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The Palmette Decoration on Northern Stamped Lamps: Transformation of a Classical Motif*

Zohar Slaney

Abstract: This article examines the palmette motif on Northern Stamped Lamps, a distinctive group of clay oil lamps, produced in northern workshops between the third and sixth centuries CE. While the palmette motif largely disappears from other mass-produced lamp types of the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, it becomes the dominant decorative element on this northern group. By placing the palmette motif at the center of the analysis and comparing its use across other contemporary and technologically related media, this study contextualizes its distinctive treatment on Northern Stamped Lamps within the broader artistic trends of Late Antique Galilee and Phoenicia. The findings suggest that the persistent and varied use of the palmette reflects both the creative agency of local artisans and a regional aesthetic language that reinterpreted classical decorative norms. The endurance of the palmette on Northern Stamped Lamps reveals how form, technique, and culture interacted to shape artistic change in Late Antiquity.

Keywords: palmette; clay oil lamps; Northern Stamped Lamps; Late Roman–Byzantine Galilee.

INTRODUCTION

Oil lamps were everyday objects, serving to light private homes, public buildings, and tombs, as well as offerings in temples and burial rituals. Yet they carried more than just functional value. The development of lamp forms and decorations over time reflects technological changes and artistic styles across different cultures.¹ Although lamps are generally not regarded as objects of high artistic value, lamp decorations signify choices of motif and style that reflect the values and identities of their users. As such, they can offer insight into the communities for which they were made.²

This paper explores the distinctive use of the palmette motif on a Galilean group of clay lamps, called ‘Northern Stamped Lamps’, an unusual group produced between the third and sixth centuries CE, that marks the artistic transformations of the Roman–Byzantine periods. They were also called ‘Beth She‘arim lamps’, since they were found in large quantities at the site cemetery, especially in Catacomb 20.³ These lamps are

* This study is based on my doctoral dissertation (Slaney 2026). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Adi Erlich, who supervised the dissertation, for reading the manuscript at its various stages. Her insightful comments were invaluable and contributed significantly to the development of this study. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and constructive suggestions, which greatly improved the article.

¹ Sussman (1982), 2.

² Rosenthal-Heginbottom (2019), 101.

³ Avigad (1976), 188; Rosenthal-Heginbottom and Sivan (1978), 110–112; Sussman (1989); Sussman (2017), 215; Lapp (2016), 77–81; Rosenthal-Heginbottom (2019), 99.

unique due to their sunken (and therefore named ‘stamped’) decoration, which looks clumsy and uneven. They have been found throughout the Galilee and along the Phoenician coast and are commonly attributed to Phoenician workshops.⁴ The lamp’s popularity peaked between the fourth and fifth centuries CE, characterized by cultural continuity and significant transformation. During the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, Galilee and Phoenicia experienced economic prosperity and demographic growth. While the pagan population on the Phoenician coast gradually converted to Christianity,⁵ the fate of the Jewish population in Galilee is less clear, whether decline or prosperity, and is currently under scholarly debate.⁶

The almost complete absence of religious symbols on these lamps makes it difficult to identify their target audience. On the one hand, their significant presence at Beth She‘arim, a distinctly Jewish site, supports the assumption that they were produced for a Jewish clientele. On the other hand, their distribution across various sites in the northern region, and especially in pagan and Christian southern Phoenicia, indicates that they were used by a more diverse population.⁷

There are three main characteristics of the Northern Stamped type lamps. First, they feature sunken decoration, which is most unusual among mold-made lamps, whose decoration is almost always depicted in relief, in all periods.⁸ Second, in contrast to other contemporary lamp types, such as Beit Nattif, Samaritan, and Caesarea lamps, which display uniform and carefully executed designs, Northern Stamped Lamps exhibit significant variation and lack consistency in execution. Their decoration is often clumsy and uneven, and their significant popularity stands in contrast to their unusual appearance. Sussman has described these lamps as crude and of little artistic merit,⁹ while Lapp has suggested that they can reflect a form of local, popular art.¹⁰ And third, the motifs decorating the Northern Stamped Lamps are restricted to plant and geometric forms, such as herringbone or branch, circles, squares, rosettes and palmettes. While all these designs

⁴ Sussman (2017), 215.

⁵ From the late second century BCE to the fourth century CE, the Galilee was inhabited mainly by Jews who lived in villages, towns, and cities. Most of this Jewish settlement continued into the Byzantine period, even though the number of Christians increased in the larger urban centers such as Tiberias and Sepphoris, as well as in newly established monasteries and Christian villages. Aviam (2007), 132.

⁶ Some scholars argue for a demographic decline in the Jewish population of eastern Galilee beginnings in mid-third century that increased during fourth century CE, see Leibner (2009), 351–68. Others suggest continued settlement and growth, with fluctuations, through the fourth to sixth centuries, see Magness and Schindler (2015), 191, 205–6; Lapin (2017), 127, 139–41.

⁷ Sussman (2017), 217, 244, map 8.

