

Sesostris Chariot in a Roman Circus? A New Interpretation of a Scene depicted on an Imperial Oil Lamp

Sylvain Forichon

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SESOSTRIS' CHARIOT IN A ROMAN CIRCUS? A NEW INTERPRETATION OF A SCENE DEPICTED ON AN IMPERIAL OIL LAMP

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1. Introduction

The collective craze for chariot races in the Roman Empire left many material traces still visible today. These include a multitude of oil lamps, the discuses of which depict drivers perched on their chariots.[1] The British Museum in London, like other museums in Europe or north Africa, houses several lamps of this kind. However, one of them features what is indeed an unusual chariot team (**fig. 1**). Although the lamp is badly worn, it is possible to make out a chariot drawn by at least three, maybe even four figures (perhaps the individual on the far right is not hitched to the chariot properly, but instead guides the team). Those figures are hitched up instead of horses and roped one to another by the neck. A fifth figure stands upright in the chariot, with the guide reins tied around his waist, as was usual practice for professional charioteers in the Roman world. In his right hand, he brandishes what looks like a whip, and the chariot is being driven from left to right. Spectators appear crowded in the stands in the background. The *metae* indicate that the setting is a circus.

The underside of the lamp is marked *SAECVLI*.[2] Three other oil lamps kept in the British Museum, which D. M. Bailey dates to the same period, apparently bear the same inscription, although it is more abbreviated: *SAECVL*.[3] One other lamp carries the lettering *LI*, which Bailey also understands as referencing *[SAECV]LI*.[4] The scenes depicted on the medallions of these five lamps are very different in character. Two lamps contain representations of deities or mythological scenes: Greeks and Amazons on Q 1341, and the god Sol and the Goddess Luna on Q 1343. Two other lamps have representations of shows taking place in circuses on their medallions: a chariot

I am grateful to Prof. Jean-Michel Roddaz (Université Bordeaux Montaigne), Dr. Anne Bajard (Université Bordeaux Montaigne), Dr. Typhaine Haziza (Université de Caen Normandie), and Dr. Sinclair Bell (Northern Illinois University) for their observations on this paper. My thanks to Christopher Sutcliffe and Dr. Sinclair Bell for the translation and also to the anonymous reviewers of the *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* for their comments. Abbreviations of ancient sources follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary.*

[1] See, for example: Walters 1914, 86 (no. 563), 102 (no. 671), 103 (no. 672), 103 (no. 673), 103 (no. 674), 148 (no. 979), 172 (no. 1138), 172 (no. 1139), 211–212 (no. 1398); López Rodríguez 1981, 18 (lamina V, nos. 56–57); Hellmann 1987, 25 (no. 77), 25 (no. 78), 25 (no. 79), 36 (no. 126), 89 (no. 339); Bonnet 1988, 59 (fig. 6, nos. 4–6), 60 (fig. 7, no. 1); Morillo Cerdán 1992, 126–127 (no. 19); Amaré Tafalla and Liz Guiral 1994, 41–42 (figs. I.1, I.2, II.1, II.2, II.3, II.4, II.5, II.6, III.1); Liesen 1994, 44–45 (no. 168); Goethert and Werner 1997, 59 (no. 26); Morillo Cerdán 1999, 214–215 (no. 89); Robin Petitot 2000, 55 (no. 85), 66 (no. 186); Eckardt 2002, 376 (no. 1297); Rodríguez Martín 2002, 107–110; Casas I Genover and Soler I Fusté 2006, 112–113 (fig. 52); Marcattili 2009, 272–274 (nos. 95, 96, 97, and 98).

[2] This lamp is referenced in the catalogue of H. B. Walters (Walters 1914, 164, no. 1095) and in that of D. M. Bailey (Bailey 1980, 351, Q 1348).

[3] See in Bailey 1980, 347–351, the lamps Q 1343, Q 1344, and Q1349.

[4] Bailey 1980, 349, Q 1341.



Fig. 1. Oil lamp with a chariot drawn by four (or three ?) men in a circus (15.20 × 11 cm). London, British Museum, inv. no. 1878,1019.316 (photo © Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 2. Oil lamp with horse racing scene in a circus (14.70 × 9.60 cm). London, British Museum, inv. no. 1814,0704.106 (photo © Trustees of the British Museum).

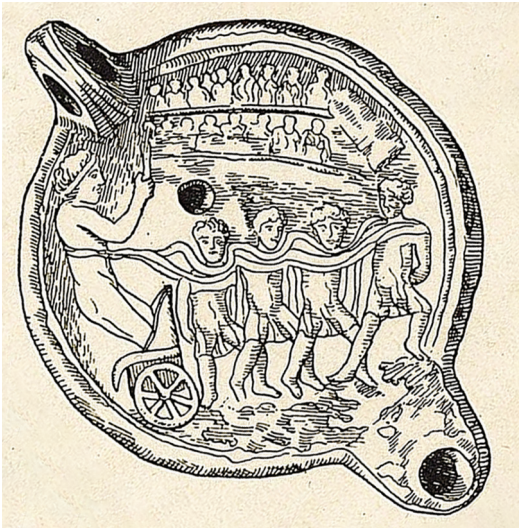


Fig. 3. Drawing of Fig. 1 by Walters (after Walters 1914, 164, no. 1095, fig. 222).



