

# Egyptian Nocturnal Festival of Lamps in Honour of Athena-Neith

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## ABSTRACT

Terracotta figurines – as a part of minor arts – have been produced and widely used throughout the long period of Graeco-Roman dominance over Egypt. They were cheaply made of fired Nile clay and display a wealth of motifs unparalleled in any other terracotta workshops from the ancient world. Many of them represent both Egyptian and foreign deities who were particularly thought to offer personal protection and many of them were moreover closely connected with religious feasts. This is also the case of Athena-Neith. The identification of Athena with the Egyptian warrior-goddess Neith led in the Roman period to the mass-production of distinctive lamps with Athena's image. No wonder that some of them are also housed in several Czech museums and private collections.

## KEYWORDS

Graeco-Roman terracottas; nocturnal festival; Athena-Neith; Athena-Dadouchos; Sais; Esna.

## INTRODUCTION

The civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece and later of the vast Roman imperium were not mutually impervious to each other's influence. For a study of this acculturation process – on a small scale – Graeco-Roman terracottas, that is, figurines of fired clay, are an abundant and indispensable source (TÖRÖK 2005). Since they were cheap, mass-produced ware widely dispersed throughout the lower levels of society, they give us a considerable insight into the popular belief, art, religion and daily life in an ethnically-mixed society. Under Greek influence, the moulding technique was widely in use as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in certain sites in Egypt, mainly in the Delta region. Generally, small figurines of fired clay are rare in pharaonic art, compared to figurines in bronze or Egyptian faience (PETRIE 1886). Very few terracottas kept in the museums around the world were found in official excavations, while their majority is unprovenanced, recovered from the unrecorded activities of the *sebakh* diggers. However, various official excavations have yielded a sufficiently large number of terracottas mostly from private houses of city and village dwellers, e.g. Soknopaiou Nesos, Theadelphia, Bacchias, Ehnasiya, Karanis (BAILEY 2008, 1–6). Here, terracottas positively attest that worshipping gods in domestic space had a long history both in Egyptian and Greek cultures (SMOLÁRIKOVÁ 2010, 17–21; ABDELWAHED 2015, 95). An original and expressive Graeco-Egyptian blended style gradually emerged: a style which combined the Greeks' predilection for movement and naturalistic, supple, rounded forms with the frontal depiction and a strong emphasis on symbolic expression characteristic of the Egyptian canon. In general, the majority of the employed motifs belonged to the sphere of Egyptian religion, while motifs of a secular character also occur but are in the significant minority (DUNAND 1990). Behind this fact we can see a widespread belief that the figurines of deities were devised to protect the house occupants from the perils of the supernatural world. The representations of Greek gods are

significantly fewer in number among the terracotta figurines than figures of the decidedly Egyptian deities: Harpokrates, Bes, Isis, etc. (FRANKFURTER 2012, 283–296). Nevertheless, the pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses is far from limited and we can find among them Aphrodite, Athena, Eros, Dionysos, Zeus and many other Olympians.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF ATHENA

The intention of this article is to concentrate our attention on the abovementioned goddess Athena and her typical iconography as well as to touch on her later mythological development in a mixed Egyptian, Greek and Roman milieu.



**Fig. 1: Athena-Neith in the form of a small lamp: height 16.8 cm, provenance unknown (after SMOLÁRIKOVÁ 2010, 47, Fig. 40; The Náprstek Museum, Prague, P 5946).**

To begin with, it must be stated that no solid analysis of Athena's representation in Egyptian 'small arts' has been made up to now. This may be due to the lack or shortage of their typological variations (unlike e.g. Aphrodite), and their rather limited usage during the single religious feast. Nevertheless, the war-goddess Athena was one of the Greek gods very popular among

the people of *chora* and thus widely portrayed by coroplasts. Far more frequently she was depicted in the form of a small lamp (**Fig. 1**) in the shape of a bust with one or two wick-holes and wick-rests below. The rendering of this type of goddess seems to be rather stereotypical with differences in details only, such as the varying shape and decoration of the helmet and shield as well as the type and decoration of garment. Not rarely, the crest of the helmet was replaced by a rosette or a little Egyptian crown of feathers. There are many lamps where a hole pierced in the helmet served for suspension. However, it is difficult to estimate to what extent these representations would be regarded as depictions of the goddess Neith, with whom Athena was identified. In other words: it is impossible to say, if terracottas depicting Athena can be considered as purely Greek or if we can speak about the Hellenistic image of Egyptian goddess. These small terracotta lamps in the form of Athena were very probably presented as special offerings at the shrine of the goddess, or used at home by people who were not able to attend her festival personally.



**Fig. 2: Athena-Neith in the form of a small lantern: height 10.6 cm, provenance unknown (after QUAEGEBEUR 1983, 320, Fig. 5).**

Apart from the lamps with a motif of Athena, also little lanterns were produced in the form of a square or oval building, with pointed roof and a loop on the top for suspension (**Fig. 2**). A miniature lamp or inflammable material was placed inside the lantern through a small opening in the front or back respectively. Also other gods used to be presented on the walls of the lanterns besides Athena (Dionysos, Eros, Zeus, etc.), but she is rather easily recognisable thanks to her weaponry: the shield and the helmet, as well as from the aegis with the head of Medusa. These small lanterns of different shapes were probably used during the nocturnal lamp festival of the goddess Athena-Neith.

