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Female or Male Desire? Astrological Gems and Procreation

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edited by

Henriette Harich-Schwarzbauer and Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle

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Fabio Spadini

Female or Male Desire? Astrological Gems and Procreation

Among the engraved gemstones which served as personal ornament for women or men in Antiquity, a series of motifs relate to procreation and fertility. This paper will analyze the iconographic composition of three groups of intaglios with astrological themes involving the phases of the moon, fertility, and hence possibly the wish of having a child. These examples will be used to discuss how to identify the gender of the owner of that type of gem and of gems in general.¹ Are themes like procreation related to a specific gender? This study will also allow us to address the perception of the responsibility, male or female, for fertility and infertility in Greco-Roman times.

Gems and Gender

In order to answer this question, our approach will be divided into two steps. First, we will analyze the moral codes related to the wearing of rings, starting from the ancient sources. Based on these, we will then examine how the vision conveyed by the texts is reflected in the iconography of gems, and what means are available to assign an intaglio to a man rather than a woman.

Seal rings and collections: a male preserve?

Intaglios were made of precious or semi-precious stones, privately used mainly as seals as well as jewelry and amulets. They were normally set in metal hoops to which a chain was bound to allow them to be worn around the neck or wrist or mounted as rings. The act of sealing written legal documents and letters in Antiquity was central for both men and women. Besides its practical use, a strong identity value was linked to the iconography chosen by the owner of the seal. Ancient sources indicate that the image carved on it would have been carefully selected. The case of the young Octavian is revealing on different levels. At the beginning

I would like to thank Véronique Dasen and the anonymous reviewer for the suggestions and corrections. My special thanks are extended to Marco Abbondio, who corrected the English version, and to Anne-Sophie Meyer for the corrections of the Greek and Latin quotations.

1 For an introduction on jewelry and social identity, see Berg 2002. The abbreviation CBd stands for the Campbell Bonner database online: <<http://classics.mfab.hu/talismans/>>.

of his political career, he used two signet rings with the image of a Sphinx, which belonged to his mother Atia. This choice was criticized because this mythical beast was regarded as the bringer of enigmas par excellence,² and Octavian then changed and decided to use the portrait of Alexander the Great.³ Thus, the seal was seen as a double of the owner, as Cicero suggests: Don't let your signet ring be a mere implement, but, as it were, your second self.⁴

Similar stories show that in the Late Republican and early imperial periods the signet ring was a jewelry item socially acceptable for men,⁵ and even a mark of their social and political status. It was also part of family identity as it could be passed down from father to son,⁶ as well as from mother to son, as in the case of Octavian/Augustus, who "inherited" the rings of his mother most likely during her lifetime.⁷ The finger on which the signet ring is worn changes over time. During the Republic, men only wore one ring on the left-hand finger next to the last, called *digitus anularis*.⁸ During the early empire a change occurred, and the signet ring began to be worn on the little finger.⁹ Martial evokes the excess of men using gemstones on every finger as status symbols:

Charinus wears six rings on each finger and does not take them off at night nor when he has his bath. Do you ask the reason? He doesn't have a ring case.¹⁰

-
- 2 Plin. *HN* 37,4: "Augustus of Revered Memory at the beginning of his career used a signet engraved with a sphinx, having found among his mother's rings two such signets which were so alike as to be indistinguishable. [...] The recipients used to make a neat joke saying 'the Sphinx brings its problems.'" (Transl. D. E. Eichholz).
 - 3 Suet. *Aug.* 50: "In passports, and dispatches and private letters he used as his seal at first a sphinx, later an image of Alexander the Great, and finally his own, carved by the hand of Dioscurides; and this his successors continued to use as their seal." (Transl. J. C. Rolfe); Cass. Dio 51,3: "To this end they [Maecenas and Agrippa] also received from him [Augustus] a ring (*sphragis*), so that they might be able to seal the letters again. For he had caused to be made in duplicate the seal which he used most at that time, the design being a sphinx, the same on each copy since it was not till later that he had his own likeness engraved upon his seal and sealed everything with that." (Transl. E. Cary).
 - 4 Cic. *QFr.* 1,1,4 (Transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey). Marshman 2015, 36.
 - 5 Croom 2000, 71.
 - 6 Zwierlein-Diehl 1992, 15. Cf. papyri where the father and the son seal with the same signet ring beside their names. Guiraud 1996, 12.
 - 7 Atia died in August or September 43 BC, at the time of the first consulship of Octavian.
 - 8 This finger was linked to the heart, see Gell. 10,10.
 - 9 Plin. *HN* 33,6.
 - 10 Mart. 11,59 (Transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey). See also Mart. 5,11: "My friend Stella, Severus, turns sardonyxes, emeralds, diamonds, jaspers on a single finger joint. You will find many gems on his fingers, more in his poetry; hence, methinks, is his hand adorned." (Transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey).

New trends appear in the iconography with the Roman conquest of Greece and eastern regions, especially Egypt. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder describes the possession of gemstones with Egyptianizing images by men:

At the present day, a fashion has been introduced among the men even, of wearing effigies upon their fingers representing Harpocrates and others figures of Egyptian deities.¹¹

Pliny the Elder refers to male owners of collections, *dactyliothecae*. The earliest gem collector was M. Aemilius Scaurus, the stepson of Sulla (1st century BC):

The first Roman to own a collection of gemstones (for which we normally use the foreign term *dactyliotheca*) was Sulla's stepson Scaurus.¹²

Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar too had a collection of gems, and a private *dactyliotheca* could even be presented as an offering to the god in a Roman temple.¹³ This fashion, however, was seen by some authors as a foreign practice and as a mark of effeminacy. Seneca the Younger thus criticizes the use of rings by men:¹⁴

