one bronze lamp in the collection rendered in anthropomorphic form (a Hellenistic style) (Rosenthal Sivan 1978, 145), the group is mainly comprised of earthen lamps with a hole for the oil and neck for the wick. The form is simple and utilitarian. Rim decorations are generally a helpful aesthetic clue into the regional specificity. The lamps continue to elude me. Save for a few that have vegetal accents and one with a small stamp by the air hole (an indicator of the stylistic impact of Imperial Rome and a potter's marking perhaps?) (fig.4), the designs are generally enigmatic.



(fig.4) *Lucernae*, dated III-IV AD, terracotta, 4.5 cm (h) x 8.7 cm (d). National Museum of Kosova, Pristhina. Inv. 954. Stamp can be seen near the central hole. The smaller air hole and decorated disc most likely a Flavian lamp tradition (Rosenthal Sivan 1978, 12).

Many of the lamp traditions observed within the collection are historically wheel made, though I could not locate studied evidence of striations. Whereas constructing lamps with molds gave the artisan ability to accent the material more easily with designs, the wheel made lamp was less about individuation and more about the quantity of production (Broneer 1930, 8).

Nevertheless, the wheel made lamp offers its own insights and subsequent questions. If the lamps were made on a mass-scale, surely a space was allocated for its production, namely a workshop and/ or kiln. The spatial planning necessary in creating wheel made lamps required collaboration between community members and the landscape. Kilns, especially those producing industrial or community wide earthenware, require an upkeep of ideal temperatures and burning materials (MacDougall 2001, 0:21:32 to 0:28:45). This sense of community building creates an integrative exchange of ownership, a production for members and by members. Though the lamps are framed within the museum as objects of Dardania, would it be helpful to shift our consideration of these objects from evidence of a singular cultural power to a source of correspondence between communities and land?

Dardania is said to be the ancient kingdom of the Illyrians (the forefathers of modern-day Albanians). Though Dardania's heart is said to have been situated in modern day Kosova, its socio-political and military range also encompassed surrounding territories. Dardania was comprised of diverse tribes, with Illyrians as a majority. Dardania is invoked by various projects of statecraft: either to bolster modern day Albanians around a common ancestry, or to reduce Dardania as a mere myth for the purpose of inter-colonial control.

For example, Roman literary sources mention Ancient Dardania's cultural and military prowess appearing in Aristophanes' *The Wasps*, Menander's *Dardanus*, and others (Shukriu 2008, 10). Meanwhile, some scholars challenge or diminish the existence of any such formations, arguing Dardania to be a purely Roman Imperial construct (Mihajlovic 2018, 198). This conflict over narrative is best exemplified in a recent archeological discovery in Skopje (Macedonia), in which a tombstone inscribed in Latin confirms Skopje as the capital of Illyrian Dardania between 500-600 AD. The Macedonian government has done much to move with this discovery in silence, as it compromises their efforts to erase the existence of the ancient kingdom. In fact, commercial construction will continue at the site and valuable archeological evidence *in situ* will most likely be destroyed (Tase 2023). As archaeological finds can be mobilized to function as evidence of cultural origins and/ or duration, archaeological material can fall prey to the violence of competing constructions of history. What renders archaeological material so vulnerable is the art historical discipline's tendency to essentialize culture (though here we can perhaps challenge a constellation of disciplines), to project an ethnic mythos free of variation or change.

In the example of my archaeological case study, however, variations in form do, in fact, exist among the lamps. Some can be traced to a Hellenistic tradition, others to a Roman Imperial

style, some to the Herodian lamps deriving from Judeo, others to influences from further East (primarily, Egypt or Alexandria) (Broneer 1930, 8) (Rosenthal Sivan 1978). Were these styles absorbed into the Dardanian lamp making tradition or are they evidence of economic exchange? Either way, considering these objects as part of a cultural negotiation destabilizes notions of fixity.

*Perhaps I have been too concerned with what Drita means to me
Why could I mean to Drita?
Fixing her in her victimhood
As the object of a patriarchal power system
Perpetuates the violence that robbed her of dimensionality to begin with
Perhaps I am her continuum
Perhaps we are both equal participants
In a continuum of light bearing*

We see in Byzantine art a treatment of light that goes beyond the seeing into the realm of synesthetic experience. The dynamism of light activates the space to invite the viewer into an alternate consciousness. Dardanian pagan cult practices have been determined as the belief in a cyclical cosmological order, centering the relationship between the destructive and the regenerative (Cam 2014, 67) (Hajdari Berisha 2021, 60). To echo my previous reflections, could light and its subsequent technologies then hold within it the potentialities not just of illumination, but also of obstruction? Could these lamps be an example of the monumental in the everyday?

*Dr. Alp Cam speaks on the Egyptian understanding of sun light as a “symbol of uniqueness and the ‘soul walking on the surface of the water’ “ (Cam 2014, 67)
Please no longer refer to me as Drita
Refer to me as
Soul walking on the surface of the water*

In *Reading the Past*, Hodder and Hutson write that material culture is “not a language at all—it is more clearly action and practice in the world” (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 168). Should not the questions surrounding “action and practice” be met with action and practice? Are we satisfied with the static museum inscription? Interdisciplinarity might aid in providing the vocabulary with which to respond to this fixity.

If I have used these lamps as metaphors for my grandmother Drita, then a parallel can be found in the museological treatment of “history as such” (Jordheim 2007, 138) to the belief that patriarchy is also “history as such”—as the natural world order. Womanhood as understood by my father’s side of the family is also a corpus, that is, a fixed, non-individuated, monolithic entity upon which can be projected the visions of those desiring control. Western modernism also vies for control. As a professor of mine Dr. Ortega says, “we must undiscipline the discipline”. My attempt has been to recenter femininity through material culture as that which is a *process* of daily negotiation, engaging our imaginations to find new possibilities. Afterall, where this is light (Drita), there is life.

Ultimately, my research has only led to more questions than answers. An earthquake destroyed Ulpiana in 518 AD (Shukriu 2008, 21), taking with it knowledge of lifeways and initiating projects of reconstructions. Perhaps some things are not for us to know. Perhaps knowing provides us with a sense of control, of ownership over that which is too vast to grasp. Perhaps it is time to rethink the framework of “ownership”. These lamps have been a humbling case study for me. A case study on that which eludes study (in the traditional sense). A case study on the destabilizing capacities of reimagining that which we think we know, that which we believe to be fact.

Sometimes I want to call up the ghost of my grandmother.

*To summon her
Dial "000000000000"
Open the doors to the unrest
Risk the perils of that which is not known to me
"Memory, speak!"
Even as I write these words I am terrified*

I get the sense she is very far away.

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