⁸ Different views have been proposed regarding the production process of Northern Stamped Lamps. Sussman claims that these lamps were decorated after removal from the mold, while leather hard. This theory explains the varied and rather clumsy appearance of the lamps, see Sussman (2017), 215. On the other hand, Dry and Gonen maintain that the stamping was applied to a solid prototype, a competing explanation, with which the present author agrees, supported by economic considerations and efficiency of the production process, see Dry and Gonen (2025), 168.

⁹ Sussman (2017), 217–8.

¹⁰ Lapp (2016), 78.

appear widely on contemporary lamps such as Beit Nattif, candlestick, Caesarea, Samaritans oil lamps,¹¹ the palmette is uniquely associated with the Northern Stamped Lamps of this period (**Fig. 1**). Although the palmette motif was common in Hellenistic and Roman lamp decoration, by the fourth century CE, it had stopped decorating oil lamps and appeared almost exclusively on the Northern Stamped Lamps, where it is quite common.¹²



Fig. 1: Palmettes on Northern stamped lamps from Beth She‘arim 4th–5th CE. Photo by the author.

¹¹ Hadad (2002), no. 66, 127, 136; Lapp (2016), no. 16; Sussman (2017), no. 1609, 1803, 1120, 2371, 2907, 3089; Rosenthal-Heginbottom (2019), fig. 2.1.

¹² Sussman (2017), 218.

This raises several questions: Why was this motif so common on Northern Stamped Lamps? What stylistic changes did it undergo over time? To what artistic influences can the motif be attributed? This paper takes the palmette as a case study to address these questions, placing it within the broader discourse on decorative forms. Its appearance on Northern Stamped Lamps is then examined as evidence of the wider artistic transformations that characterize Late Antiquity.

Decorative systems comprise motifs and their composition, typically marked by repetition and symmetry.¹³ Once considered marginal within art history, they are now recognized as independent formal systems, adaptable to diverse media and contexts.¹⁴ The systematic study of decorative forms and the theoretical framework for their analysis took shape in the late nineteenth century, most notably through the work of Alois Riegl. He argued for form autonomy independent of technique, showing that only a limited number of motifs recur across time and culture.¹⁵ Later scholars, such as Ernst Gombrich, approached decoration through the lens of human creativity and perception, stressing the importance of craftsmanship, material, and the organization of decorative space.¹⁶ More recent scholarship, represented by Ellen Swift, emphasizes the cultural and social dimensions of decoration, viewing it as a visual language that articulates cultural boundaries. Her approach acknowledges the gap between decorative theory and its practical execution by local, non-elite artists in the Roman world.¹⁷

Any assessment of the palmette prominence must also consider the local artistic context. Scholarship has shown that Roman and Byzantine decoration in Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine was often adapted in non-classical ways, employing sharp contrasts of light and shadow, geometric abstraction, and an emphasis on surface decoration.¹⁸ An additional feature of the artistic production of this period, observable in a range of media, is the movement from naturalistic vegetal design toward abstract geometric rendering.¹⁹

From a regional perspective, the abundance and variety of art forms discovered in Galilee attest to the significant development and flourishing of its art in Late Antiquity. The decline of paganism and the expansion of Christianity generated significant change in the field of Jewish art across various media.²⁰ Studies of architectural elements in the

¹³ Swift (2009), 1–10.

¹⁴ Brüderlin (2001), 20–2.

¹⁵ Riegl (1992[1893]), xxii, 5.

¹⁶ Gombrich, while deeply influenced by Riegl, challenges his principle of stylistic continuity, asking whether every motif that appears transitional must necessarily serve as evidence of gradual and continuous change. He does not reject the general idea of formal development but suggests that additional factors may account for stylistic transformation, see Gombrich (1979), 72–5, 180–7.

¹⁷ The gap between theory and actual practice in the field allowed for creative invention and the adoption of alternative design principles, particularly among local artists outside the cultural elite, see Swift (2009), 1–10, 16–23. The concept of decorative elements as a semiotic language is also discussed by Necipoğlu in relation to Islamic art, which has been extensively studied, see Necipoğlu (1995) 83, 217–22.

¹⁸ Avi-Yonah (1981), 87, 113–17.

¹⁹ Avi-Yonah (1981), 78.

²⁰ During the late Second Temple period, Jewish art avoided figurative representations and was restricted to vegetal and geometric decoration. In the Roman and Byzantine periods, however,

Galilee and the Golan have shown that local reinterpretations and departures from classical prototypes were expressed through the reduction and omission of details.²¹ Another characteristic feature of Late Antique art, reflected in the artistic production of northern Roman Palestine, is the deliberate use of asymmetry. This characteristic should be understood not as solely the outcome of poor craftsmanship but rather as a deliberate aesthetic choice.²² With these theoretical frameworks and the local artistic context in view, we now turn to the discussion of the palmette.

