A Jewish Oil Lamp Unearthed at the Red Sea Port of Roman Aila (Aqaba, Jordan)

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Roman Aila was the thriving Red Sea port of the client kingdom of Nabataea, the commercial and administrative center of which was located at Petra (and later Bozrah)—the legendary city carved out of the red sandstone cliffs of the Wadi Musa some 130 km to the north. In antiquity, the port was situated at the crossroads of significant trade routes both by land and sea, linking it to North Africa, Egypt, Sinai, Palestine, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, and India. In 1996 archaeological excavations conducted at the site under the direction of S. Thomas Parker of North Carolina State University in Raleigh, unearthed a small find with important implications for ancient Jewish art: a clay oil lamp fragment portraying a menorah flanked by an etrog (citrus fruit) (Figs. 12.1–12.2).1 The menorah image itself belongs to one of five types found on such lamps fashioned in a folk-art style with semi-circular branches composed of rectangular bulbs. The lamp belongs to a round-bodied type manufactured in Alexandria, Egypt, and based on parallels dates to the fourth century CE.2 The significance of this lamp find cannot be overemphasized. As far as I am aware, it is the first and earliest item of Jewish material culture unearthed at Aila and further represents the easternmost and sole occurrence of the Alexandrian discus type from a scientifically excavated stratigraphic context in Roman Palestine and Arabia. Further, the lamp is only the second of two with a menorah image discovered in Jordan, the first being a Beit Nattif form uncovered at the Decapolis city of Pella/Tabaqat Faḥl (Da Costa 2003, 2:516, No. 92).

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2 Bailey 1988, 251, Q2061 MLA, Q2062 MLA (= Dalton 1901, 150, No. 818), and Q2063 MLA (= Dalton 1901, 150, No. 817); Hachlili 2001, 452, L6.1, 48*, Pl. 11-85.
Clay oil lamp fragment belonging to the Alexandrian Type 1: Round-Bodied with Concave Discus group. An incomplete menorah image flanked by an etrog decorates the discus. Alexandria, Egypt. Fourth century CE. Found in Area J at Roman Aila (Aqaba, Jordan). Greatest Dimension: 6.9 cm. (Photograph by Eric C. Lapp.)

Incomplete menorah with semi-circular branches and a tripod base flanked by an etrog. Image depicted on the discus of the Alexandrian Type-1 lamp fragment excavated in Area J at Roman Aila (Aqaba, Jordan). Note the two circular filling holes on each side of the tripod. Not to scale. (Drawing by Eric C. Lapp.)