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ON THE ORIGINS OF THE CONTEXT AND MEANING OF THE MOTIF OF DOLPHIN ON THE SHIP-SHAPED OIL LAMP FROM THE MUSEUM OF SMEDEREVO (4TH CENTURY AD)

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Abstract. The dolphin motif on the ship-shaped oil lamp treasured in the Museum of Smederevo (4th century AD) has complex iconography, multi-layered and complex symbolism, and a long history. This article presents and explains how its iconography and meaning were gradually formed and developed in ancient Greek and Roman art, as well as the peculiarities of its gradual transformation into a Christian symbol. It is found that the context of the appearance of the dolphin motif in art during different epochs is not a mere coincidence, but the expression of a clear intention on the part of particularly learned artists and commissioners of works of art. Since there are no written records of this motif that would explain its iconography and meaning, and since the motif itself is by nature very hermetic, and at the same time very rare, the characteristic context of the appearance of the dolphin motif in art is also a decisive parameter for analyzing its meaning and its gradual formation.

Introduction

Early Christian and early Byzantine art drew its ideas from a variety of themes in the art of ancient Greece and Rome, and adapted certain themes and depictions. The selection and the way in which certain themes were contextualized within the framework of the new Christian cult are directly related to the religious views of the time and the wishes and intentions of the patrons and artists who executed these works of art. Numerous motifs from antiquity, which are an integral part of the decoration of works of art, lend a multi-layered meaning to the works of art in which they appear. The way in which Christian art has modified these motifs and adapted them to its needs is very refined and skillful, precise and subtle. One of the characteristic motifs that underwent this process and acquired its Christian meaning is the complex motif of a dolphin on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo (4th century AD; Fig. 1a–b, 2). This article examines the way in which the meaning of this motif was formulated and affirmed. In order to better understand the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, we will first describe the main features of the oil lamp and its decoration. Afterwards, as a kind of introductory note, the basic information about the oil lamp find and historiography will be given and explained.

The Oil Lamp from the Smederevo Museum and its Decoration

The ship-shaped oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo (4th century AD) is exceptional and unique find in many respects (Fig. 1a–b, 2). Although the context in which the oil lamp was found does not provide any information about the dating and use of the lamp, or other clues, it should be briefly mentioned at this point that the oil lamp was discovered by accident in 1964 during agricultural labor. It was found in the area of Mezul (ancient Vinceia) on the property of the agricultural cooperative “Azanja”. The farmer Radomir Jelić found a ten-nozzle oil lamp in the shape of a ship when his tractor damaged it by cutting off two



Fig. 1a. Oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum, starboard view, small dolphin without prey and two dolphins swallowing an octopus and a squid, 4th century (Photo: Darko Manasić)



Fig. 1b. Oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum, port view, dolphins swallowing fish, 4th century (Photo: Darko Manasić)

nozzles and the starboard stern section. The discovered oil lamp was donated to the National Museum of Smederevo on December 11, 1965.²

The oil lamp is cast in bronze by the lost wax method (*cire perdue*) and is unusually large: it weighs 4.874 kg, it is 422.5 cm long, 22.8 cm wide and 15.5 cm high (inv. no. 200/65; A 145). What is significant for this study is its lavish decoration.³ The lamp has the shape of a ship, similar in type to a galley and a Roman trireme, with a profiled keel that divides it symmetrically into two parts.⁴ Both sides of the ship are decorated with depictions of marine fauna—with motifs of dolphins swimming or devouring their prey, while the depiction of the sea monster spitting the prophet Jonah out of its mouth occupies the area of the rostrum.⁵ Above the dolphin depictions are ten nozzles, five on each side of the ship. Today, the lamp is missing its lid (the deck), its mast and most probably human figures.⁶ There is a votive inscription that runs along both sides of the prow and the stern which bears the name of a certain “Termogenes”.⁷

² On the discovery of the oil lamp, see Павловић, 1966, p. 123; 1969, p. 4; Mirković, 1976, pp. 89–90 (cat. no. 83); Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 235–236; Gavrilović, 2022a, pp. 142–143.

³ On the main references devoted to this oil lamp with cited bibliography, see Павловић, 1966, pp. 123–129; 1969; Поповић, 1970, pp. 323–330; Јовановић, 2006, p. 41–45; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 161–162, 177–178, 185–188, 192, 235–249, 257, 323, 316, cat. no 12, ill. 22; Тешић Радовановић & Gugolj, 2020, pp. 151–159 (with earlier bibliography); Gavrilović, 2022a, pp. 141–159 (with earlier bibliography); Ilić, 2022, pp. 47–49.

⁴ On different opinions concerning the type of the ship of the oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum, see Тешић Радовановић, 2018, p. 236; Gavrilović, 2021a, p. 148.

⁵ For the outline of the marine motifs as well as of the fish motif on late antique and early Christian oil lamps from the central Balkans and their symbolism, see Тешић Радовановић, 2018; Тешић Радовановић, 2022 (with bibliography).

⁶ Павловић, 1969, p. 10; Поповић, 1970, p. 323; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 162, 193, 238, 239, 241; Тешић Радовановић & Gugolj, 2020, p. 152; Ilić, 2022, p. 47; Gavrilović, 2022a, p. 145. For the assumption that the ship has no deck, see Karović, 2002, p. 463.

⁷ Павловић, 1966, pp. 123–129; 1969, pp. 5–6; Mirković, 1976, pp. 89–90 (cat. no. 83); Тешић Радовановић & Gugolj, 2020, pp. 153–154; Gavrilović, 2022a, p. 145; Ilić, 2022, pp. 47–49.