We men have taken over the cosmetics of whores, which would not indeed be worn by decent women [...] We adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is arranged in every joint.¹⁵

This remark is recalled by later ancient authors who seem to consider their use more appropriate for women than for men. In his *Etymologies*, Bishop Isidore of Seville quotes a speech of Gaius Gracchus, a Roman politician (2nd century BC) who wanted to introduce social reforms in Rome, and considered the wearing of more than one ring as effeminate:

Examine his left-hand, citizens, do you see? This man whose authority you follow has an account of his desire for women, adorned himself like a woman.¹⁶

Do these literary discourses reflect real uses? Isidore adduces the speech attributed to Gaius Gracchus in order to evoke a Roman republican ideal of austerity, associating the wearing or owning jewelry with a laxity of morals. Having a

11 Plin. *HN* 33,12: *Iam vero et Harpocraten statuasque Aegyptiorum numinum in digitis viri quoque portare incipiunt.*

12 Plin. *HN* 37,5: *Gemmas plures primus omnium Romae habuit – quod peregrino appellant nomine dactyliothecam – privignus Sullae Scaurus.* (Transl. D. E. Eichholz).

13 Plin. *HN* 37,5: “Pompey’s example was followed by Julius Caesar, who during his dictatorship consecrated six cabinets of gems in the temple of Venus Genetrix, and by Marcellus, Octavia’s son, who dedicated one in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine.” (Transl. D. E. Eichholz).

14 On effeminacy and rings, see Olsen 2017, especially 136–140.

15 Sen. *QNat* 7,31,2: *Colores meretricios matronis quidem non induendos viri sumimus ... exornamus anulis digitos, in omni articulo gemma disponitur.* (Transl. T. H. Corcoran).

16 Isid. *Orig.* 19,32,4: *Considerate, Quirites, sinistram eius; en, quouis auctoritatem sequimini, qui propter mulierum cupiditatem ut mulier est ornatus.* (Transl. W. J. Lewis).

closer look at the stones themselves, at their iconography, material and inscriptions gives nuance and depth to the ideas expressed in the texts by the texts.

Identifying the Gender

Defining the gender of a gem's owner is difficult. This issue was already addressed at the end of the 19th century by Edmond Le Blant. His book, *750 Inscriptions de pierres gravées inédites ou peu connues*, published in 1898, is not a mere catalogue of inscriptions. In fact, E. Le Blant regularly tries to determine if a particular gem or ring belonged to a woman or a man,¹⁷ especially when the gem is associated with a gift, marriage and erotic magic.¹⁸ His method is based mainly on the inscription which bears the name of the owner, as in the case of the sardonyx gemstone with EYTYXI ΣABINE, "Be happy Sabine".¹⁹ When the name of the owner is not indicated, E. Le Blant takes a guess based on a grammatical analysis.²⁰ This approach is not systematic and his suggestions are very hypothetical when inscriptions are missing or difficult to interpret. A hematite from a private collection (fig. 1),²¹ dating from the Roman imperial period, shows the difficulty of this kind of approach. The obverse side depicts a woman reclining on a *klinê*. Her arms are up as if she were fixing her hair. Her identity is unclear: as a



Fig. 1a and b: Hematite (25 x 16 x 4 mm). Private collection, photo: M. Depowska.

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- 17 "Ce camée aura comme tant d'autres où se trouve la même image (guirlande au-dessus de deux mains qui se serrent, dexiosis) été donné par un époux", Le Blant 1889, 32.
- 18 This iconography very often combines Aphrodite Anadyomene, Aphrodite and Ares, Eros torturing Psyche, or simply inscription linked with marriage.
- 19 Le Blant 1889, 34.
- 20 KYPIA KAAH, "L'acclamation que présentent ces trois gemmes est des plus fréquentes sur les objets de l'espèce, et de celles qui pouvaient s'adresser à une épouse comme à une amante", Le Blant 1889, 50.
- 21 CBd-1188, Wagner/Boardman 2003, no 577.

divine figure, she could be Aphrodite, often characterized by the same gesture, but the woman is reclining whereas the goddess is always standing.²² Is a mortal woman imitating the pose of the goddess? An inscription is engraved on the reverse:

Kastor, the one called Agrippas (sic.), whom Kallikleia bore.²³

This gem is linked to love magic, a field where the results that the beneficiaries wish to obtain seem to be different according to their gender. Women more often appear to be the agents of spells destined to preserve an existing erotic relationship and to protect it from external influences. Men, on the other hand, seem to be more interested in obtaining the beloved one.²⁴ There are two possible interpretations for our gem: in the first case, the hematite was owned by a woman who loved a man called Kastor. The gesture with the hair expresses a magical tie that will fasten the beloved one. The presence of the matronymic points to erotic magic where this use is systematic because the name of the mother is always certain.²⁵ A second hypothesis is that the owner is Kastor himself.²⁶ The gem could aim at rendering him charming in the eyes of others, women most likely. I would argue that the first hypothesis is more convincing, especially because it can be associated with the erotic use of rings by women. The poet Ennius, quoted by Isidore of Seville, describes the lascivious behavior of a young woman who attempts to seduce men by manipulating her ring:²⁷

As if playing with a ball in a group she offers herself from hand to hand and makes herself common. She holds one, nods to another, elsewhere a hand is busy, one she pinches at the foot, to another *she gives a ring to look at*, from her lips she summons one, and she sings with yet another; still she makes letters with her finger for others.²⁸

22 Ficheux 2006, 185–186.

23 Transl. Faraone 2010, 216.

24 Edmonds III 2014, 285–288. On the problem of gendering love magic from antiquity to modern time, see Stratton 2014.

25 For the use of matronymic, see Jordan 1976; Curbera 1999; Golinkin 2002, and on erotic magic in general, Faraone 1999.