Fig. 4. Drawing of Fig. 1 by Bailey (after Bailey 1980, 56, fig. 58, Q 1348).

race in a circus on Q 1349 (**fig. 2**), and a chariot pulled by men in a circus on Q 1348 (**fig. 1**). On the last lamp (Q 1344), we can see a group of men carrying a cask. H. B. Walters had assumed that these lamps marked *SAECVL/SAECVLI* could have been linked to the Saecular Games (*Ludi Saeculares*) and that they could have been used to illuminate the entertainment buildings during these celebrations.[5] With the exception of lamps Q 1348 (**fig. 1**) and Q 1349 (**fig. 2**), which include performances of shows in circuses, the scenes represented on the three other lamps have *a priori* no relation with the Saecular Games. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the shows on the lamps Q 1348 (**fig. 1**) and Q 1349 (**fig. 2**) took place during the Saecular Games. This is why the hypothesis of Bailey seems to me much more likely. According to him, it is actually the name of the potter who made them.[6] Thus these five lamps could come from the same workshop, although this remains very hypothetical for lamp Q 1341.

Regarding oil lamp Q 1348 (**fig. 1**), many features cannot readily be made out, rendering the scene difficult to read and interpret. For that matter, a comparison of the drawings by Walters (**fig. 3**)[7] and Bailey (**fig. 4**)[8] shows that they did not interpret certain details in the same way: for example, Walters thinks the man riding the chariot is naked whereas Bailey depicts him dressed in a tunic. Bailey has noticed the statue of Cybele in the background, which Walters plainly failed to spot. On these two points, I am tempted to side with Bailey. But in any event, both Walters[9]

[5] Walters 1914, XIV: "Many lamps, especially those with subjects relating to the circus or games, are inscribed with the word SAECVL(ARES), and it is possible that these were used in connection with the Ludi Saeculares, at which illuminations took place."

[6] Bailey 1980, 346–347.

[7] Walters 1914, 164 (no. 1095, fig. 222).

[8] Bailey 1980, 56 (fig. 58, Q 1348).

[9] Walters 1914, 164 (no. 1095): "Man in chariot to r., drawn by four men turned to the front; above are rows of figures, presumably spectators in the circus."

and Bailey[10] agree that the chariot is being drawn by men. Although horses were sometimes replaced by other animals such as camels for some races in Rome,[11] I know of no textual source that mentions chariots being drawn by men in a circus, whether freedmen, slaves, prisoners, or those condemned to death (*noxii*), be it in Rome or any other imperial city.[12] Moreover, I have not found any similar representation in the iconography of the circus of ancient Rome, whether on oil lamps or in any other visual medium.[13] Nevertheless, it was entirely possible, at least from a material point of view, to harness men to a chariot in a circus. In any case, it is not *a priori* an imaginary team, like the chariots driven by winged Cupids and harnessed to horses or to dolphins that appear on various sarcophagi[14] or on frescoes from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii. Men could have been harnessed to a chariot instead of horses and thus be exposed to public view in a circus, as Bailey held.[15] But this absence of any further references in ancient literature or iconography does suggest that it was uncommon and even exceptional for men to be harnessed to a chariot in a circus, and thus that this may refer to a singular event rather than a regular practice.

If such a spectacle could very well have taken place in a circus, which seems quite likely to me, the question arises of establishing where and when this event might have occurred. According to Bailey[16] and J. Humphrey,[17] this lamp (Q 1348; **fig. 1**), like the other lamp with a scene of chariot racing on its medallion (Q 1349; **fig. 2**), would have been produced in central Italy. Nevertheless, Humphrey notices that on the lamp Q 1348 that interests us,[18] the obelisk seemingly appears absent, unlike the other lamp (Q 1349). According to him:

> It is of interest to repeat Bailey's comment […] that the form of the lamps of this type points to a North African prototype, since the obelisk was also absent from the contemporary Carthage and Silin circus mosaics. It is not impossible that elaborate circus designs showing several parts of the building were first placed on lamps in North Africa, inspired by the circus patterns being produced by the mosaic workshops there.[19]

The fact that the obelisk does not appear on the lamp Q 1348 (**fig. 1**), unlike lamp Q 1349 (**fig. 2**), does not strike me as significant for two reasons. Firstly, on lamp Q 1349 (**fig. 2**), the circus is seen from above, and so it is logical that different elements of the *euripus* appear, at least

[10] Bailey 1980, 57: "The condition of the lamp's surface is very poor, but the structure with the lap-counting eggs can be seen, and also the statue of Cybele on the lion and the polygonal shrine; the support for the dolphins may also be present. The main scene of the lamp is of a *quadriga* drawn by four men, presumably a representation of an actual happening in the circus."

[11] Nero reportedly organized races with teams of four camels in the circus (Suet., *Ner.* 11.1). Heliogabalus had chariots drawn by four elephants ride in the Vatican and teams of four camels in private spectacles in a circus (SHA, *Heliogab.* 23.1).

[12] According to SHA, *Macr.*, 12.7., Macrinus is said to have used a cart to punish a tribune who had tolerated the neglect of the watchtowers. However, the nature of this torture is very different from what we observe on this oil lamp, since Macrinus had the tribune tied under the cart and dragged on a path to his death.

[13] On the depiction of the Roman circus, see especially: Yacoub 1980; Dunbabin 1982; Ennaïfer 1983; Sennequier et al. 1998; Bergmann 2008; Marcattili 2009, 241–279; Dunbabin 2016, 138–170; and Grosser 2017.

[14] See Schauenburg 1995.

[15] Bailey 1980, 346.

[16] Bailey 1980, 351.

[17] Humphrey 1986, 248.

[18] Humphrey 1986, 249.