THE PALMATTE: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The palmette is one of the most widespread and ancient decorative motifs, likely inspired by the palm tree. Its structure typically features three or more petals on each side, radiating like a fan from a central calyx. Although it first appeared in the art of Egypt and the ancient Near East, the motif is best known for its extensive use in Greek art (**Fig. 2**).²³ Its varied use in different ritual and symbolic contexts suggests that the motif functioned as an open form, whose meaning could be adapted to diverse cultural settings.²⁴



Fig. 2: Palmette from the Parthenon, 5th BCE. Drawn by the author after Riegl (1992), fig. 109.

the decline of paganism and the spread of Christianity led to a transformation in the Jewish approach to art, which now articulated its decorative elements through more figurative and symbolic expression, see Hachlili (2013), 605; Levine (2015); Peleg-Barkat (2016), 27–8.

²¹ Fischer (1987), 173; Turnheim (1996), 122–4, 131–2.

²² According to Hachlili, although its origin lies in the East, it became a specifically Jewish feature, appearing in architectural decoration, mosaics, and funerary contexts, see Hachlili (2009), 159–62, (2013), 276, 609, 197, fig. IV–51.

²³ Riegl (1992), 403; Wilson (1999) 10.

²⁴ Rykwert (1994), 12–8, fig. 5–7, 1.

In Greek Classical art, the palmette is common in the decoration of red and black figure pottery, where changes in its form provide a valuable tool for dating.²⁵ In architectural ornamentation, the palmette frequently appears in combination with the acanthus motif, which lends the decoration a more vegetal and naturalistic appearance. The combination of the palmette and lotus with acanthus leaves is commonly referred to as anthemion or honeysuckle motif.²⁶

In the Roman period, the palmette remained a dominant decorative motif across various media and continued to develop stylistically.²⁷ In the Byzantine period, plant motifs based on the palmette continued to develop in various regions of the Mediterranean. The palmette underwent further processes of stylization, reduction, fragmentation, and fusion with other vegetal motifs. These transformations continued into the early Islamic period.²⁸

THE PALMETTE IN THE ART OF ROMAN PALESTINE

In Roman Palestine, the palmette motif appeared across a variety of media. In the mosaic at Masada, palmettes are placed in the corners of the inner panel.²⁹ Two palmettes also appear in a mosaic from the Upper City of Jerusalem of the Early Roman period (**Fig. 3a**). They are rendered in outline and positioned diagonally opposite each other in the spandrels.³⁰ A different appearance of the motif is found in a mosaic from Caesarea, designed under Italian influence, where it is more stylized, combined with ribbons and a tendril motif (**Fig. 3b**).³¹

The palmette appears in various forms on Jewish ossuaries of the Early Roman period. It is often carved in plastic and symmetrical manner, placed in central positions within the decorative composition (**Fig. 4a**).³² In other cases, it is rendered more schematically through simple linear incision (**Fig. 4b**).³³ A close similarity can be observed between the palmette on the mosaic from Masada and the slender palmette carved on ossuaries.³⁴ Rahmani suggests that in these cases, the original form of the palmette may either have been forgotten or deliberately disregarded.³⁵

²⁵ Riegl (1992), 40; Dinsmoor (1946), 111–13; Wilson (1999), 10, fig. 6.

²⁶ Wilson (1999), 10–1, fig. 12.

²⁷ Balmelle (1984), 103, fig. h; Wilson (1999), fig. 12.

²⁸ Riegl argued that the Islamic arabesque, which developed in Egypt, originated from the palmette motif and was particularly influenced by its naturalistic Hellenistic and Roman versions, see Riegl (1992), 233, 240–255, fig. 154, 269, fig. 167, 176a, 192, 192a; Gombrich (1979), 181.

²⁹ Hachlili (2009), 11, fig. I–6.

³⁰ Hachlili (2009), 11, pl. 1.4a; In the mosaic, an opposing motif is incorporated — a spindle-shaped vessel for liquids (*unguentarium*), made of clay or glass, used for a range of purposes. This motif is less common than the palmette. Talgam (2014), 17–8, fig. 17.

³¹ Talgam (2014), 23, fig. 27.

³² Rahmani (1994), no. 60f, 816f.

³³ Rahmani (1994), fig. 98, 99.

³⁴ Hachlili (2009), 11, fig. I–6.

³⁵ Rahmani (1994), 44.



Fig. 3a–b: Palmettes from mosaics in Roman Palestine. (a) left – Jerusalem, the Upper City; (b) right – Caesarea, Roman Domus. Drawn by the author after Talgam (2014), fig. 17, 27.



Fig. 4a–b: Palmettes from ossuaries. (a) left – plastic carving; (b) right – schematic engraving. Drawn by the author after Rahmani (1994), no. 816, 136.

In the northern region of the country, architectural elements from the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods made extensive use of the palmette, often in combination with lotus and acanthus motifs. The general design followed the ‘Syrian sequence’, which remained in use in the northern region throughout the period. Over time, the decorative elements were gradually simplified and abstracted, moving away from their classical prototypes (**Fig. 5**). The design of the palmette reflects these broader tendencies, emphasizing sharp contrasts of light and shadow as part of the overall decorative effect.³⁶ It is interesting to note that in lead coffins — a contemporary medium of the Northern

³⁶ Turnheim (1996), 131–32.