26 Faraone 2010, 218.

27 This passage is attributed to Ennius or to Naevius. On the authorship, see Barchiesi 1978, 95.

28 Enn. Frag. Rep. Latin II, F5 (ap. Isid. *Orig.* 1,26,1–2): *Quasi in choro pila / ludens datatim dat sese et communem facit. / alium tenet, alii adnutat, alibi manus / est occupata, alii pervellit pedem, / alii dat anulum spectandum, a labris / alium invocat, cum<que> alio cantat; adtamen / alii dat digito litteras.* (Transl. S. M. Goldberg).

Showing a ring to the lover can thus represent a sort of erotic game. Other texts allude to seduction games with rings between women and men.²⁹ A Pompeian graffito uses a similar comparison between the impression of the signet on a wax seal and sealing a love bond:

Primigeniae Nuc(er)inae greetings! Oh how I wish I could be your gemstone for just one hour, so that I could give you kisses when you impress your seal.³⁰

By the end of the 20th century a few studies were dedicated to so-called “votive gems”, characterized by the carving of a wish.³¹ This kind of “portable epigraphy”, as the authors call it,³² allow reflections on the gender identity of the owner based on grammatical analysis even when no specific names are given. The study of Annewies van den Hoek, Denis Feissel and John J. Hermann has produced surprising results. One would expect love wishes to be expressed mainly by women, but almost all the gems were used by men: of 41 votive gems, 39 were made for a male user, only two for women.

When the inscription is missing, the material and iconographic analysis can give some clues. Stones are sometimes gendered, and they even have a sex life.³³ The lapidary of Theophrastus (4th century BC) mentions some examples of male and female stones:

For one type of *sardion*, which is translucent and of a redder color, is called the female, and the other, which is translucent and darker, is called the male.³⁴

The author indicates a relationship between gender and transparency or color. Male gender is linked to darker colors, female gender to paler ones.³⁵ However, it is difficult to define the gender of the possessor based solely on the material of the stone. Iconography plays an important role too, as Véronique Dasen recently proposed.³⁶ As the stones were engraved to order, their iconography may reflect women’s or men’s preferences, for example about clothing and nudity. In her

29 Cf. Plaut. *Asin.* 4,778–779: “She shall not give her ring to anyone to look at.” (Transl. W. de Melo).

30 *CIL* IV 10427. In this case the link between kiss and the act of sealing is motivated by the fact that seals need to be moistened before they are pressed into the wax, Marshman 2017, 144. See Hiltbrunner 1970.

31 Van den Hoek/Feissel/Hermann 1994; 2015. On votive gems in general see Mastrocinque 2009.

32 Van den Hoek/Feissel/Hermann 1994, 43.

33 Just like human beings, stones have a sex life. They can mate, get pregnant as well as give birth. See Dasen 2014.

34 Theophr. *Lap.* 30.

35 Dasen 2014, 204.

36 Dasen 2020.

study of a particular magical gem, V. Dasen argues that “the Seyring pendant contributes to the on-going discussion about the gendered identity of amulets’ wearers. It probably belonged to a man at risk [...] The blue colour of the Seyring stone could also suggest water and the wish for a safe travel of a war leader.”³⁷ The re-semanticization of a subject can also hint to the identity of the possessor, as with the famous *Venus Victrix* and *Venus Genetrix*. Considered the ancestor of the *gens Iulia*, this deity was central to the political propaganda of Julius Caesar, and later on of the emperor Augustus.³⁸ This motif is a symbol of political alliance from the Republic to the Empire and it is found in different versions. The most famous one depicts Mars giving his sword to Venus, symbolizing the return of the age of Saturn, the Golden Age.³⁹ By the end of the 1st century BC this iconographical scheme, which originally transmitted a political message, became an identity marker that may have been used by women. On a series of gems, the statue of Venus is holding a mirror in the left hand and touches the face of a fully armed Mars with the inscription ἡ χάρις “Grace” (fig. 2).⁴⁰ I will now apply a similar method to a series of intaglios with astrological motifs, based on inscriptions and iconographic types, in order to attempt to identify the gender identity of their owners.



Fig. 2: Blue glass (23 x 21 x 4 mm). University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, from Michel 2004, pl. 84, n° 3.

Astrological gems

Many gemstones are carved with figures and compositions associated with astrology.⁴¹ They depict zodiacal signs, planets and constellations that embody astral influence on the human body, revealing the bonds between macro- and micro-cosm. Three different types of iconographical schemes seem to aim at providing and increasing or enhancing conception, fertility and successful delivery thanks to the favor of stars and more broadly, of zodiacal constellations. All three

37 Dasen 2020, 188. For a similar approach on the Cassandra’ seals, see Kleibrink 2017, 36.

38 Cass. Dio 43,4.

39 Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 129.

40 CBd-1365, Bonner 1950, n° 159.

41 On gems and astrology see Lancellotti 2007; Michel 2011.

schemes date to the Roman imperial period, a time when astrology was playing a central role in society.⁴²

The first gem, kept in the British Museum (fig. 3),⁴³ depicts birth in a metaphorical way. It is made of grey-white glass and dates back to the Augustan period. It depicts a naked child in the middle, lying on the ground and surrounded by three women, with a torch on the right. The women are holding attributes which allow



Fig. 3: White-grey glass (9 x 12 mm). London, British Museum, from Dasen 2011, 134, fig. 11.