Authors who have studied the oil lamp come to different conclusions regarding the date and place of its creation, the religious affiliation of its commissioner, Termogenes, and consequently, the interpretation of its decoration. Although scholars have different views on the date of origin of the oil lamp, most of them agree that the person who commissioned it, Termogenes, was a Christian and that the oil lamp belongs to the early Christian period due to the symbolism of its decoration.⁸ The fact that two coin hoards were also discovered in Mezul (Vinceia), not older than the period of Trajan Decius (249–251), prompted some authors to link the oil lamp to this period, even though there is no direct connection between the hoard find and the oil lamp.⁹ In more recent literature, the oil lamp is mainly dated to the 4th century AD, according to early Christian material in the central Balkans and the oil lamp decoration, and the dedicatee Termogenes has been associated with Hermogenes, the commander of the VII Claudia Legion from the time of Constantine.¹⁰ It should be noted that the entire upper part of the oil lamp has been destroyed today. It is rightly assumed that there were some figures, most likely the figures of Christ and apostles, and that the mast was designed as a cross.¹¹ There are not many analogies for this type of lamp, the only known example is a similar lamp in the Archaeological Museum in Florence, which shows apostles on the deck and has a chain, just like the oil lamp from Smederevo once did.¹² Regarding the place of the oil lamp's creation, several hypotheses have been expressed—that the lamp was produced in Campania (Павловић, 1969, pp. 11–12; Ilić, 2022, p. 49), that it could belong to local production (Tsamakda, 2017, p. 164, n. 30), and that it might represent an imported item, what still remains for further investigation (Gavrilović, 2022a, pp. 156–157). As there are no adequate stylistic parallels to this type of oil lamp, both possibilities still remain open.

⁸ Поповић, 1970, p. 329; Karović, 2002, p. 464; Јовановић, 2006, p. 45; Xanthopolou, 2010, p. 26; Цвјетићанин, 2013, p. 346; Tsamakda, 2017, p. 164; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 162, 185–186, 187, 188; Tešić Radovanović & Gugolj, 2020, pp. 154–157; Gavrilović, 2022a; Ilić, 2022, pp. 47–49.

⁹ Јовановић, 2006, p. 45; Xanthopolou, 2010, p. 26; Valeva & Vionis, 2014, pp. 326–327. However, the connection between the oil lamp and the coin hoards is still hypothetical. See Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 237–238.

¹⁰ Петровић, 1993, p. 338 (cat. no 146); Цвјетићанин, 2013, p. 346; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 237–238; Tešić Radovanović & Gugolj, 2020, pp. 154–157; Gavrilović, 2022a; Ilić, 2022, pp. 47–49.

¹¹ Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 162, 193, 238, 239.

¹² Ilić 2022, p. 49; on the lamp from the Archaeological Museum in Florence, see also Xanthopolou, 2010, pp. 26, 124–125; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, pp. 188, 237–238; Baratte, 2023, pp. 266–267. For the ship-shaped oil lamps, see Tsamakda, 2017, pp. 159–171; Тешић Радовановић, 2018, p. 317 (with bibliography). As far as the dolphin motif is concerned, the oil lamp with the griffin, the cross with monogram, the dove and the dolphin depicted above the body of the lamp is a rare analogy for this lamp. See De Rossi, 1868; Reynolds Brown, 1979, p. 624; Bliss, 1987, p. 157.

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Depictions of Dolphins in Ancient Art

The motif of the dolphin has a long history in ancient art, both as an individual figure and as an iconographic element in direct relation to other marine animals.¹³ Although the earliest example of the motif of the dolphin devouring an octopus is already attested in Minoan art, it is very rarely found in its “complex” iconographic form (Evans, 1928, p. 502, fig. 306; Gavrilović, 2020), while the dolphin as an independent motif without other marine animals is common (see below). Individual or independent depictions of dolphins adorned various types of buildings and rooms as well as various works of applied art (Stebbins, 1929; Gavrilović, 2020; 2022a; 2022b). As an integral part of the *thiasos* of certain sea gods, the dolphin was depicted in various contexts in ancient art alongside various sea gods and mythological figures (main references Dunbabin, 1999). The dolphin is also sometimes depicted independently as an attribute of certain gods in their hands or under their feet.¹⁴ Although the dolphin motif occurs frequently in various contexts in both ancient pagan and early Christian art (and also on lamps), only selected examples of the dolphin motif will be considered in this article due to its purpose and scope. As the dolphin motif is attested on the sides of the ship-shaped oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, the article focuses on the selected ship-related depictions of dolphins, in particular the scenes associated with the god Dionysus. Through their iconography and messages, these depictions reveal the special relationship that existed between dolphins and other themes associated with Dionysus.

The Selected Depictions of Dolphins in Ship-Related Scenes

Since the earliest times, dolphins have been depicted in art in the vicinity of ships—swimming in the sea, surrounding and accompanying them. They were most frequently depicted leaping out of the water. The Bronze Age friezes depicting ships in the West House Room 5 at Akrotiri on the Aegean Island of Thera (2000–1500 BC), preserved in the National Museum of Athens, are one of the earliest known examples of this type of representation (Warren, 1979, pp. 116, 119, 127, pl. Ac, Ba–b; Guttandin, 2017, p. 18, Abb. 20). These frescoes show dolphins accompanying ships, jumping out of the water or diving. They are also depicted in this way in later periods, particularly in Greek vase painting. The Attic black-figure kylix from the British Museum which shows a

¹³ On the representations of dolphins in the art of ancient Greece and Rome, see the following footnotes.

¹⁴ See, for example, Agusta Boularot, 2001, p. 179; Becatti, 1961, pl. 45; (Neptunus) n. 1–7; Dunbabin, 1999, fig. 114; Jane Cuyler, 2014, pp. 125–126; Simon, Bauchhenss, 1994, n. 107, 140, 141, 235a; for different representations of dolphins, see Gavrilović, 2020.

young man lifting an amphora with both hands (no. 1843,1103.29; old no. 849; 510–500 BC) and the so-called Nikosthenes' kylix kept in the Louvre (Louvre F 123; 540–520 BC) can serve as good examples of this type of dolphin depiction (Smith, 1896, pp. 41–42, E2; Münds, 2017, p. 43, Abb. 2). Dolphins could be depicted under the ships, in the depths of the sea, often swimming below the wave lines, as for example on the oinochoe by an anonymous Athenian painter from the Archaeological Museum in Thebes (R46.83; 490–480 BC; Aravantinos, 2010, p. 182; Münds, 2017, pp. 45–46, Abb. 4).

