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THE MATERIALITY OF MAGIC

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ÁRPÁD M. NAGY

ENGINEERING ANCIENT AMULETS: MAGICAL GEMS OF THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD*

Hommage à Oleg Y. Neverov

The so-called magical gems constitute a type of Roman Imperial Period amulets. Relegated to the periphery of research until recently, magical gems have by now aroused the interest of a number of disciples (such as classical archaeology, Egyptology, Jewish studies, history of religion, medieval studies). The first part of the study presents the most important characteristics of the object group from five aspects (What is a magical gem? How where they made? How where they used and to what purpose? Magical gems – ‘chiefly Graeco-Egyptian’? The significance of magical gems), outlining the social contexts of the use of these gems as well. The second part analyses what is perhaps the most famous Imperial Period example, the Perseus gem in Saint Petersburg, which belongs to the border area of the category, thus offering an almost outside perspective on magical gems. The analysis lists the characteristics of the gem intended to cure gout, reconstructs the ancient reception of the healing praxis it represents, and also interprets the phenomenon.

It was John Davidson Beazley (1885–1970), perhaps the greatest master of classical archaeology, who pointed out an alternative to the scholarly attitude that seeks originality by feverishly striving to uncover new finds —

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the rediscovery of forgotten treasures gathering dust in museum storerooms.¹ I believe all of us could bring many examples to show how right he was. It is striking, however, that in today's world not only individual items, but a complete Gattung is being recovered from warehouse fossilisation. Even fifteen years ago, a past communis opinio relegated magical gems to the sphere of the Wissenschaft des Unwissenswerten.² Today, however, this is one of the most dynamically developing fields of classical studies.

In the first part of this paper, I will give an overview of the magical gems from five aspects. In the second part, I will look at a gem which belongs on the border lines of the genre, thus offering almost an outside perspective on magical gems.

1 MAGICAL GEMS – AN OVERVIEW

1.1 WHAT IS A 'MAGICAL GEM'?

The term 'magical' (or, as they are less frequently called even today: 'gnostic') gems is not an ancient invention, but a concept imposed by modern archaeology. It denotes a certain amulet type of the Roman Imperial period.³ These amulets are precious stones, 1 to 3 centimeters in size, primarily of haematite, carnelian, lapis lazuli and different colours of jasper; or, more seldom, glass substitutes for these kinds of stone. Their typology follows the shapes usual in Graeco-Roman glyptics complemented by a few Mesopotamian and Egyptian variants.⁴ The iden-

¹ Kurtz 1989, 98.

² See the story mentioned by Gordon 2008, 716. My use of the word 'magic' in this paper is wholly conventional, and I intend no opposition between 'religious' and 'magical' uses of the gems. Similarly, I use the word *magos* in the sense 'ritual expert' or 'ritual specialist'.

³ The fundamental work is still Campbell Bonner's 1950 study: Bonner 1950. A later synthesis: Michel 2004. The most recent overview: Entwistle and Adams 2011. New possibilities are offered by *The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database (CBd)*: <http://classics.mfab.hu/talismans> edited by the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest in cooperation with the University of Fribourg, and realized through international collaboration.

⁴ For the most recent version of the list of shapes developed by Erika Zwierlein-Diehl, see Vitellozzi 2010a, 31. Among the Graeco-Roman versions the most frequent type is oval, flat on both faces, with a trapezoid cross-section (e.g. CBd-10). The heart-shaped type (e.g. CBd-778, -779,

tification of *Zaubergemmen* is based on three formal and two structural characteristics (a single gem does not need to show all five features). The first group is connected to the three constituents that may be engraved on magical gems: text, image and sign.