[19] Humphrey 1986, 249.

the most emblematic ones such as the obelisk. On the other hand, on the lamp Q 1348 (**fig. 1**), the angle of view is different. It is as if we are in the stands below, near the track or even on the track itself, from which we see this chariot pulled by men passing in front of us. Now, from where we (the viewers) sit, we can only logically see part of the *euripus*. It is therefore not surprising that the obelisk does not appear. Second, the assumption made by Bailey about a North African prototype concerns the other lamp (Q 1349 = **fig. 2**), not lamp Q 1348 (**fig. 1**), and is based upon the shape of the lamp's nozzle.[20] The nozzle of lamp Q1348 has a different shape. Consequently, nothing prohibits one from thinking that this chariot is located in a circus in Italy, even the Circus Maximus in Rome, as Bailey suggested.[21] However, this obviously remains a supposition, and we absolutely cannot exclude the possibility that this show took place elsewhere.

Regarding the date, Walters classifies this object among a set of lamps dating from the second century C.E.[22] According to Bailey,[23] this lamp would have been produced between 175 and 225 C.E., but he recognizes that this dating remains hypothetical.[24] In general, of the vast quantity of material culture produced in response to circus games, very little of it indicates the place and the date of the event.[25] Nevertheless, this dating has been widely accepted by the various historians who have studied the object, such as Humphrey.[26]

Few of them, though, have commented on the meaning of the scene depicted on the lamp.[27] Most have merely described it, as did Humphrey in his major monograph on the Roman circus.[28] C. Vismara referred to the object in an article[29] as well as in her subsequent book on torture in the Roman world.[30] She likened the depiction to five other ancient representations in which individuals were bound one to another by a rope around their necks.[31] Although Vismara does not

[20] Bailey 1980, 346: "The nozzle of Q1349 has an obtuse angled tip, and has volutes which may be reminiscent of the volute lamps of the first century AD, but are more likely to have been copied from contemporary imported North African examples […]; the manner in which the underside of the nozzle is defined and decorated also point to a North African prototype."

[21] Bailey 1980, 346: "the racing chariots of Q 1349, and the burlesque (or perhaps horribly real) representation of a racing chariot pulled by four men on Q 1348. The circus *spina* shown on both the latter lamps indicates that the Circus Maximus was the site of these happenings."

[22] Walters 1914, 142–167.

[23] Bailey 1980, 351.

[24] Bailey 1980, 344: "The lamps of groups iv to ix were probably produced mainly in the half century extending from the last quarter of the second century to the first quarter of the third. It would probably be safer to extend this period by a decade at the beginning and a generation at the end, but the bulk of them were likely to have been made between *circa* AD 175 and 225. However, there is no adequate archaeological evidence for the close dating of these lamps."

[25] The terracotta bowls from Calahorra (which name the contestants and sponsor and give the date and place of the event) are in fact one of the few surviving examples of this kind. On the bowls from Calahorra, see Mayer Olivé 1998 and Jiménez Sánchez 2003.

[26] Humphrey 1986, 248–249.

[27] Note that in his excellent dissertation on the representation of charioteers in imperial Rome and Late Antiquity (Grosser 2017), currently in press, this lamp does not appear in the catalogue, which is otherwise rich in its documentation.

[28] Humphrey 1986, 249: "It shows four men pulling a charioteer in his chariot. Spectators appear at the upper right margin, immediately above the barrier which includes possibly the dolphins, then eggs, Cybele on the lion, a pavilion and the *metae*. The obelisk is missing."

[29] Vismara 1987, 137: "Lucerna di produzione centro-italica, di tipo Bailey Q iv, databile tra 175 e 225, a Londra, British Museum. Sul disco, quattro personaggi legati tra loro per il collo tirano una quadriga sulla quale è un auriga con frustino; sullo sfondo, circo."

[30] Vismara 1990, 44: "Una scena singolare è raffigurata sul disco di una lucerna databile tra il 175 ed il 225 d.C., conservata al British Museum […]: quattro personaggi, legati tra loro per il collo, tirano una quadriga guidata da un auriga col frustino, sullo sfondo di una *cauea*."

[31] Vismara 1987, 136–137.

state this explicitly, she interprets the four individuals depicted on the lamp as prisoners, or even convicts condemned to death, as seems to be the case for the other five images she cites in her article. This hypothesis was taken up several years later by M. T. Amaré Tafalla and J. Liz Guiral, although they seem to harbor some doubts.[32] The close-up angle of view of the chariot does not make it possible to determine whether it is alone on the track or accompanied by other chariots. However, no source (to my knowledge) evokes a chariot race harnessed to men. In fact, the only thing that we can say at the sight of this image is that these individuals were harnessed to a chariot to be exhibited and humiliated in public, and also probably to be whipped in the place of horses; however, there is no indication that they were intended to be killed. In any case, Amaré Tafalla and Liz Guiral, as Bailey suggested before them, think that the scene depicted on the lamp represents a spectacle that actually did take place in a circus, although they do not make any further suggestions about the exact nature of this practice, any more than Bailey does.[33]

Several cases of public humiliation or flogging, even beating, during performances in Rome are known to us in the literature.[34] These cases do not end in death systematically, however. For instance, in 279 B.C.E., before the *ludi circenses* commenced in Rome, a *paterfamilias* hit with rods one of his slaves in a circus.[35] In general, flogging in ancient Rome seems to have been a punishment reserved for children, slaves,[36] and foreigners. It could be inflicted by the *paterfamilias* or a magistrate[37] in a private or public setting.[38] We could therefore assume that the individuals harnessed to the chariot are slaves or foreigners. Nevertheless, according to K. M. Coleman, "ritual exposure to public ridicule and abuse is well attested at Rome as an accompaniment to the formal penalty for lower-class miscreants."[39] Moreover, during the imperial period, *delatores* were repeatedly exhibited in the arena before being expelled[40] and according to G. Geltner:

> In the third and fourth centuries CE a distinction between a class of *honestiores* (noble) and *humiliores* (base) men restricted the latter's access to numerous legal privileges, also in the realm of penal law. In theory, flogging remained a licit penalty only as a form of summary justice

[32] Amaré Tafalla and Liz Guiral 1994, 46: "El motivo principal reproduce un auriga guiando a derecha una cuádriga llevada no por cuatro caballos sino por cuatro hombres – lo excepcional del motivo debe interpretarse, en opinión de Bailey, como la representación de un espectáculo contemporáneo a la pieza, que, según Vismara, se correspondería con el castigo a unos condenados, pero puede pensarse también tal vez en alguna escena con algún significado concreto que en el momento actual se nos escapa."