There was another way in which dolphins were depicted in ancient art in the scenes with ships. In some scenes, dolphins appear to jump over and dive under and beside the ships, as in the ancient frescoes at Akrotiri. In these compositions, however, there is no boundary between the sea level and the sky, so that the sea and the air form a single space. Therefore, the dolphins actually leap over the surface of the sea in front of and next to the ship. This is also how they are depicted on the kylix of Exekias, the so-called Dionysus cup, which is kept in the State Collections of Antiquities in Munich.¹⁵

Over time, the dolphins represented in works of art gradually begin to “migrate” from the marine environment to the surface of the ship. They usually adorn the fore or the aft part of the ship, and are located just above the waterline or in the upper part of the ship. Sometimes they adorn both the bow and the stern. In this way, they adorn the ship in the scene of Dionysus' epiphany at sea (Dionysus' miracle with the pirates). Examples of the scene of the god's miracle with the pirates are not very numerous in art (Gsell, 1898, pp. 31–32, pl. II.2; Gasparri, 1986, p. 558), and there are even fewer examples that include details of dolphins decorating representations of ships. Therefore, two examples of Dionysus' epiphany at sea are of particular importance in the context of this study: the aforementioned Dionysus cup painted by Exekias, now treasured in the State Collections of Antiquities in Munich and the Roman mosaic that once adorned the House of Dionysus in the city of Dougga (Thougga), now kept in the Bardo Museum (3rd century; present-day Tunisia; Dunbabin, 1978, p. 183, pl. VIII.16). Due to the lavish decoration of the depicted ships and their rarity, we will devote special attention to these two compositions. What is special about these scenes is that dolphins are depicted both in the sea and on the ship. Due to the special features mentioned above and the abundance of dolphins in both scenes, special attention will be paid to them in the following lines.

¹⁵ For main references on the Dionysian cup, see Beazley, 1956, p. 246, no 21; Boardman, 1977, p. 64; Henrichs, 1987, pp. 109–111; Steinhart, 2001, pp. 249–252; Isler Kerényi, 2007, pp. 159–207 (with bibliography); Paleothodoros, 2012, pp. 462–464 (with bibliography); Bundrick, 2019, p. 125.

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Dionysus Cup (Munich)

One of the earliest and most prominent examples of the dolphin motif alongside the figure of the god Dionysus can be found on the kylix in the State Collections of Antiquities in Munich (Germany), which is referred to in modern bibliography as the “Dionysus cup” (inv. no 2044; 540–530 BC; Fig. 3).¹⁶ It is one of the main representatives of the black-figure style in Greek vase-painting. The scene of the epiphany of Dionysus on sea appears in the inner decoration of the cup.¹⁷ It is completely preserved and shows Dionysus, the ship, the vine, and dolphins. The god Dionysus is depicted in the center of the composition in a galley under sail surrounded by a pod of dolphins. He is depicted as a bearded man with a crown of ivy leaves, reclining on the ship as symposiast, resting his left hand on his elbow and holding a rhyton in his right hand. The ship has a large white sail and a protruding mast, at the foot of which rises a vine in two branches with rich and heavy grapes. Seven full-length dolphins are swimming around the ship, four of them looking left and three to the right. Two of them leap above the figure of Dionysus and the ship, while the others leap in front of the ship. The background of the entire composition is coral red and, as we have already mentioned, without the boundary between sea and sky.

The way in which Exekias decorated the ship is characteristic—he adorned it with dolphins in a variety of ways. This kind of decoration cannot be a coincidence. The sides of the ship are adorned with the depictions of dolphins whose iconography and color match the dolphins depicted in the sea. The bodies of these dolphins used to be black, but today they are ochre and almost white due to damage. They are depicted in the same way as the dolphins in front of the ship. The bow of the ship is also decorated with the head of a dolphin. The custom of depicting the ship with a ram in the shape of a dolphin’s head, a wild boar’s head or another animal’s head with an eye was part of the general tradition in Greek art (Smith, 1896, pp. 268–269, no 440; Morrison & Williams, 1968, pl. 9a, c; 11b; 12b, d, f; 13; 14a–g; 15a, b; 16a–d; 17a–e; 18a, b; 19; 20a–d; Wachsmann, 2012, n. 33). It had historical and symbolic value—it not only represented an image of contemporary reality, but also had a symbolic function. This practice is also found in Phoenician art, from which it was adopted—the depiction of a ship with one eye and a highlighted ram with one eye was reproduced on Phoenician coins (Rebecca Martin, 2017, p. 127, fig. 37; Hancock, 2021, p. 41). Eyes on ships are also found on Panathenaic ships, some

¹⁶ For main references, see Beazley, 1956, p. 246, no 21; Boardman, 1977, p. 64; Henrichs, 1987, pp. 109–111; Steinhart, 2001, pp. 249–252; Isler Kerényi, 2007, pp. 159–207 (with bibliography); Paleothodoros, 2012, pp. 462–464 (with bibliography); Bundrick, 2019, p. 125.

¹⁷ Hesiod. *Theogony*, 1966, 7.35–42; on this myth and this scene in literature, see Paleothodoros, 2012, pp. 456–459 (with bibliography); about the Seventh Homeric Hymn to Dionysus, see Jaillard, 2011.