Stamped Lamps, also produced under Phoenician influence — the palmette is almost entirely absent.³⁷



Fig. 5a–c: Palmettes in architectural decorations: (a) left – Khirbet Samka; (b) center – the synagogue at Capernaum; (c) right – Hamat Gader. Drawn by the author after Turnheim (1996), pl. 20.B, 18.A, 13.A.

THE PALMETTE ON POTTERY DECORATION

Palmette stamps on ceramic vessels already appear in Attic wares of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.³⁸ The earliest groups of stamped palmettes, dating to the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, preserve the classical structure, typically nine leaves with a central calyx-shaped leaf flanked symmetrically by four leaves on each side.³⁹

Beginning in the third century BCE, however, the motif was increasingly enclosed within a marked outline, a modification that improved the durability of the stamps and reduced the risk of breakage. This period also saw a gradual simplification of the design: volutes were reduced to points or omitted, and the calyx evolved into a pronounced midrib. By the second and first centuries BCE, some stamped designs had moved so far from the classical prototype that they resembled ferns, ivy leaves, or other vegetal motifs rather than true palmettes (**Fig. 6**).⁴⁰



Fig. 6: Various variations of the palmette motif on terra sigillata vessels. Drawn by the author after Crowfoot (1957), 317, fig. 75.

³⁷ Rahmani notes a single occurrence of the palmette motif used as a spacer between two outward-facing lions in a heraldic composition. He argues that the palmette replaces the vine leaf that traditionally occupied this position in the prototype of the ornament. Rahmani (1999), 21, 26, fig. 50, 51 no. 19, 25.

³⁸ Corbett also analyzed the use of the stamp itself, demonstrating that the form of the palmette could change, depending on the angle and pressure applied during stamping, Corbett (1955), 173, 177, pl. 66: 3b, 4b, 16b. for the use of palmette stamps on Athenian moldmade bowls See Rotroff (1982), pl. 94, no. 9, 30, 108.

³⁹ Crowfoot (1957), 317.

⁴⁰ Crowfoot (1957), 254–57, 316–20. Palmettes also occur in ETS, Gunneweg et al. (1983), 31.

Examples of vessels decorated with palmettes from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods are common on African Red Slip Ware, where the motif undergoes further processes of simplification and stylistic transformation. Stamped decoration is a central feature of African Red Slip Ware of the fourth and fifth centuries CE.⁴¹ Hayes notes that the palmette motif belongs to a series of small stamps characterized by simple outline designs and is found on vessels dating primarily to the mid-fifth century CE.⁴² In these palmettes, the volutes are emphasized, the leaves spread outward from a short central midrib, and the stamp is enclosed by variously shaped outlines.

As for clay oil lamps, palmettes were frequently decorated on imported and local lamps during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The palmette appeared in most cases as a single motif, on the nozzle, handle, and discus, often in relief and occasionally combined with other vegetal motifs such as the lily (**Fig. 7**).⁴³ In the first to third centuries CE, a different use of the palmette appears in the form of small, stamped impressions arranged as a necklace around the discus. This decorative device is found on locally produced discus lamps,⁴⁴ as well as on the so-called ‘geometric style’ lamps from the second to third centuries CE, which likely served as prototypes for the Northern Stamped Lamps (**Fig. 8**).⁴⁵

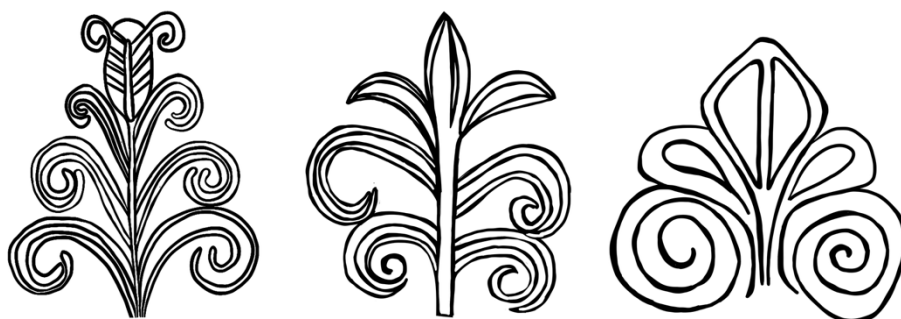


Fig. 7: Palmettes on the handle and nozzle of lamps. Drawn by the author after Sussman (1972), no. 37, 153; Hadad (2002), 20, no. 30.

⁴¹ Hayes (1972), 217–18.

⁴² Hayes (1972), 225, styles A(iii), D, E(i), fig. 43. 16.p, 249.18.r, 233, fig. 39.l.

⁴³ Broneer (1930), no. 389, 391, 400; Rosenthal and Sivan (1978), fig.22, 40, 238; Hadad (2002), 20, no. 30; Sussman (1972), 52; no. 4, 5, 37, 153, 156, 157.

⁴⁴ Lapp (2016), 255, no. 133.