[33] Bailey 1980, 57.

[34] Note that caning in general with rods (*uirgae*) and public flogging are mentioned in several passages of ancient literature, including Suetonius (Suet., *Calig.*, 27.4; *Ner.*, 49.2; and *Dom.*, 8.4–5) as well as the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (*Sev.*, 2.6; *Avid. Cass.*, 5.1–2 and *Max.*, 8.7).

[35] It would be the *Circus Flaminius* according to Val. Max. 1.7.4. See also: Cic., *Div.*, 1.55; Liv. 2.36.1; and Macrob., *Sat.*, 1.11.3. On this spectacle: Coleman 2006, 56.

[36] *Dig.*, 48.19.10: "In the case of slaves, the rule is observed that they are punished after the fashion of men of low rank. For the same reasons that a freeman is beaten with rods (*fustibus*), a slave is ordered to be beaten with lashes (*flagellis*) and returned to his master" (trans. A. Watson).

[37] According to a passage in the *Digest* (48.19.16.2), the whip was a punishment administered by a magistrate or a relative.

[38] For example, allegedly Macrinus used to punish harshly his slaves in his home: SHA, *Macr.*, 13.3.

[39] Coleman 2006, 56.

[40] For instance, during the reign of Titus (Suet., *Tit.*, 8.5), the *delatores* and the *mandatores* were whipped and beaten in the middle of the Forum, then exhibited in the amphitheater, and finally sold as slaves or exiles to distant islands. Martial (*Spect.*, 4–5) also discusses the display of *delatores* in the arena (see Coleman 2006, 54–61). It could be the same show (Coleman 2006, 55). The *delatores* would also have been exhibited in the amphitheater before being exiled during the reign of Trajan (Plin., *Pan.*, 34–35). The punishment for *delatores* seems to have been public humiliation, caning, and even c*ondamnatio ad bestias* (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Comm.*, 18.15).

> reserved for punishing foreigners, slaves, and children, and various offenses by these groups would have been addressed in private by a *paterfamilias* or in public by the organ known as the *tresviri capitales*. Yet there is strong evidence to suggest that *humiliores* too could be put into the latter group for penal purposes.[41]

The social status of these men therefore remains uncertain. The reasons for which they were condemned to be exhibited, and probably also flogged in public in the circus, are similarly difficult to determine.

In any case, the humiliation and even public flogging of individuals in a performance building was not apparently an exceptional event in the Roman world with regard to the texts cited above, nor the fact of representing scenes of torture, or even capital executions on elements of interior decoration (mosaics, frescoes) or on everyday objects.[42] What appears to be unusual, however, is the staging of the humiliation and flogging of individuals in a circus by harnessing them to a chariot in place of horses.

This image prompted me to think of a legend reported by several Greek and Latin authors of the first century B.C.E. and C.E. about a pseudo-legendary pharaoh, who is known variously as Sesostris or Sesoösis. I will first sketch out what we know of this legend, and then make some hypotheses about the sponsor of such a show, even if we recognize that these are only hypotheses.

2. A Staging Probably Inspired by the Legendary Chariot of Sesostris

The *editores* of imperial Rome sometimes drew their inspiration for the staging of their spectacles from the best-known episodes of Greek mythology or from historical or pseudo-historical events.[43] An anecdote related by several Greek and Latin authors about the chariot of an Egyptian pharaoh they name Sesostris or Sesoösis[44] seems to match the depiction on the oil lamp. This Sesostris, who is only a pseudo-historical figure,[45] supposedly used to harness the kings and chiefs

[41] Geltner 2014, 44. See also Coleman 1990, 55, and Bauman 1996, 133–136. Certain passages from the *Digest* (e.g., 48.19.28.11) show that sanctions, *a priori* reserved for slaves, could also be applied to plebeians.

[42] The suffering and even death of individuals during the shows (such as *damnati ad bestias* or gladiators) appear on several representations from the Roman period (see Coleman 1990, 57–59, and Brown 1992), in particular on mosaics, like that of Zliten (see Brown 1992, 194–196) or that of El Djem on which a wild beast devours the face of a condemned man (Brown 1992, 196, fig. 9.6). Coleman (1990, 59) also discusses an oil lamp with a depiction of a man attached to a stake on a platform in which a lion is about to attack.

[43] For example, Suetonius (Suet., *Ner.* 12.2) mentions a show inspired by the legend of Daedalus and of Icarus, interpreted in all likelihood by a prisoner condemned to death, who was deliberately dropped from a high point so as to be killed. Martial describes a *damnatio ad bestias* turned into a representation of the myth of Orpheus (Mart., *Spect.* 24–25). An aquatic spectacle inspired by the legend of Leander and Hero was also organized probably in the Flavian amphitheater or in Augustus' *stagnum* (Mart., *Spect.* 28–29), perhaps under Domitian (Coleman 2006, liii–liv). The legendary battle of the cranes against the Pygmies was staged at the time of a hunt in an amphitheater under Domitian (Stat., *Silv.* 1.6.57–64). On the influences of mythology on the staging of public executions during spectacles, see Coleman 1990. On *naumachia* with historical themes, see Berlan-Bajard 2006, 11–14.