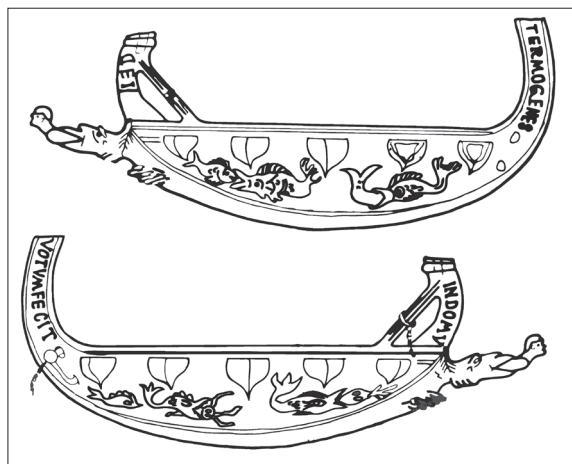


Fig. 2. Oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, drawings, after Поповић, 1970, p. 325 (bold motifs author)

marble pieces of which were found in the Agora of Athens (Carlson, 2009, pp. 347–365). This type of galley with a ram and eye has been present in art for a long time. It also appeared as a single motif on the oil lamps, which shows that the type of ship with an eye had a special significance as a single motif, which should be taken into account when choosing the shape of the oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum (Brussière & Wohl, 2017, pp. 128–129, fig. 179, type: Loeschke IV; Bailey B group II, c. 14–100). Exekias decorated the stern with the head of a bird, a characteristic decoration of this part of the ship in the Archaic period (Wachsmann, 2012, fig. 14).

Although the meaning of all the details and motifs of the Dionysus cup from Munich has not yet been clarified and the scene on the outer sides of the cup cannot be precisely identified, the following can be said with certainty: from the comparison with other, later depictions of the ships, it can be deduced that the dolphin motif regularly appears in the same place on the ships depicted as a “decoration” and that it has a specific meaning. The same, repeated position of the dolphin depicted on the sides of the ship stands for tradition—this motif is executed in the same register of the ship, giving the main tone to the symbolism of the ship and the entire scene (for some examples, see Dunbabin, 1999, p. 62, fig. 65; Ugolini, 2022, pp. 14–15, fig. 2). In the light of what has been said so far, and in keeping with the theme of the entire Dionysus cup, it can also be assumed that Exekias depicted the defeated, fallen warriors on the outer sides of the kylix—the areas around the handles of the kylix are filled with figures of hoplites and fallen warriors (under each handle is a fallen warrior, flanked by groups of three hoplites each). This opinion is also supported by the decoration of another Dionysus vessel in the scene of the same name from the House of Dionysus in the Roman city of Dougga in North Africa.

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The Roman Mosaic from the House of Dionysus (Bacchus) in Dougga (Present-Day Tunisia; mid-3rd Century)

Another example to be discussed in this article is the marble mosaic from the small Roman town of Dougga (Thugga) in the northwest of present-day Tunisia (Fig. 4a–c). It was part of the decoration of the House of Dionysus (Bacchus) on the southern edge of the Roman Empire. Today it is kept in the Bardo Museum. The iconography of this mosaic is very rich and the decoration of the ship is even more lavish than that of the ship on the Dionysus cup. The mosaic from Dougga is of crucial importance for our research—its lavish decoration makes it the focal point of the investigation. Numerous details contribute to a more complex iconographic solution of the scene. To our knowledge, this mosaic is characterized by the most narrative iconographic solution of the subject in question in ancient art. The iconographic details explain the scene precisely and clearly show its meaning. Several episodes and three ships are part of this scene, which takes place in a seascape. The main part of the composition is taken up by a central ship on which the god Dionysus stands in the middle, holding a long *thyrsos* in his right hand. The god's head is now destroyed. To his left stands a maenad, while in front of them the ship's captain Ophelteus (Opheltes) is being beaten by a leopard. He is already transformed into a dolphin, while three pirates can be seen at the moment of transformation. Through the miracle of the god Dionysus, the water transforms their bodies and turns them into dolphins. Silenus can be seen on the right, holding the oars in his hands. On the left, a young, naked man holds a *pedum* in his right hand. It is the helmsman Acoates, the only member of the crew left on board (Fig. 4c). Two other ships flank the middle one—the one on the left with cupids and the one on the right with fishermen (Dunbabin, 1978, pl. 16).

The aforementioned central ship in the scene with Dionysus is highly important for this investigation: firstly, the ship of Dionysus here is more carefully and richly decorated than any other ship within this scene in ancient art as a whole; secondly, this type of “decoration” represents an exceptional iconographic and semantic analogy to the decoration of the ship on the Dionysus cup (and the ship on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo); thirdly, due to its exceptional features, which will be explained in the article, it offers special possibilities for deciphering the exact meaning of the dolphin motif on the ships of the Dionysus cup and the Roman mosaic. It is noteworthy that although the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo was commissioned by a Christian donor, its general meaning corresponds to the meaning of the dolphin motif on the Dionysus cup and the Roman mosaic, which will be shown in the following lines.

While Exekias depicted a leaping dolphin at the bow of the Dionysus ship and another at the stern (Fig. 3), the anonymous artist of the Roman mosaic from Dougga depicted two swimming dolphins at the bow and a full-length figure of



Fig. 3. Dionysus epiphany at the sea, Dionysus cup (Munich 2044), State Collections of Antiquities, Munich, 540–530 BC, detail (Photo: public domain)

Nike (Victory) at the stern (Fig. 4a–c). All these depictions are found in the same register of the ship. On the Roman mosaic, two green dolphins swim side by side in the green sea (Fig. 4c), while Nike (Victory) is depicted in semi-profile in a flowing robe with her leg visible, holding a wreath in her right hand and a palm branch in her left (Fig. 4b). She is represented diagonally, as is usual on other monuments. Nike's robe is executed in different shades of color and matches the shades of green in which the dolphins are depicted. As on the Dionysus cup, the bodies of the dolphins are damaged. The background behind the Nike (Victory) is red and dark. Various shades of green dominate the entire mosaic, which depicts the Dionysus epiphany at sea. The sea is green, as are the dolphin-pirates, the dolphins decorating the ship and the background behind them, the robe of Nike (Victory), and numerous details of Dionysus ship. The black contours behind Nike most likely indicate wings. In addition to Nike (Victory) and the dolphins, Dionysus ship is decorated with another detail. The area of the rostrum above the dolphins is adorned with the image of a hippocampus (Fig. 4a, 4c), while the area above the Nike (Victory), which is badly damaged and too narrow for a specific figurative representation, is apparently without any depiction (Fig. 4a, 4b). On the upper part of the stern, however, several turquoise-colored tesserae can be seen. However, it is not possible to discern what they represent. In their nuances, they correspond to the turquoise color of certain lines of the sea in front of the Dionysus ship, which is now very badly damaged. Like the dolphins, the hippocampus is also executed in green color. It has a distinctive head, ears, forelegs, black eyes and jaws, black contours on the lower parts of its body and a thick, double-curved tail. Similar to Nike (Victory), it is depicted on a red background.