⁴⁵ Sussman (2012), 43; (2017), 221.



Fig. 8: Palmette decoration forming a chain around the discus on Geometric Style lamp.
Photo by the author.

In the Late Roman period, the only group besides the Northern Stamped Lamps decorated with palmettes is the Jebel Jofeh type from the Beth Shean area.⁴⁶ However, the motif appears far less frequently in this group and without comparable compositional diversity to that seen on the Northern Stamped Lamps. By the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries CE, the Roman-derived palmette motif had disappeared from the region.⁴⁷

THE PALMETTE ON NORTHERN STAMPED LAMPS

In the earliest groups of Northern Stamped Lamps, there is clear continuity with the tradition of stamping palmettes as a necklace-like decoration around the discus. However, in the later phases a significant transformation becomes evident. The palmette stamp becomes larger and is applied irregularly and more deeply. The space between the palmettes is often filled with additional stamps or incising.⁴⁸ The design of the palmette stamp had diverged from the classical prototype and these elements were now incorporated into new patterns not previously common.⁴⁹ Although the shape of the lamps changed over time, the palmette remained a consistently prominent motif throughout the centuries. A close examination of the motif and its application reveals key trends in terms of form and composition, as follows.

Characteristics of form

The palmette retains a consistent basic structure, with a central midrib and symmetrically branching lines, often accompanied by degenerated circles at the base. Variations occur in the midrib's prominence, the number of leaves, and the motif's overall outline (**Fig. 9**). Some stamps favor softer, vegetal rendering (**Fig. 9a, b, c, d**), while others adopt a sharper, more geometric form (**Fig. 9h, i, j**). As for the composition, the following characteristics are observed:

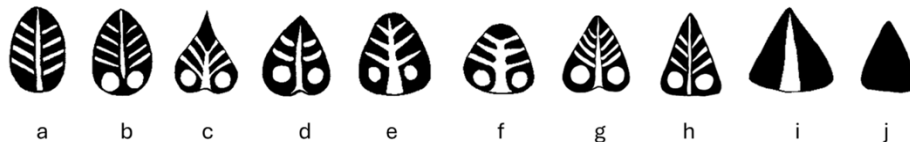


Fig. 9: Palmette motif on Northern Stamped Lamps. Drawn by the author.

⁴⁶ Hadad (2002), type, 13, no. 44; Sussman (2017), LR48, 273–74.

⁴⁷ Sussman (2017), 246.

⁴⁸ Sussman (2017), 225–29.

⁴⁹ Sussman (2017), 235.

Reversal of Orientation (Fig. 10a, b, c, d): Unlike Roman discus and geometric-style lamps, the chain pattern is reversed: palmettes face inward from the outer edges. In some cases, they are arranged vertically toward the wick-hole, in mirrored pairs, or alternating between inward and outward facing positions.

Spacing and scattering (Fig. 10f, g, h): The palmettes are widely spaced, positioned away from both the discus and each other, leaving visible empty areas between impressions

Extending Across Lamp Parts (Fig. 10b, c, e, f): The palmette motif frequently continues onto the nozzle, blurring the distinction between the lamp's parts, and in some cases even appears on the discus itself, forming a rosette composition

Asymmetry (Fig. 10g, h): The decoration is frequently applied asymmetrically; even when a clear organizational scheme is present, the number of palmettes on each side is not always equal, nor is the direction of their impression consistent.

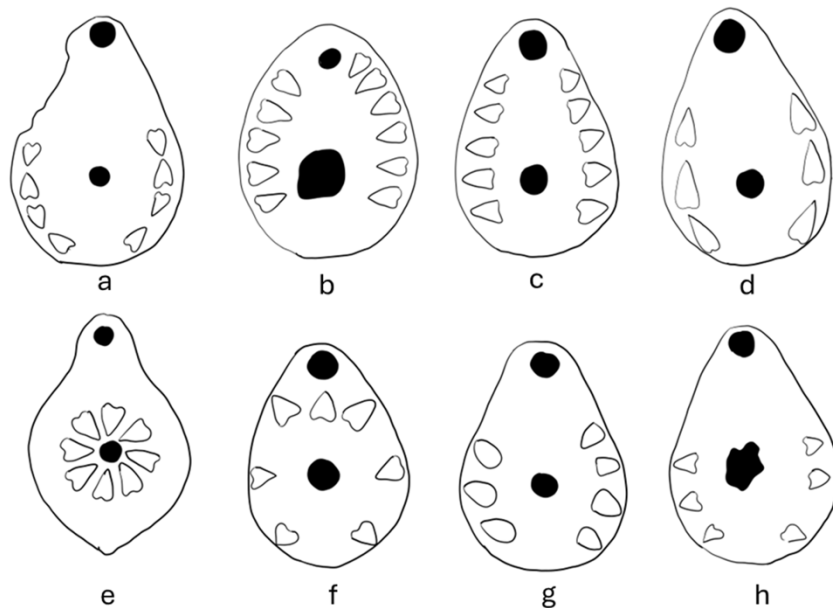


Fig 10: Compositional arrangement of the Palmette Motif on Northern Stamped Lamps.