[44] Herodotus (2.102–110) seems to have been the first Greek historian to speak of this ruler. Many Greek and Latin historians referred to this king in their writings in the following centuries (cf. Obsomer 1989, 33–35), in particular Strabo 1.2.31 and 17.1.25 as well as Diod. Sic. 1.53.1–1.58.5.

[45] Widmer 2014, 232, writes: "Le nom 'Sésostris', porté par trois souverains de la 12e dynastie, fut, à l'époque tardive, donné à un roi égyptien légendaire, dont diverses sources relatent les exploits guerriers et l'action civilisatrice. Hérodote (5e siècle av. J.–C.) est le premier auteur grec à évoquer ce héros du passé de l'Égypte, que l'on considère généralement comme un 'concentré' des pharaons Sésostris Ier (roi fondateur) et III (roi conquérant), sur lequel se sont greffés, avec le temps, des éléments empruntés à Ramsès II,

of the territories he had conquered to his chariot. Diodorus of Sicily presumably was one of the first Greek authors to mention this story, which is also recounted by Lucan[46] and Pliny the Elder:[47]

> Although many great deeds have been credited to Sesoösis, his magnificence seems best to have been shown in the treatment which he accorded to the foreign potentates when he went forth from his palace. The kings whom he had allowed to continue their rule over the peoples which he had subdued and all others who had received from him the most important positions of command would present themselves in Egypt at specified times, bringing him gifts, and the king would welcome them and in all other matters show them honour and special preferment; but whenever he intended to visit a temple or city **he would remove the horses from his four-horse chariot and in their place yoke the kings and other potentates, taking them four at a time,** in this way showing to all men, as he thought, that, having conquered the mightiest of other kings and those most renowned for their excellence, he now had no one who could compete with him for the prize of excellence[48] (trans. C. H. Oldfather; my emphasis).

Several modern historians argue this is merely a legend with no historical basis.[49] However, the testimony of Diodorus, Lucan, and Pliny the Elder show that the legend was known, at least

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à Sheshonq, voire à Alexandre le Grand. Si certains savants ont douté du substrat indigène de ces récits, les découvertes récentes confirment l'existence d'histoires populaires centrées autour de cette figure historique qui circulaient, à l'époque romaine, dans les milieux égyptiens, mais aussi grecs. […] Les divergences que l'on constate soulignent la complexité de cette légende qui n'a cessé de s'amplifier et de se ramifier, ce dont témoignent également les différentes formes du nom grécisé de Senousret (Sésostris, variantes Sésoôsis et Sésonchosis)."

On the legendary dimension of the figure of Sesostris, see also Malaise 1966; Hari 1981; Gaggero 1986; Obsomer 1989; Chamoux 1995, 45; Quack 2013, 64; and Pouwels 2014.

[46] Luc., *Pharsalia,* 10.276–277: "Sesostris made his way to the West and to the limits of the world, and drove his Egyptian chariot with kings under the yoke" (trans. by J. D. Duff).

[47] Plin., *HN* 33.15.52: "We are also told of his gold-vaulted ceilings and silver beams and columns and pilasters, belonging to Sesostris King of Egypt whom Saulaces conquered, so proud a monarch that he is reported to have been in the habit every year of harnessing to his chariot individual kings selected by lot from among his vassals and so going in triumphal procession" (trans. H. Rackham).

[48] Diod. Sic. 1.58.1–2: Πολλῶν δὲ καὶ μεγάλων περὶ τὸν Σεσόωσιν ὑπαρξάντων δοκεῖ μεγαλοπρεπέστατον αὐτῷ γεγονέναι τὸ συντελούμενον ἐν ταῖς ἐξόδοις περὶ τοὺς ἡγεμόνας. Τῶν γὰρ καταπεπολεμημένων ἐθνῶν οἵ τε τὰς συγκεχωρημένας βασιλείας ἔχοντες καὶ τῶν ἄλλων οἱ τὰς μεγίστας ἡγεμονίας παρειληφότες ἀπήντων εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἐν τακτοῖς χρόνοις φέροντες δῶρα· οὓς ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐκδεχόμενος ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐτίμα καὶ διαφερόντως προῆγεν, ὁπότε δὲ πρὸς ἱερὸν ἢ πόλιν προσιέναι μέλλοι, τοὺς ἵππους ἀπὸ τοῦ τεθρίππου λύων ὑπεζεύγνυεν ἀντὶ τούτων κατὰ τέτταρας τούς τε βασιλεῖς καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἡγεμόνας, ἐνδεικνύμενος, ὡς ᾤετο, πᾶσιν ὅτι τοὺς τῶν ἄλλων κρατίστους καὶ δι´ ἀρετὴν ἐπιφανεστάτους καταπολεμήσας εἰς ἅμιλλαν ἀρετῆς οὐκ ἔχει τὸν δυνάμενον συγκριθῆναι.

[49] Burton 1972, 177–178: "There is absolutely no evidence that foreign kings were forced by Sesostris to draw his chariot in place of horses. […] In the XIIth Dyn. the chariot was completely unknown: the horse first became common during the New Kingdom, but even in the XVIIIth Dyn. it was a valuable object of tribute. It seems in fact to have been introduced by the Hyksos." This is also the opinion of Soubiran 1998, 276.

But for Malaise 1966, 269: "La tradition suivant laquelle Sésostris attelait à son char les rois vaincus peut s'expliquer par l'interprétation, détournée à son avantage, de bas–reliefs égyptiens du Nouvel Empire qui illustrent une coutume généralisée par les pharaons de cette époque." (Unfortunately, M. Malaise does not provide any bibliographical references.)