From what has been said so far, it can be concluded that the ship on the Roman mosaic is additionally enriched with the images of the goddess Nike (Victory) and Hippocampus in comparison to the ship on the Dionysus cup. As



Fig. 4a. Dionysus epiphany at the sea, Roman Mosaic from the Bardo Museum, Dougga, mid-3rd century (Photo: public domain)



Fig. 4b. Dionysus epiphany at the sea, Dougga, detail of the central ship, dolphins and hippocamp (Photo: public domain)

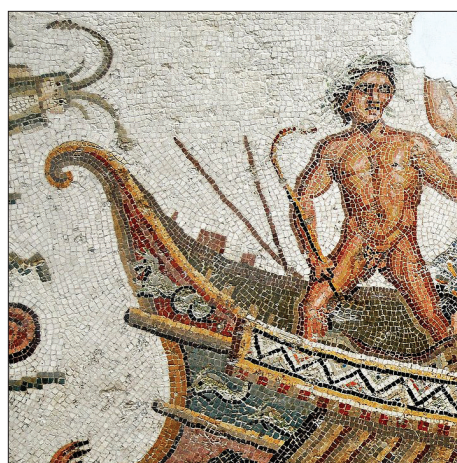


Fig. 4c. Dionysus epiphany at the sea, Dougga, detail of the central ship, goddess Nike (Victory) (Photo: public domain)

the depictions of the dolphins have already been analyzed, we will now consider the motifs of Nike and Hippocampus, in order to better understand the meaning of the decoration of the Dionysus ship on the Roman mosaic.

The Depictions of the Goddess Nike

As far as extant representations of the goddess Nike in ancient art in ship-related scenes are concerned, it should be noted that she appears much less frequently in Greek art than dolphins. Regardless of these differences, Nike, like the dolphin, gradually appears in Greek vase-painting. Initially, she appears in various scenes as a figure floating in the air. The aforementioned oinochoe by the anonymous Athenian painter from Ritsona, which is kept in the Archaeological Museum in Thebes (R46.83; 490–480 BC), can serve as an excellent example (Aravantinos, 2010, p. 182; Münds, 2017, pp. 45–46, Abb. 4). Here, the goddess Nike is depicted as a young female personification with wings, descending from the sky and running across the sea. With her body facing forward, she turns her head and looks back at the ship, to observe the figures on it. On the right side of the ship a man kneels and lays a wreath on the head of the rower, a single member of the ship's crew. Below the man placing the wreath on the rower's head is a large eye. With her appearance, Nike shows her affection for the rower to whom the wreath is presented. It is important to note that she is not yet holding the wreath, and is not the one crowning the rower with the wreath, but merely observing the scene and showing him her affection, while the man sitting on the ship above the depiction of the eye does so. Exactly what kind of event this scene represents is not yet easy to understand. However, we believe it is clear that it shows a certain kind of victory. The presence of the goddess Nike and the wreath are sufficient evidence for such a conclusion. It should be noted that Nike is depicted in the so-called kneeling position, while running on the surface of the sea. She is running and flying at the same time (on kneeling position, see Töpfer, 2014, p. 2). It can be assumed that her "kneeling" position is related to the kneeling position of the man presenting the wreath to the rower. The information of the context of the find could contribute to the further analysis of this scene. The appearance of the dolphins fits into the general symbolism of the scene—after all that has been said so far, it can be assumed that the dolphins on this vase are associated with both the idea of victory, i.e. triumph, and with safe navigation and the arrival of the ship at its destination.¹⁸ The part of the inscription above the rower receiving a wreath («NK») clearly support this opinion.¹⁹

¹⁸ Certain assumptions in this direction have already been made, but they have been left without further explanation, see Aravantinos, 2010, p. 181.

¹⁹ The inscription seems to be unpublished. This is only part of it, there are more letters between the ship and Nike. See Aravantinos, 2010, p. 182.

Over time, the depiction of the goddess Nike became more and more closely associated with the motif of the ship. She began to be depicted standing on the ship and proclaiming victory, often blowing the trumpet (salpinx). Such depictions of Nike have been preserved on coins (Sheridan, 1966, pp. 186–187; Rodríguez López, 2012, fig. 2). The goddess Nike was also depicted in sculpture in connection with ships. The most famous ancient representation of the goddess Nike, Nike of Samothrace (3rd–2nd century BC), a Hellenistic marble sculpture now kept in the Louvre, was also intended as a figure in symbolic association with a ship (Wachsmann, 2012; Stewart, 2016) and as a sign of victory.²⁰ Carved dolphins that were part of similar monuments support this view (Palagia, 2010, fig. 10.13).