us to identify them as *Parcae*: the *volumen*, or the Roman *Book of Fate*, the scale, symbol of human destiny,⁴⁴ and the distaff and spindle, evoking their work with the woolen thread of life. The torch is associated with divinities that preside over childbirth like Candelifera or Iuno Lucina. Véronique Dasen has recently shown that the child probably represents the newborn baby, and that the *Parcae* are fixing his destiny at birth.⁴⁵ One *Parca* is holding the spindle that is touching the child, alluding to the cutting of the umbilical cord, knotted by the midwife who uses wool like a *Parca*. What kind of wish is implied by such stone? The British Museum gem is not unique. Variations, six in total, ranging from the 1st century BC to the 1st century CE show a similar iconographical scheme produced by different

42 See Cramer 1954; Soubiran 1979; Le Boeuffle 1989; Possanza 2004.

43 Dasen 2011, fig. 11; *ead.* 2015, fig. 8.12.

44 Pirenne-Delforge/Pironti 2011.

45 Dasen 2015, 234–243 on Parcae as the supernatural doubles of the midwife.



Fig. 4: Marble sarcophagus, 150–170 AD. Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi 82, from Dasen 2011, 125, fig. 4.

workshops. This scheme was thus widely understood, and part of a shared collective imagery. The motif can be related to the depiction of the *Parcae* on third-century sarcophagi (fig. 4)⁴⁶ who are pointing to the celestial globe with a stick in order to fix the horoscope of the newborn baby at the moment of birth.⁴⁷ The gems, carved much earlier, may represent a first expression of the same idea, and hence relate to the wish to commemorate a successful birth.

Astrologically speaking, it can be added that the role of midwives is associated with the figure of the *Moirai*.⁴⁸ The Greek name underlines the link with astrology, because *μοῖραι* is a term which had also been used to define the degrees

46 Huskinson 1996; Dasen 2011, 125, fig. 4.

47 Dasen 2011, 130–131.

48 In the *Alexander Romance*, the astrologer takes the part of a midwife. He gives advice to the mother as a midwife does, cf. *Ps.-Callisth.* 1,12: “And as the time of childbirth had arrived for Olympias she entered into the pains of childbirth. At his side, Nectanebo, having measured the heavenly paths, exhorted her not to hurry to give birth [...]: ‘Woman rest and dominate the forces emanating from nature.’ Then using effective words, he taught Olympias to block with her hands the natural ways.” (Transl. E. H. Haight).

of the zodiacal signs since the 2nd century BC.⁴⁹ The association is made clear by a passage of Censorinus, who in his treatise *The Birthday Book* states:

There are thirty of these little parts in one zodiac sign, so a total of 360 in the whole zodiac. The Greeks call these *moirai*, lots, clearly because they call the goddesses of fate *Moirai*. In fact, the little parts are like fate to us, for the one rising when we are born has the greatest power over us.⁵⁰

These references to astrology could explain the function of the depiction of the *Parcae/Moirai* on a gem: they could represent a sort of horoscope, reminding the circumstances of birth.

If this scene relates to birth and fate, who is going to be the recipient? The gem's owner, be it male or female, or his or her child? In either case it is impossible to guess the gender identity of the owner. The stone could belong equally to a man or to a woman who believes in astrology.

The second group of gems is more explicitly astrological. A hematite in the British Museum and a yellow jasper in the Ashmolean Museum both depict the zodiacal sign of Scorpio associated with a star (fig. 5)⁵¹ or a star and a moon crescent respectively (fig. 6).⁵² Is the scorpion the image of the real animal or of the astrological sign?⁵³ The presence of one or more asterisms (stars and/or moon crescent) may point to the astrological interpretation. The power of this kind of gem is based on the belief in the sympathy between stones, plants, and other natural substances. In that case, the presence of Scorpio may be linked to the astrological doctrine called the zodiacal *melothesia*.⁵⁴ It is based on the principle that each zodiacal sign is associated to a specific part of the human body, *a capite ad calcem*. Since the 1st century CE Latin authors have elaborated a theorization of this doctrine, based on the philosophical concepts linked to the interaction between micro- and macrocosm typical of the Hellenistic period. The *Astronomica* of Manilius (17–22 CE?) is one of the first treatises on zodiacal *melothesia*. The

49 See the Greek astrologer Hipparchus, in *Arati et Eudoxi phaenomena commentariorum libri tres*. Greenbaum 2016, 413.

50 Cens. 8,5: *sunt autem hae particulae in unoquoque signo tricenae, totius vero zodiaci numer CCCLX. has Graeci μοίρας cognominarunt eo videlicet, quod deas fatales nuncupant Moeras, et eae particulae nobis velut fata sunt; nam qua potissimum oriente nascamur plurimum refert.* (Transl. H. N. Parker).

51 CBd-721; Michel 2001, n° 344.

52 CBd-1566; Henig/MacGregor 2004, n° 12.8.

53 Recent articles underline the problem of understanding if it is the terrestrial animal or the astral sign that is thought to act on the gem: see Lancellotti 2003; Nagy 2013, 79–80.

54 On *melothesia*, see Ricoux 1982; Pérez Jiménez 1996, 1998; Bakhouché 1998; Hübner 2013. Beside the zodiacal *melothesia*, there are planetary and decanic ones, always founded on the same principle.

importance of this system is reflected in its therapeutic use as iatromathematics. The association of the zodiacal constellations to a precise part of the human body favors the attraction of the beneficial effects of astral bodies to the sick organ. Following the principles of the zodiacal *melothesia*, the Scorpio sign rules the genitals⁵⁵ (male and female) as well as sexual disorders.⁵⁶ This association is most likely very ancient. In Mesopotamia the scorpion was one of the animals associated with Ishtar, the goddess of love and fertility.⁵⁷ In the iconography of the *kudurrus* (“boundary stones”), when the scorpion is represented together with the Sagittarius (fig. 7),⁵⁸ the claws of the animal point towards the testicles of the



Fig. 5: Hematite (14 x 11 x 5 mm). London, British Museum, from Michel 2001, n° 344.