For Maspero 1901, 677: "Les monuments égyptiens ne nous montrent aucun char royal attelé exclusivement de rois ou de chefs vaincus, mais sur une stèle d'Aménôthès III, par exemple, on voit les prisonniers asiatiques et nègres liés les uns sur le plancher de la caisse du char, pour former litière aux pieds du Pharaon, les autres à l'essieu et au timon, parmi les chevaux, et entraînés dans la course de ceux–ci, comme s'ils aidaient à traîner. Ailleurs, à Beît–Oually, un tableau du même genre nous montre des chefs attachés de même au char de Ramsès II, et les scènes analogues ne manquent pas sur les monuments. L'attelage de chevaux n'y est supprimé nulle part et il est toujours associé à l'attelage humain, mais on conçoit aisément que, dans un récit populaire, les bêtes aient disparu et que les hommes seuls soient demeurés."

For Burton 1972, 178: "The story might perhaps be based on a garbled misinterpretation of reliefs showing vast statues on sledges being drawn by numbers of workers."

among scholars, in the first century B.C.E. and under the early Roman Empire.[50] It is also mentioned by authors in the Byzantine era.[51] On the other hand, I did not find any trace of another representation of this legend in the iconography of ancient Rome, from either the Republican or Imperial periods. It therefore seems that this legend was transmitted mainly through Greco-Roman literature during the Roman era. In my opinion, this legend could have inspired the *editor* of this show. The scene represented on this oil lamp would therefore be a punishment—in this case a public flogging—inflicted in a circus, the staging of which was inspired by the legend of the chariot of Sesostris. To be sure, I know of no ancient source that evokes its "adaptation" to circus games, but this would not be unlikely insofar as Egypt, the Nile, its fauna, and its civilization influenced the staging of many spectacles in late Republican and Imperial Rome,[52] not to mention the way in which they appear often in Roman visual culture. In any event, I fail to see what other historical or mythological story could have influenced the staging of this spectacle. Who, then, might have had the idea of staging in a circus a human *quadriga*, similar to the chariot of Sesostris?

3. Who Was Able to Stage Such a Show?

Let us recognize at the outset that it is difficult for us, based on the current state of our evidence, to know precisely who ordered the harnessing of these individuals to this chariot. At most, we can try to draw a "portrait-robot" of the game sponsor and advance some hypotheses. If the latter was well-inspired by the legend of the chariot of Sesostris to stage the public flogging of these individuals, it means that he was aware of this legend, probably through the medium of Greco-Latin literature, but perhaps even during a trip to Egypt. However, if geographers and other intellectuals had the opportunity to travel to Egypt before or after its conquest by Octavian,[53] senators were prohibited from 30 B.C.E. onward from going there, except with the special authorization of the emperor.[54] Consequently, knowledge of the land of the pharaohs—its culture, its legends, and its people—by most Roman senators must therefore have been mostly indirect and more indebted to a collective imagination than any lived reality. Therefore, if the show's *editor* was *not* the emperor, it seems more likely that he learned about this legend from Greco-Latin literature rather than during a stay in Egypt itself. But it is also possible that these individuals were harnessed to this

[50] Several Greek and Latin authors present this king Sesostris as the archetype of the powerful and conquering Egyptian pharaoh; see Ladynin 2010, 123–129. For example, for Diodorus (1.58.3), "This king is thought to have surpassed all former rulers in power and military exploits, and also in the magnitude and number of the votive offerings and public works which he built in Egypt" (trans. C. H. Oldfather). For Pliny the Elder (*HN* 36.14.71), the obelisk the Emperor Augustus had erected on the Field of Mars in Rome was supposedly made by Sesothis, but for Pouwels (2014, 236), this obelisk in fact dates from the reign of the pharaoh Psammetichus II (ca. 595–589 B.C.E.).

[51] See Obsomer 1989, 39. It should also be specified that in the second half of the 17th century, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet mentions this legend in his *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle* (cf. *Hist. Univ.*, 3.3): "beaucoup plus digne de gloire, si la vanité ne lui [Sésostris] eût pas fait traîner son char par les rois vaincus."

[52] Forichon 2018.

[53] The historian Diodorus Siculus traveled there between 60 and 56 B.C.E. Virgil is said to have accompanied Maecenas in 29 B.C.E. and to have stayed there for more than six months. The Greek geographer Strabo would have spent five years there between 26 and 20 B.C.E.; on this trip, see Yoyotte et al. 1997, 17–19. In the second century, Aelius Aristides made a long trip to Egypt. Ammianus Marcellinus also went there in the second half of the fourth century, but the exact date of his journey is unknown to us (as pointed out by Matthews 1989, 14–15).

[54] Dio Cass. 51.17.1–3. On the reasons for this ban, see (*inter alia*) André 1987, 193–194; Legras 2014, 278; and Capponi 2005, 9–10.

chariot on the orders of an emperor.[55] If this show took place between 175 and 225 C.E., as Bailey suggests, different emperors during this period are likely to have been aware of this legend, since several of them traveled to Egypt, or at least showed themselves to be Egyptophiles.

Marcus Aurelius, first of all, would have gone to Egypt and stayed at least in Alexandria,[56] probably during winter 175/176 C.E.[57] However, such a spectacle does not seem well-suited to the description of his character by Cassius Dio, in particular his reputed repugnance for blood and violence during the shows.[58] Commodus also stayed in Egypt with Marcus Aurelius.[59] Commodus' interest in Egyptian civilization also seems to be confirmed by the fact that he worshiped Isis.[60] Commodus may, therefore, have been aware of this legend. In addition, since his cruelty is highlighted in several passages of ancient literature, in particular in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, he seems *a priori* to have been more inclined than Marcus Aurelius to order such a punishment.