The Representation of the Hippocampus

Together with the dolphins and the goddess Nike, the hippocampus, is an important component of the scene of the epiphany of Dionysus and the ship decoration on the Dougga mosaic (Fig. 4a–c). Like dolphins, hippocamps are aquatic creatures that live in water, so their presence on the Dionysus ship is entirely appropriate. As fantastic creatures that are half-horses, half-fish, they already appear in Phoenician and Greek art. In Greek and Roman art, they serve various water deities who ride them through the sea. These include Nereis, his daughters Nereids, the sea god Poseidonos (Neptune) and others. Sometimes hippocamps are also depicted individually as part of *thiasos* or in groups forming a quadriga or biga of sea gods. One of the early depictions of the hippocampus is preserved in a black-figure vase now in the British Museum (no 1836,0224.66; 520–500 BC; Walters, 1893, p. 227 [B 428]). Here the hippocampus is driven by Nereis or (Poseidonos?). We take this opportunity to mention two representative examples of scenes in which hippocampi pull the chariot of Poseidonos (Neptunos): the one from Ostia (139 AD) and the one from La Chebba in present-day Tunisia, which is preserved in the Bardo Museum (mid-2nd century AD; Dunbabin, 1999, p. 63, fig. 62; 112, fig. 114). Hippocamps appear in numerous scenes relating to the marine environment. In connection with their appearance on the ship in the scene of Dionysus epiphany at sea, it should also be noted that the hippocampus, together with the dolphin and the Nike, belongs to the *thiasos* of this deity and its appearance here is therefore justified.²¹

²⁰ The meaning and the purpose of this sculpture have been interpreted in different ways, but most of scholars are of the opinion that it was carved to represent a victory. For the bibliography on the Nike monument, see Töpfer, 2015, pp. 5–6; Stewart, 2016; Mark, 2017; Palagia, 2017; Clinton, 2020; Wescoat et al., 2020. The contribution to the study of the symbolic context of Nike of Samothrace is still what remain for further research.

²¹ On marine *thiasos* in general, see Papagiannaki, 2013, pp. 73–74, for the bibliography, see n. 4; on the *thiasos* of Dionysus and its members, see Пилиповић, 2011, pp. 45–57;

Important observations and main conclusions. In the context of this study, some important observations need be added to what has been said so far. Firstly, the motif of dolphins, which appears in the depictions of ships in the art of earlier periods analyzed above, is not depicted as chasing or devouring its pray, but alone or in pairs (Fig. 3, 4a, 4c). The oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, on the other hand, shows two types of dolphin motifs. On one side of the ship-shaped lamp, a single dolphin swims together with two other dolphins, each devouring a different type of pray (Fig. 1a–b, 2), while on the other side of the ship two dolphins can be seen also devouring or preparing to devour their pray (Fig. 1b, 2). This specific, “double” iconographic solution of the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, which consists of two types of dolphin motifs (the simple and the complex type), together with the examples of dolphins depicted on ships analyzed in this article, indirectly points to the process of gradual development and emergence of the complex dolphin motif—the dolphin devouring its pray. Significantly, this “double” iconographic solution shows that the “complex” iconographic formula and the simple formula have the same meaning and that this motif has “originated” from the “simple” type of the dolphin motif.

The context of the “simple” type of the dolphin motif in the chosen ship-related scenes with a triumphal character points to its victorious, triumphant connotations. Namely, the dolphin motif adorns the depictions of ships in the scenes of Dionysus triumph. The symbolism of the event from Dionysus life described in the Homeric hymns and its main point also point to the fact that the simple dolphin motif on Dionysus ship in the examined compositions of the epiphany at sea is a “semantic synonym” of the complex motif of the dolphin devouring its pray. In earlier bibliography, several opinions were expressed about the moment of Dionysus life depicted by Exekias on the kylix. Among other things, it has been pointed out that Exekias missed “the whole point of the Hymn, the triumph of Dionysus over the mortals who fail to recognize his divinity” (Henrichs, 1987, p. 109). A quite different conclusion has also been expressed, namely that Exekias depicts the moment when the triumph of Dionysus has already been achieved (Strauss Clay, 2016, p. 34; Paleothodoros, 2012, p. 466). We believe that the main point of the Homeric hymn is that Dionysus is depicted here as the victor over his opponents and that the learned artist Exekias has illustrated the moment when this triumph has already been achieved. It should be noted at this point that scholars have not yet come to a definitive agreement as to what exact moment and event in the life of Dionysus is depicted on the Dionysus cup of Exekias. Some scholars therefore believe that Exekias depicted

Dalgiç, 2015, pp. 30–31; Rosenthal-Heginbottom, 2015; for certain examples of appropriateness of the motifs depicted in connection with the water environment on the example of fountains in Roman and early Byzantine art, see also Гавриловић, 2020.



Fig. 5. Panel with the Triumph of Dionysus, 4th–6th century, Metropolitan Museum, New York (Photo: public domain)

the feast of Anthesteria, the Athenian festival in honor of Dionysus (Henrichs, 1987, 110, n. 96). Based on the essential message of the Homeric hymn, the presence of numerous dolphins in the sea and the analogies with the dolphin motifs on Dionysus cup, that “decorate” the Dionysus ship on the Roman mosaic at Dougga, we are of the opinion that what Exekias depicted on the kylix is the epiphany of Dionysus at sea, which is also the opinion of numerous scholars.²²

In addition to the symbolism of Dionysus epiphany at sea and all that has been said so far, the opinion that the motif of the dolphin on Dionysus ship is a “semantic synonym” for the motif of a dolphin devouring an octopus or some other kind of prey on the oil lamp from Smederevo Museum, can also be further supported by the decoration of the Dionysus ship on the Roman mosaic at Dougga and its contextual meaning. The appearance of the Nike motif with a wreath and a palm branch in her hands is crucial for understanding the meaning of the dolphin motif on the ship depicted on the Dougga mosaic and on the other depicted ships examined in this article. Like the dolphin, Nike is an icon, a sign that refers to victorious deeds (Rodríguez López, 2012, p. 9). She is also an apotropaic icon that keeps evil away and seeks the success. In connection with the Dionysian symbolism

²² For such an interpretation, see Paleothodoros, 2012, p. 462, n. 64; the representation of Dionysus reclining on the ship was also interpreted in the context of the comparison of the motif of symposium and wine drinking with the sailing across the sea, see Henrichs, 1987, pp. 110–111; Strauss Clay, 2016, p. 33; Bundrick, 2019, p. 125.