Two variants from Beth She‘arim present the earliest and latest use of the palmette on the lamps. The early variant of the third-fourth centuries CE combines ovolos and palmettes in a tight chain around the discus, producing a new decorative rhythm (**Fig. 11**). The late variant of the fourth-fifth centuries CE (**Fig. 12**) arranges palmettes in alternating directions, evoking an interlace pattern reminiscent of later northern relief lamps using different vegetal motifs.⁵⁰ Together, these examples trace both the chronological

⁵⁰ Hadad (2002), no. 348.

development of the motif and the creative freedom of local artisans which grew further over time.

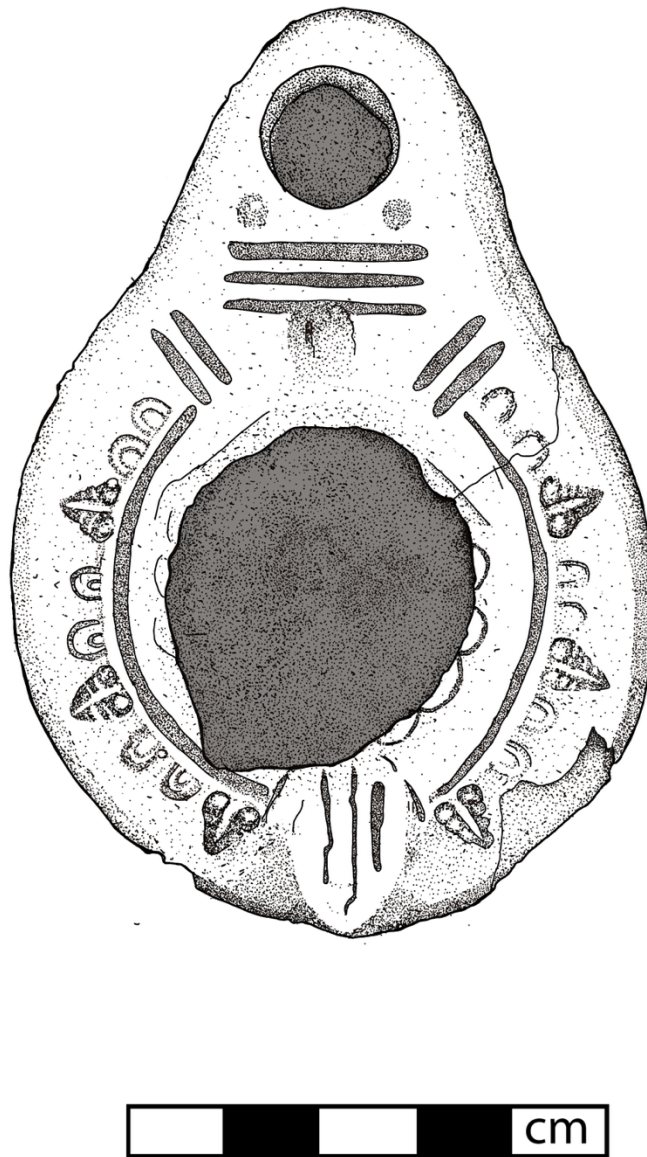


Fig. 11: Palmettes on Northern Stamped lamps from Beth She'arim, 3rd–4th CE. Drawn by the author.

