

ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

September 2026

For almost as long as people have needed light, there have been lamps. The oldest lamps can date back as far as 40,000 years ago. Archaeologists in France have discovered Neolithic age lamps made from sandstone ([Gralókr & Matthews, 2025](#))(Fig1), while in the Americas lamps made from bone were used by Native populations such as the Inuit ([Clark, 2002](#))(Fig2). This month's artifact is much more recent than its Native and Paleolithic counterparts, however.

The artifact of the month is a well-preserved glass base of a mass-produced kerosene lamp (Fig3). It was recovered by TAS (Tribal Archaeology Section) after being found above ground in what is called a "surface find." While exact dates may be fuzzy, there are clues to help narrow down when this lamp was manufactured and used.

The most obvious clue for archaeologists attempting to track down the age of the lamp is the fuel. Kerosene fuel is relatively new, having come about in 1846 ([Sheridan, 2020](#)). Before kerosene, lamps were fueled with a variety of oils and animal fats to produce flames that allowed everything from late night reading to long journeys. Some of these fuel sources were olive oil, beeswax, and whale fat ([Arnold, 2004](#)).

The next clue comes from a close examination of the lamp's creation. The lamp has two long seams running down either side which means it was created through mass-production from a factory mold rather than by the hands of a single craftsman (Fig4). This narrows down the lamp's age to between 19th century (when the kerosene lamp was invented) to sometime in the 20th century (when lamp usage declined following electricity) ([Wells, 2026](#)). Surprisingly, the glass lacks a maker's mark, so it's currently unknown where exactly it was produced and by whom, limiting our dating capabilities.

Finally, the very nature of the lamp's discovery allows archaeologists to estimate its age as well. The lamp, as stated above, was a "surface find" meaning it was recovered without digging. While surface finds can still be quite old, when viewed along with the other clues uncovered with the lamp, archaeologists are able to piece together a relatively accurate date range. This lamp is a great example that in archaeology sometimes deductive reasoning is the only course of action when everything else is exhausted.



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Figure 3

Figure 4

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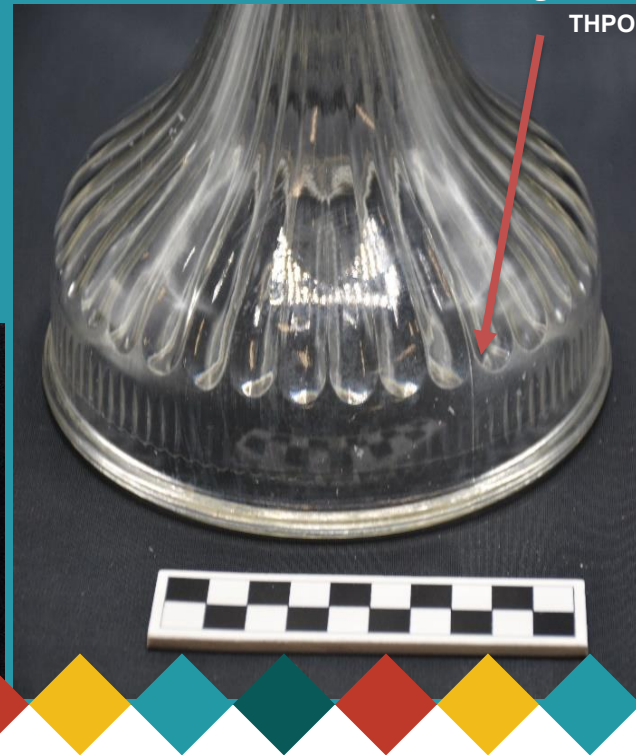


Figure 1: hanging soapstone oil lamp

atlantia.sca.org



Figure 2: Inuit lamp

afognak.org



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