on the mosaic from the Bardo Museum, she serves as a reference to the victory of Dionysus over the pirates. In the same sense, Nike is depicted as the bearer of victory in the works of art that illustrate the triumph of Dionysus (Dunbabin, 1971, pl. XII–XIV; Dunbabin, 1999, pp. 7–10, fig. 5; Dalgiç, 2015, fig. 14; on the symbolism of Dionysian triumph, see Erdeljan, 2017). The occurrence of Nike on the ship on the Dougga mosaic is the indicator and the reminder that the Dionysus epiphany at sea is envisaged as the image of god's victory, and more precisely as marine variant of this theme. With the depiction of the dolphin and Nike, the anonymous aristocratic patron and the anonymous Roman artist have thus linked two moments from the life of Dionysus—the epiphany at sea and the Indian triumph—in a very subtle and at the same time very direct way on many levels, equating them, thus, on the level of meaning. The triumphal aspect of the scene on the Roman mosaic is complemented by the usual presence of the wreath on the head of Dionysus and the heads of the members of his *thiasos*, which are also depicted in Dionysus triumphal scenes (on the wreath, see Rogić et al., 2012). The presence of both dolphins and Nike on the Dougga mosaic emphasizes the idea of triumph and shows that these motifs are interchangeable in terms of their meaning. The interchangeability of these motifs can also be clearly understood when observing the panel with the Triumph of Dionysus, which was manufactured in the early Byzantine period in Egypt between the 4th and 6th centuries and is kept in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Fig. 5; Heuck Allen, 1987, pp. 42–43, no 8; Stauffer, 1995, pp. 30–31, 44, ill. 30–31; see also Erdeljan, 2017). Here the god Dionysus is depicted in the center of the scene, which is unique in many respects. Since the god Dionysus appears in it with both the terrestrial and aquatic representatives of his *thiasos*, this scene seems to be a hapax in terms of *thiasos* members. The God is accompanied by two panthers, two maenads, a siren, and an Indian captive (?), while two dolphins, the representative of marine *thiasos*, frame the whole scene. On the one hand, the presence of dolphins can be justified by the specific iconography of Dionysus triumph in the form of his ascension in a chariot, which differs from the iconography of his “usual” Indian triumphs. In this context, the unique appearance of dolphins alongside Dionysus on the Egyptian textile panel and the specific iconographic, programmatic, and semantic links between the depiction of aquatic and terrestrial members of Dionysus *thiasos*, and in particular between the depictions of Dionysus, the goddess Nike, the motif of dolphins, and the motif of dolphins with their prey, can perhaps only be explained by the mosaics of one particular monument—the church of Santa Constanza in Rome (339–351). This monument is exceptional in many ways: in terms of its antiquity, its preservation, the reputation of its donor, the great value of the mosaics, the variety of subjects depicted on them, their representativeness, and the quality of the craftsmanship. Finally, the monument is also unique in terms of the dolphin motif. The church of Santa Constanza in Rome is the only edifice in which dolphins are still present in large numbers despite the ravages

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Fig. 6. Santa Constanza, Rome, vault, detail, 339–351 (Photo: after Ringbom, 2003, fig. 14)

of time. While some of the surviving dolphin depictions decorate its ambulatory vault (Fig. 6), the frescoes in the dome of the church, where the dolphins were depicted in even greater numbers and in a different form, have been completely destroyed today. However, these frescoes are known today thanks to the drawings from a later period (Ringbom, 2003, p. 25, fig. 14; Gavrilović, 2022b, p. 78). Apart from the question of the religious orientation of the donor and some other still unresolved issues, it should be emphasized that the mosaics of the ambulatory vault with the motif of dolphins chasing octopuses are juxtaposed with the Bacchic cupids engaged in pressing grapes and harvest-

ing (Dunbabin, 1999, fig. 263; Ringbom, 2003, p. 25, fig. 4; Gavrilović, 2022b, p. 78). This type of cupids is just as present in the triumphal scenes of Dionysus as the goddess Nike and the dolphins, which is the main link between these motifs. There is a strong semantic relationship between the panel of the Triumph of Dionysus with dolphins kept in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Roman mosaic from Dougga, the Triumph of Dionysus with the goddess Nike (Victory) and Bacchic cupids, and the mosaics with dolphins chasing octopuses from the church of Santa Constanza in Rome. The motif of dolphins chasing an octopus in the church of Santa Constanza in Rome is of particular importance for this study, as it provides an important link between the complex type of the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo and the earlier, simple iconographic type of dolphin motif analyzed in this article, which appears in scenes related to the god Dionysus, as it shows that Dionysiac themes could also be depicted with a complex type of dolphin motif. This dolphin motif also represents a link between Rome and Constantinople, as the extremely rare motif of a dolphin devouring an octopus occurs almost exclusively in Byzantine art in the church of Santa Constanza in Rome and in the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Gavrilović, 2020). The motif attested in the church of Santa Constanza in Rome and its context, together with the material analyzed in this article, shows that the simple iconographic form of the dolphin motif carries the same symbolism as the complex dolphin motif chasing or devouring its prey.²³

²³ The relationships between the triumphal scenes of Dionysus, Bacchic cupids, and the dolphin motifs deserve further investigation.

Conclusion

From the above-said, it can be concluded that the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo has its origins in ancient Greek artistic tradition, from where it was transferred to Roman art, and that the context and the way it appears on the early Christian oil lamp is at least a millenium old, if not even older. Although the number of surviving depictions is small, they are sufficient to indicate and trace the line of development of the dolphin motif. What is of great importance and constitutes the main conclusion of this article is the fact that this motif carries within itself the entire history of religious and artistic views and beliefs of several earlier periods, as it is the highest result of the development of a motif several millennia old and the product of its layering, and also an extremely rare and learned phenomenon, not only in its own time, but also in other periods. An insight into the early history and context of this motif contributes to a better understanding of the visual culture of both ancient pagan and Christian civilizations, as well as their cultural, religious, and artistic 'exchanges' and interrelationships.