Magical gems feature three characteristic types of text. The first consists of divine names. Greek deities are mentioned only rarely, Egyptian gods are not numerous either,⁵ but the majority of divine names belong to the Jewish tradition: the names of Deus Israel (Iaô, Sabaôth, Adônai), angels, archangels and a few protagonists from the Bible (Abraham, Jacob, Solomon). Numerous examples show, however, that the Jewish divine names are also to be taken as magical names independent of their original meaning.⁶ The second type of text consists of these very *voces magicae*: a word or a sequence of letters written in Greek,⁷ but lacking a meaning (*barbaron onoma, logos*).⁸ These served as an important tool for the magician: each represents the formula most suitable for evoking the divine power for the desired aim. Most elude the clear identification of cultural tradition. Just as in all cultures and periods, they are exotic elements which attest to the expertise of the magician in the eyes of his clients.⁹ The third type of text is the rarest: the meaningful text. These usually attest the function of the gem, or – more rarely – it may consist of an acclamation or a prayer.

-1040) may be of Egyptian origin, whereas the Mesopotamian types are cylindrical (e.g. CBd-944. On this type: Mastrocinque 2014).

⁵ See for example Michel 2001, 2, no. 3 (= CBd-382, Artemis), 40, no. 61 (= CBd-440, Thoth), 3, no. 5 (= CBd-384, Osiris).

⁶ A clear overview: Bohak 2003, especially 71–74.

⁷ Latin letters are only seldom found: e.g. Zwierlein-Diehl 1992, 103–04, no. 31 (= CBd-1961); Michel 2001, 176, no. 281 (= CBd-667); New York, Metropolitan Museum 81.6.314 (= CBd-1147); Gesztelyi 1998, 140, no. 34 (= CBd-1554). On Hebrew letters, pseudo-Hebrew inscriptions and Jewish magical gems: Spier 2007, 112–14, especially 163–67.

⁸ The authoritative analysis of magical names is Versnel 2002, especially 144–47 (the principal perspective: ‘What is the sense of the nonsense?’). In the wider context of Graeco-Roman literature, see Martin 2005, 215–21. For a *Glossary of Voces Magicae*: Brashear 1995, 3576–3603.

⁹ It still happens quite frequently that researchers attempt to explain the origins of magical names from cultures they know little about. For a critique of this method, see Bohak 2003 (Israel), and Thissen 1988; Quack, forthcoming (Egypt).

Magical gems use two principal types of iconographical schemes and elements to create the engraved composition. The first type features traditional, mainly Greek and Egyptian imagery (e.g. an Aphrodite *anadyomene*, Harpocrates sitting on the lotus flower, the Gorgoneion), or other schemes often taken from contemporary coins (such as the phoenix and the reaper – see below, 1.2 and 3). The other uses new schemes exclusively created for this genre. In this second category, the two most important classes consist, first, of representations of the lion-headed, ratiated snake, Chnoubis; and, second, of the cock-headed, snake-legged god referred to in contemporary scholarship as the Anguipes (see below, 1.2). The third constituent engraved element on magical gems is the magical sign, in Greek: the *charactêr*. This never occurs elsewhere in ancient glyptics, but is quite frequently found in other genres of *magica* (metal amulets, for example, or defixiones).¹⁰ Much like the *voces magicae*, the *charactêres* were also believed to serve (and attest to) direct contact with divine powers. The origin of these signs is only seldom identifiable.¹¹

Identification is further based on two structural elements. First: most magical gems are engraved on the reverse, as well – and sometimes even on the edge. Second: the inscription is not engraved in mirror writing.¹² Both features together mark a significant difference from regular gems. As a rule, ancient gems could be used as signet-rings to legally identify their owners, much like today's credit cards or official signatures (engravers were punished for creating identical gems¹³). A magical gem is not meant to be used as a stamp: it is the *sphragis* ('seal') itself – the *sphragis Theou* ('Seal of God') as inscribed on the type featuring King Solomon.¹⁴

¹⁰ As a starting point: Collins 2008, 73–78; Gordon 2011a; see also Gordon and Dijkstra, this volume.

¹¹ The best example for *charactêres* with identified origins is the Chnoubis-sign, see Lieven 2000.