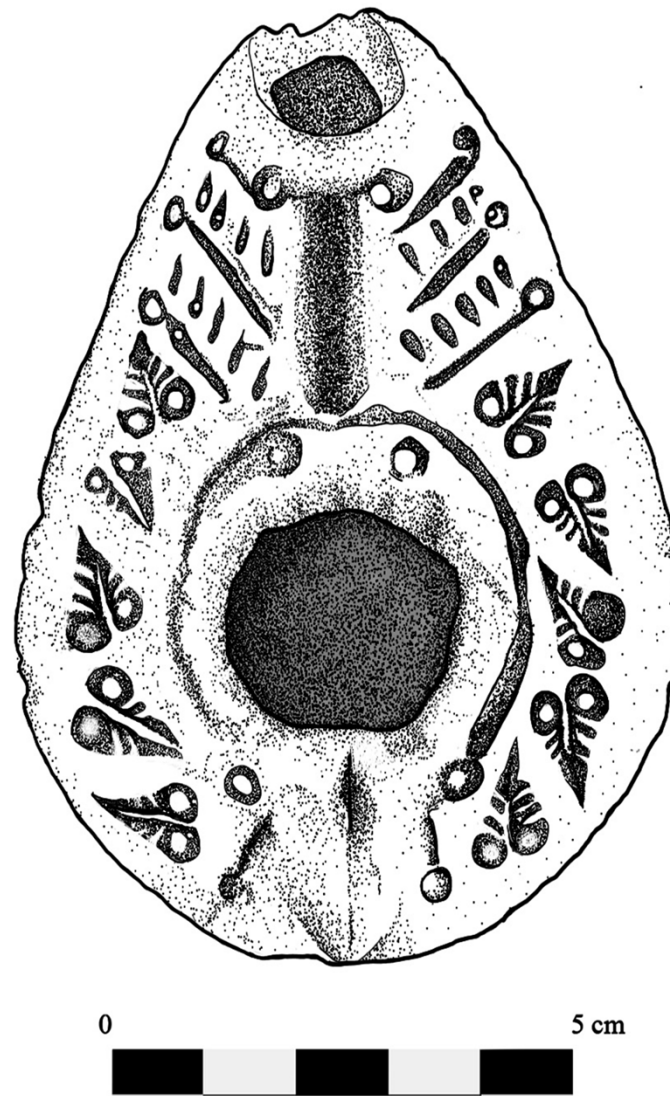


Fig. 12: Palmettes on Northern Stamped lamps from Beth She'arim 4th–5th CE. Photo by the author.

WHY (NOT) THE PALMETTE?

An analysis of the palmette's form and its compositional use shows that, although the overall appearance of the group is unusual with its sunken decoration, many of the artistic

characteristics of Late Antique northern Palestine are not abandoned but rather intensified. These include the shift from naturalistic vegetal to geometric abstraction, the popular reinterpretation of classical forms through reduction and omission of details, the creation of diverse new compositions, the deliberate use of asymmetry, and an emphasis on strong contrasts of light and shadow. Taken together, these traits frame the palmette not merely as a decorative element but as evidence of artistic transformation in Late Antiquity. Its treatment on Northern Stamped Lamps embodies the gradual departure from classical decorative norms and their reinterpretation within a new, local visual language.

What remains to be considered is why the palmette was chosen and continually adopted as the dominant motif of this northern group, while it was largely absent from other regions. The following discussion examines this question by exploring possible interpretations.

Same Lady, Different Dress

In the Northern Stamped Lamps, the repeated use of a single motif over centuries produced a diverse range of arrangements and compositions. The freedom with which the motif was used reflects a departure from the fixed rhythm of necklace decoration around the discus and the creation of new decorative structure. The general outline of the palmette, triangular or arrowhead-shaped with a clear directional axis, enabled the production of distinctive patterns and orientations.

To interpret this phenomenon, we may draw on Gombrich's insights into human perception and artistic creation. The persistence of a motif may be related to the power of habit, which is often selective and even capricious. Another explanation is that some motifs endure because they are easy to recall and to adapt to different contexts. Elements with a basic, flexible structure are preferred, as they can be endlessly reworked into new variations. Focusing on a single motif or limiting the repertoire of motifs trains viewers to notice subtle changes and respond to them.⁵¹ It has been maintained that aesthetic pleasure lies in the tension between boredom and surprise. When what we see matches our expectations, our attention wanes and the object fades from perception, whereas when something unexpected occurs, it captures our attention.⁵² In the case of the palmette on Northern Stamped Lamps, the choice of a long-standing decorative traditional element, combined with its innovative and surprising application, may have generated visual interest and attraction for the consumer.

A Local Aesthetic Language

Northern Stamped Lamps were mass-produced and attributed by Sussman to Phoenician workshops.⁵³ Their predominantly Galilean distribution and recent scholarship, however, point to local production under Phoenician influence, making the group best understood as a Galilean phenomenon.⁵⁴ Here, 'Phoenicia' denotes a regional context rather than

⁵¹ Gombrich (1979), 191, 193.

⁵² Gombrich (1979), 9.

⁵³ Sussman (2017), 215.

⁵⁴ Recently, a petrographic analysis of Northern Stamped Lamps from Beth She'arim was conducted by Dr. Mechael Osband as part of Shlomo Cezana's M.A. thesis (2024), supervised

ethnic continuity. Then, what might have been the Phoenician contribution to lamp design in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods?

The ancient Phoenicians on the southern coast of Lebanon and the northern coast of Israel were distinguished from other Semitic groups by their pantheon, seafaring specialization, and technological expertise. They established far-reaching trade networks and over time organized themselves into city states. After Alexander's conquests they became Greek speaking and were incorporated into the Hellenistic world.⁵⁵ During the Roman and Byzantine periods, the region known as Phoenicia underwent significant social, cultural, and religious transformation.⁵⁶

The very existence, nature, and influence of the Phoenicians as a distinct group are debated in current scholarship. Some scholars argue that there was no self-defined Phoenician ethnos in antiquity and that modern nationalism has projected an ancient nation into the past.⁵⁷ Others maintain that although the Phoenicians never formed a unified polity or empire, they were key agents in exporting Levantine culture from the Iron Age onward, preserving religious, linguistic, and cultural traits well into the Roman period.⁵⁸ This view challenges the traditional notion that Phoenician eclecticism prevented them from forming an artistic identity, emphasizing instead that a distinctive Phoenician material culture persisted in the Hellenistic period.⁵⁹ This culture was marked by the selective use of specific decorative elements, innovation in production techniques, and the development of distinctive pottery decoration.⁶⁰ The regional material culture associated with Phoenicia continued to influence northern regions of the country in later periods, as reflected in the material remains at Omrit, where lamps of this type were found,⁶¹ in architectural elements at Kedesh,⁶² and in the northern lead coffin industry.⁶³

While it is beyond the scope of this study to resolve basic historical questions regarding the Phoenicians, we can assume that in the region known as Phoenicia, despite successive political changes, a core material culture persisted in local workshops. This

by Erlich and Osband. Preliminary results indicate that the lamps were made of marl, a type of soil common in northern Israel.