Fig. 6: Yellow jasper (9,5 x 13,5 x 2,8 mm). Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, from Henig/MacGregor 2004, n° 12.8.

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- 55 Manil. 2,453–465 “Now learn how the parts of the human frame are distributed among the constellations, and how the limbs are subject each to a particular authority [...] Scorpion takes pleasure in the groin (*Scorpios inguine gaudet*).” (Transl. G.P. Goold). In the Greek treatises we find the word τὸ αἰδοῖον, the privy parts both of men and women. Lancellotti 2001, 438–443; Michel 2004, 160–165.
- 56 Bonner 1950, 77–78.
- 57 Van Buren 1936–1937, 34: “In very remote ages, the scorpion seems to have been a symbol of fertility.” For an overview of the main features of Scorpio in Antiquity see Eitrem 1928; Deonna 1959; Aurigemma 1976.
- 58 King 1912, pl. 29A.

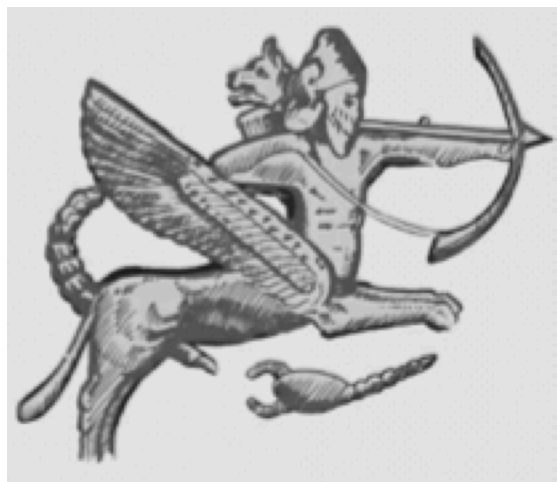


Fig. 7: Drawing of a stone Kudurru from Sippar, from King 1912, pl. 29 A.

Sagittarius, strengthening the link between the zodiacal sign and genitalia. This eastern symbolism may have made its way into Minoan religion where the scorpion was also linked to fertility. A few votive figurines, one in silver and four in clay, were found in the peak sanctuary of Ayios Yeoryios Sto Vouno on Kythera.⁵⁹ Besides the dangerous and menacing features of the terrestrial scorpion, astrologers insist on its link with fecundity. Manilius describes how the Scorpio is believed to be an especially fertile animal.⁶⁰ For example it is described as *πολύσπερμος*,⁶¹ meaning rich in

generative power. The epithet occurs in several other astrological treatises as a main feature of this zodiac sign.⁶² It was even able to generate itself, *αὐτογέννητος*.⁶³ Thanks to cosmic sympathy all the positive characteristics of the astral Scorpio could be used not only as a remedy against sexual disorders, but also to enhance the fertility of the wearer, woman or man. The owner of this particular kind of gem (figs. 5–6) may have worn it to benefit from the influence of the zodiacal sign in order to beget children. A post-antique hematite kept in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale of Florence (fig. 8)⁶⁴ shows the continuity of this belief in modern times. Three zodiacal signs are depicted one on the top of the other: at the top stands Cancer, then three stars, Fishes and Scorpio. The selection

59 Banou/Davis 2016.

60 Manil. 2,557: *Scorpios in totidem fecundus creditur hostes* – “The Scorpion is presumed prolific of as many foes.” (Transl. G.P. Goold); Procl. *In R.* 13,62,13–16: *καὶ γὰρ διὰ τὴν μεσότητά καὶ διὰ τὸ γόνιμον οἰκείως ἔχει πρὸς τὴν ζωογονίαν ὁ σκορπίος, καὶ τινες αὐτὸν καὶ ὡς τότε τῶν σπερμάτων σκορπιζομένων ὀνομασθῆναι φασιν* – “Due to its central position and his fertility, the scorpion is related to the generation of living things, and some even say that it took its name during the seed dispersal.” (Transl. A. Festugière slightly modified).

61 Vett. Val. 9,10,26: *Σκορπίος οἶκος Ἄρεως [...] Πολύσπερμον*, “Scorpio is the house of Mars [...] rich in generative power” (Transl. by the author).

62 Cf. Ptol. *Tetr.* 4,6,2–4; Heph. Theb. *Apotel.* 2,22,2–4.

63 Serapion, *CCAG* 5/3, 97,6: *Κεντρῶτὸν καὶ αὐτογέννητον Σκορπίος*, “The scorpion, furnished with a sting and able to generate himself (Transl. by the author).” Even the terrestrial scorpion is able to generate himself, see Plin. *HN* 22,60; *Gp.* 11,28.

64 Mastrocinque 2007, Fig. 95.



Fig. 8: Hematite (12,1 x 11,0 x 4,1 mm). Firenze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale from Mastrocinque 2007, Fig. 95.



