



Myth in the Greek and Roman Worlds: the Temple of Diana at Nemi

The Temple of Diana at Nemi: Oil lamp

Penny Boreham:

The gifts deposited at the Temple of Diana span the full range, from the elaborately expensive to the cheap and mundane. It seems that the temple attracted a wide public, and that each worshipper brought to the temple what they could afford. Now Katharina Lorenz turns her attention to a small, apparently insignificant fragment, which may give us important clues about the fabric of Roman society at the time.

Katharina Lorenz:

What we see here in front of us is the upper part of a little terracotta oil lamp, not much bigger than the palm of a hand, I suppose, and oil lamps are very, very widespread objects obviously in the ancient world, much easier to handle than a candle because you don't have to worry about the wax and you just fill the oil inside the little kind of, it's a bit like a little kind of teapot, I suppose, and then you burn it and you can carry it around with you, so a very, very handy, very safe way of lighting a room.

Penny Boreham:

What's striking about this oil lamp is its decoration.

Katharina Lorenz:

Now this particular lamp is interesting because it is decorated on the top, as are many lamps, but whereas quite a few oil lamps because it's a cheap product, it's something a lot of people have, they just have very generic types of decoration, here actually we have a very interesting little scene depicted, and a scene depicting a figure, a man, that's quite unusual already, and what makes it even more unusual is that this man is accompanied by a monkey. The man sits on the ground and the monkey sits next to him, so they're kind of in communication, and then looking on the right, away from the two, we see a little ladder and a cat climbs the ladder and just above the heads of the man and the cat we see two rings and this gives us some clues that this is probably a scene of a street artist, a street entertainer, who had animals trained to perform little tricks, who would also juggle with the rings and do some entertainment himself. He has some bread with him so probably his lunch, and also a little bowl to, well I suppose to collect money perhaps it is, it's strange but he might just also use it to collect money. So it's a kind of a very mundane scene, and a kind of a genre scene almost, but a very good little snapshot of urban and Roman life, I suppose.

Penny Boreham:

And Katharina Lorenz believes the depiction of this everyday scene has a lot to tell us about both the donor of the object and the society in which it was made.

Katharina Lorenz:

One of the ways to explain this is perhaps that this was either dedicated or owned by someone who also was a part of this class, who also was perhaps one of these kind of street entertainers who identified with that and who used such a scene in order to make a kind of a fairly proud statement actually about his trade. And we do have lots of instances in Roman society, especially in the period of the late Republican and early Imperial period, which is the peak period of the sanctuary in Nemi, an interest of the lower classes, not just the upper classes but also the lower classes, of depicting of what they're actually doing. Now they are not generals and they don't run the magistrate or anything, they don't give speeches, but we have lots of depictions primarily from the funerary context where slaves or all kind of people who made some money, Roman freedmen, would depict themselves very proudly doing their trade, bakers for instance, or all sorts of workmen, and perhaps this little kind of depiction on the lamp is something which is a depiction which actually makes a proud statement about the trade of an entertainer which, as I said, is a very low-class pursuit.

Penny Boreham:

At the very bottom of the social heap were slaves, and there's strong evidence that the slaves worshipped at the temple, alongside people from every other social class. There may even be a particular link between the cult of Diana and slavery. In an influential folk tradition, the chief priest of the temple was described as an ex-slave who had escaped from his master. In order to achieve the elevated position of chief priest at the Temple of Diana he had to fight a duel with and kill the current incumbent. Whether this is historical fact is open to question but it does cast an interesting light on perceptions of social mobility at the time.

Katharina Lorenz:

The interesting thing is Nemi is also a good site to demonstrate to us that this mobility, this flexibility in Roman society was a reality, and that there were people even though, despite being slaves, they were able to fulfil very important functions, and we have documentation from Roman culture in general that slaves did act as proper businessmen. Sometimes they made so much money they were able to buy themselves out of slavery.

Penny Boreham:

This might shed some light on some of the consumers of myth at the time the temple was in its heyday. For the lower classes, and slaves in particular, going to a sanctuary like this one may have had a reassuringly empowering psychological effect.

Katharina Lorenz:

They couldn't make their mark politically but there were places like, for instance, sanctuaries where they were able to make their mark by means of visual representation.

Penny Boreham:

And it may well be that the person who donated the oil lamp could have been in this position. In the next section, we'll meet another ex-slave with links to the Temple, and follow the evidence about his life and career.