The selected examples of the dolphin motif in this article have several features in common. They were shown in the same context as the dolphins on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, which is the reason for their selection. The examples show that the position of the dolphins on the sides of the ships is specific and that they already represented a millenia old established tradition at the time of Smederevo oil lamp's creation. The scenes of the Epiphany of Dionysus at sea were chosen firstly because they feature dolphins as decoration of the depicted ships. Secondly, the lavish ship decoration of the Dougga mosaic makes it possible to decipher the meaning of the dolphin motif in these scenes. This is not possible in other scenes without such elaborate ship decoration. This kind of elaborate and skillful 'decoration' actually points visually and implicitly to the meaning of the dolphin motif. In this way, the development of the dolphin motif can be traced. From the 6th century BC, when the Dionysus cup was made and decorated, to the 4th century AD, when the oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum was made, dolphins were regularly depicted in the same registers of the ships in various artistic techniques. The unchanged position of dolphins in the ship's decoration testifies to a long and uninterrupted tradition of depicting this motif; the unchanged position, as well as the context in which the dolphin motif appears, also proves its unchanged meaning, which is the main conclusion of this study. This tradition shows that the dolphin is not a mere decoration of the Dionysus ships, but a purposefully placed image that conveys the message and meaning of the entire scene. This article also shows to what extent the nature of the lamp's decoration, its placement, iconography and meaning, but also the sophisticated taste of Termogenes as the Christian commissioner of the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo and its artist, were determined and guided by

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the pagan heritage, and to what extent the pagan heritage was deeply rooted in Christian visual culture. In this sense, it is particularly interesting to point out as a conclusion that the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo has fully retained its original pagan meaning and only partially changed its context, which was strictly traced, deeply rooted and fully channeled by the rules and discourse of pagan art of previous eras.

This further means that the presence of both types of dolphin motifs on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo shows that they carry the same meaning. In all analyzed examples, a sign of equality can be drawn between the depictions of dolphins on the ships on Dionysus cup, on the Roman mosaic from Dougga as well as on the oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum in relation to their triumphal connotation. Although all the mentioned dolphins carry the same meaning, which is the chief outcome of this study, the main difference between them is that their point of reference is different, which shows the subtle and sophisticated process of transferring the motif from one (ancient, pagan) cult to another (Christian). Apart from the different artistic techniques and complexity of the motifs, the most important and “only” difference between the dolphins on these three monuments is that the dolphins decorating the ship on the Dionysus cup and the dolphins on the Dougga mosaic refer to the triumph of Dionysus, while the dolphins devouring their prey on the oil lamp from the Smederevo Museum refer to the triumph of Christ.²⁴ In conclusion, the meaning of the “simple” dolphin motif, the “complex” dolphin motif, and the meaning of the event described in the Homeric hymn coincide, as does the position of the dolphins on the sides of the ships on the Dionysus cup, on the Roman mosaic and on the oil lamp from the Museum in Smederevo.

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²⁴ On the meaning of the dolphin motif on the oil lamp from the Museum of Smederevo, see Gavrilović, 2022a.

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Порекло контекста и значења мотива делфина посведоченог на луцерни у Смедеревском музеју (IV век)

Резиме

У овој студији реч је о постепеном уобличавању тј. „историјату” формирања значења и иконографије мотива делфина посведоченог на луцерни у облику брода, која се чува у Смедеревском музеју (IV век; сл. 1a–b, 2). Ова лампа по својим бројним одликама представља јединствен налаз – како по раскоши, репрезентативности и врсти њеног украса тако и финоћи обраде, димензијама и другим карактеристикама. У контексту овог истраживања, од посебне је важности чињеница да мотив делфина на њој има вишеслојну и веома комплексну симболику, као и дугу историју. Такође, реч је о (изгледа) јединој очуваној лампи ранохришћанске и византијске провенијениције на којој је делфин приказан као украс брода у тзв. сложеној иконографској формули како лови и прождире плен. У овом раду представљен је пут постепеног уобличавања и формирања његове иконографије и значења, као и специфичности преиначавања његовог значења у симбол хришћанског култа. Што је важно истаћи и указати, овај трансфер симболичке мотива делфина из једног у други култ изведен је тако педантно, брижљиво и учено да је приликом преласка из једног у други култ – из римског паганског у хришћански – његово значење остало нетакнуто, али је његов контекст потпуно саображен новом, хришћанском култу. С обзиром на сву суптилност и прецизност која се огледа у поштовању традиције, указивање на овакав манир трансфера

представља главни циљ овог рада. Имајући све речено у виду, установљено је да модуси присуства мотива делфина у уметности током различитих епоха, тј. његов контекст, не представљају пуку случајност, већ одраз јасне намере уметника и поручилаца дела. Најзад, с обзиром на чињеницу да о овом мотиву како у древној античкој, тако ни у хришћанској уметности не постоје писана сведочанства, тј. литерарни извори који би објаснили иконографију и значење овог мотива, карактеристични модуси појаве мотива делфина уједно представљају и кључни параметар у анализи његове симболике и њеног уобличавања и формирања. У овом раду анализирани су мотиви делфина уз одабране представе бога Диониса (сл. 3, 4 а–с). Узете су у обзир представе на којима се мотив делфина јавља као „украш“ бродова, као и на лампи из Смедеревског музеја. Поменути одабрани примери датог мотива наглашеном контекстуализацијом недвосмислено указују на значење мотива делфина присутног на луцерни из Смедеревског музеја, као и на даље аналогије овом мотиву (сл. 5, 6) које поткрепљују везу између наведених мотива делфина и мотива делфина са луцерне из Смедеревског музеја, а уједно и везе између мотива делфина и тема везаних за бога Диониса, које заслужују и даља истраживања.

Кључне речи: плитак рељеф; делфин; брод; луцерна; Смедеревски музеј; грчка уметност; римска уметност; хришћанска уметност; Дионис; иконографија; иконологија; IV век; контекст.



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