Fig. 9: Green glass (27,0 x 22,0 mm). Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum inv. No. 8452, photo by the Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

of these signs obeys a system: all three are defined as watery and feminine signs in astrological treatises. Like Scorpio they are all associated with the enhancement of fertility. On the Florence gem (fig. 8), the promotion of fertility is enhanced by the fact that the three signs are represented in their trine aspect,⁶⁵ the most important and positive geometrical combination of signs in the zodiacal circle. Thus, it is most likely that the watery trine aspect was made to order and worn to foster the procreation of many children, by a woman as well as by a man.⁶⁶

The last example, a gem made of green glass kept in the Allard Pierson Museum of Amsterdam, is unique to this day (fig. 9).⁶⁷ It belongs to the category of the so-called magical gems that form a special class in the glyptic of the Roman Imperial Period.⁶⁸ Different criteria are applied to identify them. Firstly, two formal features: these gems are engraved on both faces, and even on the bevel or rim of the gem. The texts are engraved directly, not in mirror-writing, so that the inscription can be read directly on the gem and not on the impression, as it is the

65 One of the astrological aspects, four groups of three signs 120° apart. In that way they form a triangle.

66 Guido Bonatti, *De astronomia tractatus X, universum, quod ad iudiciariam rationem nativitatum, aëris, tempestatum, attinet, comprehendentes*, Basel 1550, 52: *Et quaedam ex eis dicuntur plures proles habentia, scilicet Cancer, Scorpio et Pisces* – “Some of them [i.e. of the zodiacal signs] – that is to say the Cancer, the Scorpion and the Pisces – are said to have numerous descendants” (Transl. Anne-Sophie Meyer).

67 Sijpesteijn 1970, fig. 4, 177.

68 For a definition of the magical gems see Nagy 2011; Nagy 2015; Dasen/Nagy 2018.

case for seals. The engraving is usually characterized by a new visual idiom, mixing classical figures with Egyptian ones, especially iconographic types from Egyptian astrology and magic, such as the lion-headed snake Chnoubis or the cock-headed Anguipes.⁶⁹ These cross-cultural constructions metaphorically visualize the magical action and ensure performative efficacy. Magical names, *voces magicae*, and magical signs, named *charakteres*, are another characteristic of this group of gems. Few examples come from an archaeological context, but on stylistic grounds it is assumed that most of them date broadly from the Roman Imperial Period, with a peak between the 2nd and 3rd century AD.⁷⁰

The Allard Pierson gem (fig. 9) features a seated baboon in the center, the head topped with a disc (or an Ouroboros, in the shape of a snake eating its own tail) containing three Greek letters (ω κ α) and a *charakter*, to the top left an ibis, to the top right a Horus falcon wearing the double crown; in the middle left a jackal, and a scorpion at the bottom. The scene is surrounded by Greek vowels: A EE HHH IIII OOOOO VVVVVV WWWWWW.⁷¹ On the reverse, a magical inscription is carved on three lines: BAI / NXW / WWX, “the soul of the primeval god of darkness”.⁷² The Greek letters on the obverse are linked to the baboon. The same sequence is found in the Greek Magical Papyri, where three cynocephali are probably invoking the moon god Thot:

Enter, appear to me, lord, because I call upon you as the three cynocephali call upon you, who speak your holy name in a symbolic form: α ε η η η ι ι ι ο ο ο ο ο υ υ υ υ υ ω ω ω ω ω ω.⁷³

I argue that the elements of this iconographical scheme are very likely associated with conception. First of all, the baboon has a particular affinity with the moon, as a passage by Iamblichus indicates, where the behavior of certain animals, such as the dog, the baboon or the field-mouse, is linked to the moon.⁷⁴ The baboon is

69 On Chnoubis see Dasen/Nagy 2012; on the Anguipes see Nagy 2002; Nagy 2014.

70 For a recent account on dating magical gems see Zwierlein-Diehl 2019.

71 The Y and Ω are represented on the gem as V and W.

72 I would like to thank Joachim Quack for giving me this new translation, different from the classical one: “The Ba of darkness”.

73 *PGM IV*, 1002–1006: Εἴσελθε, φάνητί μοι, κύριε, ὅτι ἐπικαλοῦμαι, ὡς ἐπικαλοῦνται σε οἱ τρεῖς κυνοκέφαλοι, οἵτινες συμβολικῶς σχήματι ὀνομάζουσίν σου τὸ ἅγιον ὄνομα α ε η η η ι ι ι ο ο ο ο ο υ υ υ υ υ ω ω ω ω ω ω. On the divine language of the baboon see, Te Velde 1998; more recently Bull 2017, 87–92. For an analysis of the word κυνοκέφαλος in ancient Greece see Vespa 2019.

74 *Iamb. Myst.* 5,8: (...) ὡς τὰς τῶν ζώων δυνάμεις καὶ ἐνεργείας, οἷον κυνὸς κυνοκεφάλου μυγαλῆς, κοινὰς οὔσας πρὸς σελήνην (...).

both an animal whose behavior is seen to relate to the moon and a symbolic manifestation of the moon itself.⁷⁵ The moon has power over childbirth, because it is linked to the idea of increasing and decreasing during the different lunar phases.⁷⁶ The moon helps to moisten the womb, thus facilitating conception. This link between the baboon and the moon can be pushed even further. In his description of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, Horapollo (4th century AD) connects the figure of the baboon to the conjunction of the sun and the moon at the eastern horizon, a moment known as “lunar invisibility” or astronomical new moon. During this period, when the waning crescent can no longer be seen before sunrise at the eastern horizon and the first crescent has not yet appeared in the western sky after sunset, the moon seems to dwell near the sun. Thus, the moon is invisible because it moves conjointly with the sun:

When they mean the moon [...] they draw a cynocephalus. The cynocephalus, because this animal has a certain sympathy with the conjunction of this goddess. For when the moon moving into conjunction with the sun is darkened (*the moment of lunar invisibility*), then the male cynocephalus does not look nor does he eat.⁷⁷

The seated baboon may thus visually express the phenomenon of conception: the conception is invisible just as the moon is during the conjunction, it will appear only at the time of birth, when the moon becomes visible again like the growing crescent in the sky.⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that Latin and Greek authors hint at a possible relationship between the path of the moon and that of human life.⁷⁹ The

75 The baboon is a manifestation of the god Thoth since the middle of the 18th dynasty, and Thoth and the moon have long been associated in Egypt. See Larcher 2016.