¹² Neither of these features is an exclusive characteristic of magical gems, see Nagy 2012b, 73, n. 5, with examples. Addendum: gem engraved on both faces, bust of Christ on one side, that of Mary on the other: Martiniani-Reber 2011, 34, no. 9.

¹³ The most famous example is probably the tradition of the two identical signet-rings of Augustus, representing a sphinx: Plinius, *NH* 37.4.10. The *opus magnum* on ancient glyptics is Zwierlein-Diehl 2007.

¹⁴ On the Solomon gems, as a starting point: Michel 2001, 268–70; Michel 2004, 323–24. Magical gem and seal: Dasen 2011.

Based on the above definition, magical gems are as different from other gems as the Sargasso Sea is from the Atlantic Ocean that encircles it on all sides. This is all the more natural in the case of a genre of objects that belonged entirely to the private sphere, without obligatory, externally imposed prescriptions as to how they should be made. The vagueness of the definition is clearly shown by the following example: excavations at Zeugma (Commagene province, Asia Minor) between 1998 and 2000 unearthed the remains of the ancient city's archives, which had burnt down. The rolled papyrus documents were destroyed, but 102,500 clay seals survived, baked hard in the fire. Among the material published so far are two Anguipes-impressions.¹⁵ Thus in Zeugma this scheme, which researchers automatically define as a magical gem, decorated signet-rings (which, of course, does not rule out that the rings in question had a talismanic function as well). The boundary can also be crossed in the opposite direction: many gems that were used as amulets do not belong among magical gems.¹⁶ These incertainties, however, do not render the category useless: there is no doubt that magical gems form a genre of their own in Roman glyptics.

The gems' date of production in the Roman Imperial period was established in the seventeenth century by the first great scholars to work on them: Jean l'Heureux (Johannes Macarius, c. 1551–1614) and Jean Chifflet (Johannes Chifletius, 1588–1660).¹⁷ Further progress in this area has, however, only been made recently. A chronological framework for magical gems was developed by Erika Zwierlein-Diehl.¹⁸ Her work de-

¹⁵ Önal 2010, 42, no. 50 (= CBd-1573) and 43, no. 51 (= CBd-1574), with further literature. The significance of the find is enhanced by the fact that so far this is the only well-defined archaeological context not belonging to the funeral sphere, i. e. it attests to the *in vivo* function of the gems.

¹⁶ Two critical analyses on the definition of magical gems: Gordon 2011b, 44–45; Nagy 2012b, 82–88 (with a list of healing amulet-gems known from written sources, and not belonging to magical gems).

¹⁷ On Macarius, see Spier 2007, 2. His study in manuscript form (*Abraxas, seu Apistopistus*) was published by Chifflet: *Ioannis Macarii canonici Ariensis Abraxas, seu Apistopistus; quae est antiquaria de gemmis Basilidianis disquisitio. Accedit Abraxas Proteus, seu multiformis gemmae Basilidianae portentosa varietas; Exhibita, et Commentario illustrata à Ioanne Chifletio, Canonico Tornacensi, Philippo IV. Regi Catholico, et Serenissimo Principi Ioanni Austriaco à Sacris Oratorii* (Antwerpen, 1657). An overview of the work: Heenes 2003, 45–47.

¹⁸ Zwierlein-Diehl forthcoming.

monstrates that production began in the late Hellenistic period, its hey-day falling in the second and third centuries AD, followed by a slow decline. Only through research carried out in the past years are we beginning to realize that the post-antique history of these objects is equally noteworthy.¹⁹ Anathemizing magical gems only began in classical studies at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was then that the definition of the genre developed, which – though resting on a completely different approach – still holds today.²⁰

Today about 4,000 individual magical gems are known. In her 2004 book, Simone Michel published a list of 2,700 pieces.²¹ Since then, almost one thousand further pieces have come to light; with a few exceptions all from museum storerooms. Magical gems are usually said to have been produced in Alexandria, even though there is no archaeological evidence to support this. It seems more likely that they were not created in a single centre. The majority of the production is sufficiently unified, and pieces created far from the major centres are relatively easily differentiated.²² Still, it is generally held that magical gems were mainly made and used in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Hardly a dozen pieces come from authentic excavations,²³ and these too are almost

19 As a starting point: Zwierlein-Diehl 2014; Nagy 2014. It is getting more and more evident that one of the most important steps in upcoming research will be to tell apart ancient and post-antique gems, as was pointed out by Joachim F. Quack as early as 2004 (Quack 2004, 262).