### ATHENA-DADOUCHOS - ATHENA-NEITH

A common iconographic type of Athena among the Egyptian terracottas shows the goddess with a large torch. With this attribute the goddess is known as Athena Dadouchos ('torch-bearer'); she is almost always depicted as a standing woman, holding a large torch to her right side and a supporting oval shield with her left hand. She is dressed in a chiton with an aegis and a crested helmet as well (**Fig. 3**). The large torch, however, – quite an un-Greek attribute for

Athena – identifies this figure as Athena assimilated with the Egyptian war-goddess Neith (LLOYD 1976, 280, *passim*; BAILEY 2008, Pl. 59:3332, 3333).



**Fig. 3: Athena-Dadouchos/'torch-bearer': height 21.1 cm, provenance unknown (after QUAEGEBEUR 1983, 309, Fig. 1).**

The assimilation of Athena with Neith – one of many results of the Greeks' effort to make sense of the strange Egyptian deities as well as demons – created a demand for a great many lamp-figurines in that they were used in the nocturnal festivals of light, held by the Egyptians in honour of Athena-Neith. It is not without curiosity that in the Pre-Ptolemaic period the Egyptians used mostly simple flat lamps in the form of shallow small cups/bowls as is well-documented archaeologically from the sites all around the country (HAMZA 1997, Fig. 1:5–12) as well as thanks to the classical written sources. The Greeks had been well acquainted with Sais and its customs from the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and Herodotus described the festival as follows: *At Sais, when the assembly takes place for the sacrifices, there is one night on which the inhabitants all burn a multitude of lights in the open air round their houses. They use lamps in the shape of flat saucers filled with a mixture of oil and salt, on the top of which the wick floats. These burn the whole night, and give to the festival the name of the Feast of Lamps. The Egyptians who are absent from the festival observe the night of the sacrifice, no less than the rest, by a general lighting of lamps; so that the illumination is not confined to the city of Sais, but extends over the whole of Egypt. And there is a religious reason assigned for the special honour paid to this night, as well as for the illumination which accompanies it* (Herodotus II, 62 *apud* LLOYD 1976).

Later, during the Roman period, the myth and a series of religious rituals performed at Esna were very closely and explicitly modeled on those known already from ancient Sais, so much so that these two cities are interchangeable in hieroglyphic text (SAUNERON 1962, 249–251).

The *logos* is a cosmogony, the most detailed one known to us from Egypt, in which the goddess Neith acts as the Demiurg and which gives the background to the Feast of Neith on the 13<sup>th</sup> Epiphi (SAUNERON 1968, no. 207, 22–23). The core of this festival presents the triumphal mythical arrival of the goddess accompanied by her son Re at Sais after the creation of the world. In the evening the image of Neith was carried by the crowd of priests in the form of a cow to the quay of the city. It was then carried back to the temple while her victory over the enemies of her son Re was performed. Her triumphal return to the temple symbolized the end of the long era of chaos which was epitomised by the enthronement of the goddess and her son in the temple: *Returning to her temple in peace. Words spoken by the prophet: 'Hurray! Hurray! She has come in joy. Neith the great cow has come in peace! Hurray for her coming! Neith,*

*the Great One, Mother of the God, Mistress of Esna, Merihyt-Nebtu, Mistress of Khentyto! Burning of torches in abundance within this temple! Let men and women make festival! Let this whole city raise cries of joy, and let none sleep until sun-rise! Let Esna be in festival* (SAUNERON 1968, no. 207. 22–23). Undoubtedly, the burning of torches was both symbolic of and a magical recreation of the annihilation of darkness and disorder achieved by the goddess Neith at the beginning of the world, during the battle against the snake Apophis and all the foes of light and order. In such a way Neith, Mistress of Sais, was imposingly inaugurated together with her son Re in the temple of Sais.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we tried to offer a complex view on one type of terracotta figure used in the mixed society of Roman Egypt where the small terracottas bear witness to deep-rooted religious belief among those who possessed them, the country people of Graeco-Roman Egypt. These people of a lower echelon of society had obviously no access to the cult statues in the innermost precincts of the magnificent Egyptian temples. It was only in the ritual processions that the ordinary worshippers managed to see the cultic images of their gods at all. It is, therefore, not surprising that personal piety predominated and most of the religious figurines have been found within the household equipment. Here they were an integral part of the household worship and were either stood or hung in niches in the wall reserved as household shrines. Such small shrines, which are well-known from pharaonic Egypt, were particularly widespread in the Roman world. In these domestic shrines the family honoured the wide pantheon of gods and beneficent demons. This would also be where the figure-lamps of Athena-Neith and lanterns with her image would come into their own. They served as varieties of reliquaries during the personal worship of the cult rite or were simply held at home in memory of the nocturnal festival of lamps.

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