76 Arist. *GA* 777b 27–28: Διὸ συμβάλλεται (ἢ Σελήνη) εἰς πάσας τὰς γενέσεις καὶ τελειώσεις, “Wherefore (Selene) join together all processes of birth and development.” (Transl. A. L. Peck); Cic. *Nat. D.* 2,119: ... *luna inluminata graviditates et partus afferat maturitatesque gignendi*, “... the moon is the source of conception and birth and of growth and maturity.” (Transl. H. Rackham); cf. Porph. *Antr.* 18: “The moon presides over generation”. For the link between moon and childbirth Roscher 1890, 55–61; Préaux 1973; Lunais 1979, 76–77; Gourevitch 1996.

77 Horap. *Hieroglyphica* 1,14: Σελήνην δὲ γράφοντες...κυνοκέφαλον ζωγραφοῦσι. Σελήνην μὲν, ἐπειδὴ τὸ ζῶον τοῦτο, συμπάθειάν τινα πρὸς τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ σύνοδον ἐκτίσατο. ὅταν γὰρ ἐν τῷ μέρει τῆς ὥρας ἡ σελήνη συνοδεύουσα ἡλίῳ ἀφώτιστος γένηται, τότε ὁ μὲν ἄρσην κυνοκέφαλος οὐ βλέπει, οὐδὲ ἐσθίει (Transl. G. Boas). Priskin 2016, 123–124.

78 This link has already been noted by Priskin 2015, 143.

79 Sen. *Ben.* 4,23,1: *Num dubium est, quin [...]ad huius [lunae] cursum fecunditas humana respondeat?* “Does anyone doubt [...] that there is some relation between human fecundity and the course of the moon?” (Transl. J. W. Basore.). Procl. *In R.* 13,34,5–7 makes this link even clearer by citing Pseudo-Zoroaster on the seven months gestation: “The conceptions that take place during the conjunction of the sun and the moon produce births at the time of full moon.” αἱ κατὰ σύνοδον ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης γενόμεναι συλλήψεις ἐν



Fig. 10: Hematite (13,7 x 9,8 x 4,0 mm). Private collection, photo: M. Depowska.

baboon in the middle of the magical gem could therefore represent the lunar invisibility alluding to a propitious moment for conception. The other elements seem to be linked to childbirth. Most likely, the scorpion here is not seen as a dangerous animal, but as a symbol of earth and fecundity.⁸⁰ In Egypt, this animal was associated with the goddess Selket who has power over life, childbirth and delivery.⁸¹ The jackal could represent Wepwawet, “the opener of ways”,⁸² who is normally depicted as opening the ways for the procession of kings or divine beings. On the gem, the jackal may have metaphorical value and could be regarded as the opener of the womb. The falcon with the double crown symbolizes a grown-up Horus and the ibis may refer to Thot, the Egyptian moon god.⁸³ In showing a positive conjunction for conception, the

owner of this magical gem was perhaps hoping to beget a child.

Who was the owner? Because of the symbolical ubiquity of the moon, the Ibis-Thot, the baboon, the invocation, I suggest that the engraved gemstone was owned by a woman. The lunar cycle, as well as the lunar sphere in general, has more affinities with the female world than the male one. For example, the *lunula* is an amulet in the shape of a moon crescent that was worn by adult women only.⁸⁴ This gem could thus correspond to the amulet, but in another medium and with another iconography. The link with a possible female owner is strengthened if we compare this gem with the group of the so-called uterine gems. This group of

πανσελήνοις ποιοῦνται τὰς ἀποκυήσεις. In this case the pregnancy starts when the moon is invisible, and the child is born when the moon is fully formed.

- 80 It is important to note the fact that before the introduction of the zodiacal sign of Libra, the autumnal equinox was in Scorpio, and that the autumnal equinox is the moment of the conception of Horus. Priskin 2015, 142.
- 81 Deonna 1959, 32. For the relationship between Selket, childbirth and the uterus, see Spieser 2001; 2006.
- 82 Pouls Wegner 2007.
- 83 Smelik 1979.
- 84 Wrede 1975; Dasen 2003; Dasen 2015, 309–313.

gems typically shows an upside-down pot (fig. 10)⁸⁵ that represents the womb as a medical cupping vessel, and they aim to provide protection over a successful conception, pregnancy and delivery.⁸⁶ As the baboon represents the moon, it could refer metaphorically to the child growing in the uterus and to uterine life in general. It is interesting to note that Armand Delatte underlined a possible link between the uterus and Thot:

c'est plutôt son rôle de compteur de temps, grâce à sa qualité de dieu-lune qui restaure l'oeil-astre qui lui aurait valu de veiller sur la matrice [...].⁸⁷

Beside the reference to the lunar sphere, the link with uterine magic also speaks in favor of a female owner.⁸⁸

Conclusion: fertility, infertility and gender identity

Each piece of the three groups of intaglios could be worn by women as well as by men. The Moirai gems express the wish for a successful birth and good fate, the Scorpio gems are linked to fertility and sexual disorders, and the baboon-gem seems to belong to uterine magic. As these gems are associated with childbirth and fertility, we tend to think that they were owned by women. However, in each case, with the exception perhaps of the third one because of the central role of the moon, a man could have worn this kind of engraved gemstones. This invites us to reconsider the question of the responsibility of fertility and infertility in the Greco-Roman world.⁸⁹ In Greek and Roman antiquity the infertility of a couple was often but not exclusively attributed to a physical defect in the wife. Thus, Aristotle states:

the cause of a man and woman's failure to generate when they have intercourse with each other, resides sometimes in both, sometimes in just one or the other.⁹⁰

85 CBd-728, Michel 2001, n° 351.

86 Dasen 2015, 53–87.

87 Delatte/Derchain 1964, 143.

88 See Faraone 2011.

89 On impotence and infertility, see Hopfner 1938, 276–293; Costanza 2010; Laes 2016.

90 Arist. *HA* 633b 13–14: ἀνδρὶ καὶ γυναικὶ τοῦ μὴ γεννᾶν ἀλλήλοις συνόντας τὸ αἴτιον ὅτε μὲν ἐν ἀμφοῖν ἐστὶν, ὅτε δ' ἐν θατέρῳ μόνον (Transl. A.L. Peck). Flemming 2013, 571. However, he develops only issues about the responsibility of women. Even today scientific studies show that this approach is present. Speaking about infertile bodies Arthur Greil says that “regardless of which partner has a problem, it is the woman who is the focus of most infertility treatments”. Greil 2002, 101.