20 Nagy 2012b, 88–89.

21 Michel 2004, 235–345. For a concordance of Michel's list with CBd, s.v. Bibliography, Michel, DMG.

22 On the Alexandrian theory, see most recently, with serious counter-arguments: Gordon 2011b, 40–41. For provincial workshops, see for example a group of Chnoubis-gems (Kerbenstil-group): Michel 2001, 261–64, no. 417–23 (= CBd-109-13; CBd-122, CBd-153); silver ring with Chnoubis-gem from Aventicum: Guisan 1975, 11–12 (= CBd-1021).

23 The first list of pieces with known provenance: Philipp 1986, 8, n. 18. Supplements: Kotansky 1997, 257–60; Michel 2004, 2, n. 7. An important new find is the piece discovered in Augsburg, since it was recovered from a dated stratum: Platz-Horster 2012, 40–41, no. 13. 'Aus der Benutzungsschicht einer Holzbauphase des letzten Drittel des 1. – Anfang 2. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. On a Chnoubis gem recently found in a tomb in Pella, see Chrysostomou 2008, 80–81 (see also 82 and fig. 11: silver ring with the inscription: *Heis Zeus Serapis*). I thank Marianna Dági (Budapest) for pointing out this reference to me.

all tomb finds, thus marking only the final destination of their ancient history. This makes it basically impossible to know anything about the owners of the gems. It is nevertheless possible to define five important features of the social context in which they were used (see below).

The invention of magical gems fits into a wider religious process in Mediterranean history that is usually regarded as having experienced a ‘turn’ around the beginning of the first century AD. Before this date, ancient magic was primarily transmitted through the oral tradition; after that point, however, written records became generally widespread and the different – to use a highly anachronistic term – ‘national’ traditions of ancient magic combined into a cross-cultural science.²⁴ The most spectacular sign of the change was precisely the spread of magical names and signs in genres of *magica* like curse tablets, papyri and precious metal amulets. In all probability, the invention of magical gems was also part of this change. This Hellenised cross-cultural context is the first fundamental feature of the social world to which the magical gems belong.

1.2 HOW WERE THEY MADE?

The production of magical gems required two kinds of expertise, which – in theory – differed greatly from each other. One was the knowledge of the ritual expert (*magos*) who designed the gem and the magical *praxis* it formed part of, and who performed the rite (*teletê*)²⁵ when the object was finished. The other craft which required practical skills and tools was that of an engraver skilled at engraving precious stones (*daktyliographos*), who engraved the gem based on the recipe of the *magos*. The two roles may have been played by different people;²⁶ some gems, however, were designed and produced by the same person.²⁷

Based on all these, there are two ideal ways of classifying gems. One is to reconstruct the oeuvre of the engravers irrespective of whether they created regular or magical gems. The other is to collect magical gems belonging to the *praxeis* developed by individual magicians, irrespective

²⁴ For the first time on this shift: Wunsch 1909, 19. Most recently: Gordon 2011b, 43–44.

²⁵ The fundamental study on *teletê* is still Samson Eitrem’s work (Eitrem 1939).

²⁶ The Budapest gem CBd-4, for example, is not engraved with what was prescribed, but with the inscription ‘as it is prescribed’ (*hôs prokeitai*).