⁵⁵ López-Ruiz (2021), 11–4.

⁵⁶ Roman imperial control had a profound impact on local culture, yet Hellenism continued to flourish, with local traditions being renewed and adapted, see Aliquot (2019).

⁵⁷ This approach emphasizes the Phoenicians not as an ethnic entity, but as a colonial one operating in the service of the Roman Empire, see Quinn (2018), xviii, 135, 143, 152.

⁵⁸ For further discussion, see López-Ruiz (2021), 14–5, 313.

⁵⁹ López-Ruiz (2021), 285; Nitschke (2011) 102.

⁶⁰ López-Ruiz (2021), 3; Nitschke (2011), 102; Monnickendam-Givon (2018), vi; Monnickendam-Givon (2022), 59. Nitschke notes that what is often recognized as 'Greek' ornamentation, according to this approach, may already have been assimilated into the Phoenician artistic lexicon centuries earlier. Nitschke (2015), 211–13, 233.

⁶¹ Rosenthal-Heginborrom (2021), 66, 98, Phoenician influence is also evident at the site in sculpture and pottery materials, Sharvit (2021), 290; Sandhaus (2021), 41.

⁶² Ovadia and Turnheim (2011), 31–3.

⁶³ Rahmani identified the regional influence on lead coffins, and later studies confirmed this observation. Rahmani (1999), 72; Aviam and Shalem (2014), 208–11. In the Byzantine period, recent research has highlighted the persistence of regional characteristics in architecture and material culture within the Phoenician provinces, Kohn-Tavor (2021).

culture was eclectic but not random, absorbed Greek traditions while maintaining distinctiveness through the selective choice of certain motifs and the rejection of others.⁶⁴ It is therefore plausible that even in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, this cultural heritage continued to shape the production of Northern Stamped Lamps. The choice of the palmette may thus be understood as eclectic but far from arbitrary. A classical motif that was preserved, reused, and varied in its application. Thus, the deliberate use of the palmette may signal regional distinctiveness and a conscious expression of cultural and visual tradition.

CONCLUSION

We may assume that the decoration of the lamps was not solely the result of artistic choice, but was also shaped by limitations of skill, resources, manpower, and time. The increasing use of stamped decoration in the Late Roman period, and the growing accessibility of this decorative technology, likely opened the possibilities of ornamentation, extending them to broader segments of the population and to many local workshops. This method did not depend solely on a single ‘master’ craftsman. Rather, it allowed many agents to participate in the decorative process due to the simplicity of the technique and its designs.⁶⁵

While the palmette motif itself was bounded and fixed, the act of stamping allowed considerable freedom in composition, structure, and application. Together with the arrow-shaped form of the palmette, these enabled the creation of dynamic and varied rhythmic patterns, allowing less skilled artisans to participate in production and still create visually appealing decorations. Skill was a significant factor in the organization of production, shaping both labor structure and participation.⁶⁶ In this sense, the stamping technique employed in the production of Northern Stamped Lamps may be regarded as a mechanism of technological democratization, broadening both the community of makers and the creative possibilities expressed through the palmette motif.

Under the influence of the stamping technique, the palmette motif and its compositional arrangement underwent a significant transformation, moving away from its classical form. Although the overall appearance of the Northern Stamped Lamps is unusual and somewhat clumsy, an examination of the palmette motif on these lamps shows that they participate in a broader trend of departure from and dissolution of classical models. As Riegl observed, new artistic conditions arise through the dismantling of earlier ones, a process vital to stylistic change and artistic development. What may seem obscure or unconventional can thus signal moments of transition between aesthetic systems.⁶⁷ In this light, the palmette on the Northern Stamped Lamps may be understood as a local expression of the dissolution of one aesthetic system, a necessary step toward the emergence of a new one. The examination of the palmette across time reveals that artistic

⁶⁴ Nitschke (2015), 213.

⁶⁵ Fingerprint and 3D-scanning analyses conducted on both lamps and clay figurines, which share common features in their technological production process, have provided insight into workshop organization and production methods. These studies reveal the participation of diverse makers, including women and children, see Lapp and Nicoli (2014); Lichtenberger and Moran (2018); Hoff (2024).

⁶⁶ Costin (1991), 17–8, 39.

⁶⁷ Riegl (1985[1901]), 11.

transformation is never the result of a single cause, but of a complex process of interaction. It emerges from the dialogue between form, technique, and culture—each shaping and reshaping the other. In this dynamic interplay lies the enduring vitality of decorative art.

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