Herodotus describes male impotence as a woman's disease, *θήλεαν νοῦσον*, implying that infertility was mostly linked to women.⁹¹ A few anecdotes, however, reveal that men could be seen as responsible. In 4th century Athens, for example, we read in Isaeus that Meneclis had decided to leave his wife in order to let her have children by marrying another man:

the wife of Meneclis was childless. Two or three months later Meneclis, with many expressions of praise for our sister, approached us and said that he viewed with apprehension his increasing age and childlessness [...] He, therefore, begged us to do him the favour of marrying her to someone else with his consent.⁹²

Similarly, a few passages in Hippocratic treatises allude to fertility problems due to the male sperm.⁹³

Beyond these few texts, archaeological and iconographic evidence, such as ex-votos of male sex, found in Greek and Roman healing sanctuaries,⁹⁴ suggest that men could feel responsible for the problem, but this anxiety was not explicitly formulated in written sources. The Dodonian bronze lamellae presenting oracular requests to Zeus (4th century BC) also evidence that the desire of having children was a male concern. A man called Callicrates thus asks:

... whether there will be offspring for me from Nike, the woman he has, if he shows allegiance and prays to which of the gods?⁹⁵

Phallic ex-votos,⁹⁶ oracular requests as well as the gems with the Scorpio sign testify that men too felt concerned by problem of infertility and sterility. It is important to specify that ex-votos and gems are two distinct media associated with different occasions and contexts. Ex-votos were made to be seen by all pilgrims in public, sacred place, whereas gems belonged to the private sphere, personal and individualized. In a world where the purpose of marriage was procreation and

91 Hdt. 1,105,4: “But the Scythians who pillaged the temple, and all their descendants after them, were afflicted by the goddess with the female sickness: and so the Scythians say that they are afflicted as a consequence of this.” (Transl. A.D. Godley). Male impotence was a characteristic of the Scythians, see Ballabriga 1986.

92 Isae. 2,6–8 (Transl. E. S. Forster). Bonnart/Dasen/Wilgaux 2017.

93 The most famous test to see if the male semen is the problem is the one with water. The semen that will not be able to generate will float, the one rich in generative power will sink. Arist. *GA* 746b 12 – 747a 22.

94 Forsén 1996, Baggieri 1999.

95 Eidinow 2007, 91, no. 6: Καλλικράτης ἐπερωτᾷ τὸν θεὸν ἢ ἔσται μοι γενεὰ ἀπὸ τᾶς Νίκης τῆς γυναικὸς ἣς ἔχει συμμένοντι καὶ τίνι [θ]εῶν εὐχομένῳ. Flemming 2013, 581. Some other examples exist where a man asks if he will have children, see Parke 1967, 264, n° 3; 264, n° 5; 265, n° 7; 266, n° 9.

96 Of course, phallic ex-voto express a wish to heal many sexual disorders, not only the one ranging from impotence to sterility. Anyways the absence of inscription allows us to only suggest. Cazanove 2009.

failure to conceive was seen as grounds for divorce,⁹⁷ the fear of not having children must have been shared by men as well as women. Husbands loved their wives, even if the texts are more or less silent about it, getting divorced was as uneasy for a man as it was for a woman. For a woman not having children was even seen as dangerous for her health;⁹⁸ for a man, it represented the impossibility to pass on his legacy. Without inscriptions it is difficult to understand the gender of the owners of gems. In fact, only in one case (fig. 9) the iconography and the message can be linked to a female owner, while the others (figs. 3, 5, 6) could have been used by both.

Illustrations

1. Hematite (25 x 16 x 4 mm). Private collection, Photo: M. Depowska.
2. Blue glass (23 x 21 x 4 mm). University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, from Michel 2004, pl. 84, n° 3.
3. White-grey glass (9 x 12 mm). London, British Museum, from Dasen 2011, 134, fig. 11.
4. Marble sarcophagus, 150–170 AD. Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi 82, from Dasen 2011, 125, fig. 4.
5. Hematite (14 x 11 x 5 mm). London, British Museum, from Michel 2001, n° 344.
6. Yellow jasper (9,5 x 13,5 x 2,8 mm). Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, from Henig/MacGregor 2004, n° 12.8.
7. Drawing of a stone Kudurru from Sippar, from King 1912, pl. 29 A.
8. Hematite (12,1 x 11,0 x 4,1 mm). Firenze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale from Mastrocinque 2007, Fig. 95.
9. Green glass (27,0 x 22,0 mm). Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum inv. No 8452, photo by the Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.
10. Hematite (13,7 x 9,8 x 4,0 mm). Private collection, Photo: M. Depowska.

97 Val. Max. 2,1,4: *Primus autem Sp. Carvilius uxorem sterilitatis causa dimisit*: “Sp. Carvilius was the first to put his wife away for cause of barrenness” (Transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey).

98 In fact, if the womb was not moistened often enough by intercourse it would become desiccated and migrate to other organs in search of moisture where it could cause mortal damage. Dasen 2015, 57–60.

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