²⁷ A recent attempt at attributing three gems: Nagy 2011, 77–79.

of the number of engravers who cut the pieces. At present, the former method would still prove very difficult. The sort of stylistic analysis devised by Beazley to attribute painted vases cannot be applied here; moreover our knowledge of glyptical workshops in the Imperial Period is extremely limited.²⁸ The other method seems more promising. Today the *praxis* seems to be the constitutive basis for the classification of magical gems. They can be categorized into series defined by the material, colour, shape and size of the precious stone on the one hand, and by the relationship of the three formal constituents mentioned above: text, image and magical sign. This may be exemplified by a class of digestive amulets, the phoenix gems.

Today we know of twenty-five ancient gems that belong to this class.²⁹ (fig. 1) All are haematite. With two exceptions, all are oval in shape with a trapezoidal cross-section. Twenty are engraved with a designation of function (e.g. *'pepte'*: 'digest', or *'stomachou'*: 'for the stomach!'). The structure of the composition is identical in all cases: i.e. the longitudinal axis of the obverse features a deity with pairs of animals arranged vertically on each side, while the reverse generally bears an inscription that refers to the function of the gem. It is important to note that the principal image engraved in the focus of the obverse is not always identical: in seventeen cases we have a phoenix, while four times it is an ibis-headed figure (identified by Armand Delatte and Philippe Derchain as Thoth), three times Harpocrates, and once a crab. At present it is impossible to tell how many engravers worked on gems of the phoenix class. We do not know their date of production either, although the basic type cannot predate the second quarter of the second century AD, since the principal image, the phoenix on a globe was only present in Imperial coinage from AD 121/122 with no known earlier parallels.³⁰ The iconographic composition follows an Egyptian tradition whose single further source is Herodotus.³¹ The interpretation of a variant attested by a single piece, however, was made possible solely through Horapollon (5th–6th centuries AD).³² The Roman Imperial period phoenix gems thus connect, and

²⁸ A thorough overview: Tassinari 2008.

²⁹ Nagy 2012a, with the detailed elaboration of the summary below. A post-antique piece also belongs here: Michel 2004, 323, pl. VIII 6.

³⁰ See Nagy 2011, 79.

³¹ The most frequent central motif of the scheme is the phoenix standing on a globe. For the interpretation of this image, see Herodotus 2.73.

³² There are two phoenixes on a lost gem: Bonner 1950, 270, no. D. 104



1 Haematite gem. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts. Classical Collection, inv. no. 55.154 (= CBd-2). Photo: László Mátyus

moreover, unite in a single tradition, sources which span a millenium or more, from Herodotus to Horapollon. In doing so, they neatly exemplify the cross-cultural nature of the gems.

An important conclusion may be drawn from the comparison of surviving recipes and the gems that may be related to them: the correspondence is never complete.³³ We cannot speak of a relation of ‘design’ to ‘mass produced object’. Practically speaking, no two magical gems are identical. Another important conclusion: the motifs on the gems do not simply infiltrate from other genres of art and literature. Rather the gems remake established iconographic and textual motifs and conventions: they are individual compositions. Contrived for a particular purpose,

(= CBd-198). For the story of the two phoenixes, see Horapollon, *Hieroglyphica* II 57.

33 The list of recipes mentioned in magical papyri and lithical works (*Lithika*): Nagy 2002a, 170–79. Addendum, apart from the items listed in Nagy 2012b, 84, n. 46: Vitellozzi 2010b, 122–25 (ad PGM V 2916–2441, cf. Nagy 2002a, 174, no. 21).

the basis of their construction is the magical *praxis*.³⁴ It is through the *praxis* that the *magos* defines what the piece will represent. He chooses 'components' he deems are the most efficient, and which will bring the success of the ritual. The magical gem represents living practice: it is a living genre. Its makers were entrepreneurs; they lived off the 'market', and tried to make their products more appealing by suggesting two contradictory statements at the same time.³⁵ They claimed their products represented a repository of ancient, often exotic knowledge; but also that they represented the latest in cutting-edge magical technology, personally designed to fit the needs of the customer. This double nature is the second important characteristic of the social context of magical gems. As attested by the great number of surviving gems, these marketing messages of their makers proved to be just as effective two thousand years ago as they are today.