Septimius Severus also stayed in Egypt, and even for quite a long period it seems, from the end of the year 199 to probably autumn 200 C.E.[61] According to Cassius Dio[62] and the author of his biography in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*,[63] he would have visited almost all of this region, in particular its many monuments and shrines.[64] Diodorus Siculus attributes to Sesostris (who he names Sesoösis) various buildings, including many temples[65] as well as the erection of obelisks in Thebes.[66] According to C. Obsomer,[67] some of these buildings could indeed have been commissioned by Sesostris I. Septimius Severus therefore most probably heard about this sovereign and, perhaps, also about the legend of his chariot. Various sources also mention the harshness, even cruelty of Septimius Severus in the punishments he meted out.[68] However, we have too little information to say that these individuals were harnessed to this chariot during the reign of Septimius Severus and upon his order.

His son Caracalla also seem likely to have imagined, or at least ordered, such a staging of a public flogging. Caracalla also stayed in Egypt with his father.[69] He, too, could have known about

[55] It should be noted that in the few examples cited in the introduction, every time the *delatores* were exhibited in public during performances in imperial Rome it was on the orders of the emperor: Titus (Suet., *Tit.*, 8.5) and Trajan (Plin., *Pan.*, 34–35).

[56] Amm. Marc. 22.5.5; SHA, *Marc.*, 25.12 and 26.3.

[57] For a chronology of the different journeys of Marcus Aurelius, see Halfmann 1986, 212–213.

[58] Dio Cass. 71.29.3–4.

[59] SHA, *Comm.*, 2.3.

[60] SHA, *Comm.*, 9.4–5 and *Pesc. Nig.*, 6.9.

[61] For a chronology of the stay of Septimius Severus in Egypt, see Halfmann 1986, 217–218. On his stay in Egypt, see also Birley 1999, 136–139, and Daguet-Gagey 2000, 301–311.

[62] Dio Cass. 75.13.1–2.

[63] SHA, *Sev.*, 16.9–17.4.

[64] SHA, *Sev.*, 17.4.

[65] Diod. Sic. 1.56.2.

[66] Diod. Sic. 1.57.5.

[67] Obsomer 1989, 42.

[68] SHA, *Sev.*, 8.4, 9.6–7, 12.7–14.1, 14.12–13, 15.5–6, 17.7, 18.4, 21.9; Dio Cass. 74.2.1–2 and 74.8–9; Hdn. 2.9.2, 3.8.3, 3.8.8. On this point, see also the remarks of Daguet-Gagey 2000, 140 and 433–435.

[69] According to Daguet-Gagey 2000, 301. It is not certain, however, that Caracalla followed him on all of his journey. Caracalla stayed again in Alexandria from December 215 to March/April 216 whereupon he ordered the massacre of people, according to several sources (cf. SHA, *M. Ant.*, 6.2–3; Dio Cass. 77.22–23 and Hdn. 4.8.6–4.9.8). Caracalla's stay in Alexandria: Halfmann 1986, 229. But after this massacre, he left for Antioch and did not return to Rome until his death in April 217.



Fig. 5. Ivory bust of a male, possibly the emperor Caracalla, dressed as a charioteer in a thick, horizontally banded tunic. Ca. 200–225 C.E. H. 5.08 cm. Said to be from the amphitheater in Arles. London, British Museum, inv. no. 1851,0813.175 (photo © Trustees of the British Museum).

this legend, if only through literature. In addition, the author of his biography in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* as well as Cassius Dio insist on his cruelty.[70] He was also passionate about chariot racing, according to different literary accounts.[71] Admittedly, a passion for the chariot races of the "bad emperors" is a leitmotif of ancient literature. However, the British Museum possesses an ivory bust of a charioteer (**fig. 5**), which some have interpreted as representing the emperor Caracalla in the guise of a charioteer.[72] If this identification is correct, this object would confirm the emperor's alleged passion for chariot races. Could he be in this case the sponsor of this punishment, thereby reconciling his passion for chariot racing, his cruelty, and his attraction to Egyptian civilization?

While Caracalla cannot be excluded, some of his successors would make for good candidates as well. This is the case with Heliogabalus. Certainly, unlike Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla, Heliogabalus did not stay in Egypt (at least to my knowledge), but he could very well have learned of the legend of Sesostris from other sources, in particular literature, without having visited it himself. In any case, Heliogabalus was in all likelihood interested in Egyptian civilization.[73] Moreover, the author of Heliogabalus' biography in the *Historia Augusta* asserts that the emperor habitually harnessed various animals to his chariot, notably elephants[74]

[70] According to the author of his biography in the SHA in particular, he put many people to death, especially after the assassination of his brother Geta: SHA, *M. Ant.*, 3.5, 4.3, 4.7, 4.9, 5.7. Cassius Dio, a contemporary of the emperor, also describes his murders and his cruelty: Dio Cass. 77.1 and 77.4–5.

[71] According to Cassius Dio, he even allegedly drove chariots himself (Dio Cass. 77.10.2), although his account does specify whether Caracalla went so far as to perform in public in the circus. Caracalla also allegedly ordered the death of the charioteer Euprepes because he did not belong to the emperor's preferred faction (Dio Cass. 77.1.2). According to Herodian (Hdn. 4.6.4), he also ordered the execution of circus spectators who dared to mock his favorite charioteer. On Caracalla's passion for the chariot races, see further: Horsmann 1998, 86–87.

[72] Inv. no. 1851,0813.175; e.g., see Weeber 1994, 180, fig. 257.

[73] He seems to have been fascinated above all by Egyptian fauna: SHA, *Heliogab*. 28.3.



Fig. 6. The "Cameo of Heliogabalus" (19 × 22 mm). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, inv. no. C 428 (after Vollenweider and Avisseau-Broustet 2003, 128, no. 243; reproduced with permission).

and even dogs.[75] Reportedly he liked to appear on various types of chariot, taking himself for a divinity.[76] Although it is not specified by Heliogabalus' biographer in the *Historia Augusta*, the chariot harnessed to stags was most certainly an evocation of the chariot of Artemis/Diana who, for several ancient authors, traveled on a chariot drawn by stags or does.[77] Likewise, the chariot drawn by elephants seems to be an allusion to the one on which Bacchus entered Thebes.[78] Moreover, Heliogabalus' biographer in the *Historia Augusta* claims in another passage that this emperor even drove naked on a chariot harnessed to women who were also unclad.[79] Several historians[80] have associated this testimony with a cameo now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris depicting a man standing on a chariot drawn by two women (**fig. 6**). The women are on all fours and completely naked, as is the man on the chariot (who is seen erect), which tends to confirm the assertions of Heliogabalus' biographer. Apart from his alleged penchant for driving chariots harnessed to different animals or to naked women, Heliogabalus was generally keen on horse racing. Several ancient sources report he often drove teams while dressed as a charioteer.[81] He could, therefore, also be the sponsor of such a punishment. On the other hand, it is unlikely that he is the man represented standing on the chariot, because according to Cassius

[74] SHA, *Heliogab*. 23.1.

[75] SHA, *Heliogab*. 28.1.

[76] SHA, *Heliogab*. 28.2.

[77] Callim., *Hymn to Artemis* 98–106; Ap. Rhod., *Argon* 3.879; Nonnus, *Dion*. 48.309; Claud., *Cons. Stil.* 3. 286.

[78] On the Indian triumph of Bacchus at Thebes, see Diod. Sic. 3.65.7 and 4.3.1; Plin., *HN* 8.2.4. On the popularity of this theme on sarcophagi of the Severan era, see Turcan 1966, 459–463.

[79] SHA, *Heliogab*. 29.2.

[80] De Longpérier 1845. See also Babelon 1897, 158–159 (no. 304); Turcan 1985, 178 (fig. 27); Megow 1987, 247 (no. A 164, pl. 50,5); Vollenweider and Avisseau-Broustet 2003, 189–190 (no. 243).

[81] Dio Cass. 79.14.2; Hdn. 5.6.10. See also: SHA, *Heliogab*. 6.3. About the passion of Heliogabulus for chariot races: Horsmann 1998, 87.

Dio,[82] Heliogabalus never dared to perform publicly as a charioteer in a circus,[83] whereas this chariot is clearly before a crowd of spectators in a circus.

Finally, there remains some doubts about Severus Alexander. First of all, the latter probably would have planned to go to Egypt, as assumed by J. D. Thomas and W. Clarysse, based on the study of an Egyptian papyrus now preserved at the University of Michigan.[84] However, nothing in this document,[85] any more than the lengthy biography of Severus Alexander in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, proves that he actually went to Egypt or even that he had a particular interest in this country and its civilization. Nevertheless, he could have learned of this legend through literature, without having traveled to Egypt. In addition, according to the author of his biography in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Severus Alexander was particularly intransigent, even harsh, in his punishments of soldiers[86] and thieves.[87] Moreover, he showed a particular appreciation for the spectacles.[88] He is therefore not to be excluded from the list of emperors who could have ordered this punishment.

In fact, in examining the list of emperors who succeeded one another between 175 and 225 C.E., and if we admit that the legend of the chariot of Sesostris inspired the staging of this punishment, several of them seem likely to have imagined and ordered such a punishment. However, there is no evidence that the sponsor of this event was the emperor; it may have been ordered by a magistrate. And, again, we are not entirely certain that this performance took place in Rome.

4. Conclusion

The scene on this oil lamp is—and remains still—highly enigmatic. What we can be sure of is that at least three, possibly four, individuals are harnessed to a chariot, that another individual is standing on the chariot, that he is apparently brandishing a whip, and that the chariot is moving from left to right in the setting of a circus. Nothing suggests *a priori* that the scene represented on this lamp is imaginary. Such a team could very well have been put in a show when *ludi* were held in a circus. In light of the absence of a similar representation in the iconography of the Roman circus and among references in ancient texts, the spectacle of this "human *quadriga*" probably only happened on a very few occasions, perhaps only once.

In addition, it seems very likely that the staging of this spectacle, which obviously appears to be a public punishment, was inspired by the legend of the chariot of the pharaoh Sesostris, as recounted by various Greek and Latin authors from the Roman era. From there, many hypotheses can be drawn about the identity of the sponsor of this show or the circumstances of its performance, location, and date. Unfortunately, given the current state of the ancient evidence and research, I must admit that I cannot answer these various questions with precision. Nevertheless, my investigations have allowed the scholarship to make some progress in the interpretation of this scene which until now had received little attention in the scholarship but which provoked the imagination of at least one ancient Roman potter.

[82] Dio Cass. 79.14.2. Nevertheless, one passage of the SHA (*Heliogab.* 6.3) and the testimony of Herodian (5.6.10) are more ambiguous on this point.

[83] This is also the opinion of Horsmann 1998, 87.

[84] Thomas and Clarysse 1977.

[85] Thomas and Clarysse 1977, 197–198.

[86] SHA, *Alex. Sev.*, 25.1–2.

[87] SHA, *Alex. Sev.*, 28.2–5.

[88] SHA, *Alex. Sev.*, 37.1.

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