The makers of magical gems were creative not only on the level of individual gems. Among their far-reaching innovations, two are worthy mentioning here. The 'Chnoubis' gems transformed a minor figure of Egyptian astrology, one of the 36 decans, into an important solar deity easily interpreted from the perspective of different cultures, and thus created the largest series of digestive amulets.³⁶ The Anguipes-scheme (a cock-headed, snake-legged human figure in armour with one hand holding a whip and the other holding a shield, which is often inscribed with the name Iaô) was a completely new invention and should be understood as an important intellectual attempt to incorporate through this unique imagery the God of Israel not solely through his names, but also through a unique image, into the pagan magical *koinê* of the Imperial period.³⁷ (It is important to note: the image does not represent God,

³⁴ Nagy 2011, 77.

³⁵ As a starting point: Dickie 1999, 163–93, especially 184; Versnel 2002, especially 154–56.

³⁶ Bonner 1950, Michel 2004. Most recently: Dasen and Nagy 2012. The most detailed analysis: Quack in press. I would hereby like to thank the author for providing me with access to the relevant parts of his manuscript.

³⁷ According to a theory elaborated elsewhere (Nagy 2002b) the scheme defines one name of the Lord through words deriving from an identical Hebrew root (*GBR* – גבר). For example, *gever*: rooster, man; *gibbor*: warrior, gigas, usually represented in Graeco-Roman art with double snake's legs. The inventor of the scheme transformed these words into an image, and organized the elements into a unified figure. The scheme creates a coherent picture as a reference to the Almighty (*Ha-Geura*). The shield has been

only one of his names, thus it does not break the Law). Elements from roughly contemporary Christian culture also appear among the motifs of magical gems. The earliest pictorial representation of the crucifixion is known from a magical gem.³⁸

1.3 HOW WERE THEY USED AND TO WHAT PURPOSE?

Although the papyri show that they had other uses as well,³⁹ gems were usually mounted in rings or pendants, which means they were used as jewellery.⁴⁰ This fact points to the third important social characteristic of their users: contrary to previous presuppositions, magical gems were not necessarily the amulets of the poor. It will suffice to give here only a brief outline of their functions, since the subject has been treated by many since the fundamental work of Campbell Bonner.⁴¹ The gems' uses may be inferred from the objects themselves and from outside sources as well. Of these, the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri are the most important.⁴² It must first be stressed that among the four thousand or so

interpreted by E. Zwieler-Diehl: it depicts God as *hyperaspistês* – 'who protects with his shield' – well-known from the Septuagint (Zwieler-Diehl 1992, 30–31). Against a possible *interpretatio Aegyptiaca* (most recently: Koenig 2009): Quack forthcoming.

38 Michel 2001, 283–84, no. 457; Spier 2007, 73, no. 443; CBd-815. On this piece and the issue in general, see most recently Engemann 2011; Harley-McGowan 2011.

39 An overview of the sources related to function: Nagy 2012b, 89, n. 65. A number of haematite gems survived broken in two; Erika Zwieler-Diehl has suggested that this may be a reference to a healing practice widespread in Antiquity: stones were broken into two, then one half ground and drunk (Zwieler-Diehl 1992, 50).

40 Precious metal mounts have also survived in some cases, and their one-time existence may be traceable in many more examples. Many gems show unique, shell-like chippings on their edges, which suggests that the stones were once forced out of their mounts (see for example CBd-387, -525, -1132, -1392, -1554). Pieces surviving in their precious metal mounts: Dunand 1939, 44–45, no. 1248–51, pl. 137 (Byblos); Vikan 1990, 155–56 (= CBd-1253. Roma, Piazza della Consolazione-treasure). A few further examples: CBd-14, -617, -913, -1021.

41 Some overviews: Bonner 1950; Mastrocinque 2003; Michel 2004; Zwieler-Diehl 2007, 210–31.

42 The sources: PGM; Suppl. Mag. The authoritative English translation: GMPT. An overview of the recipes recommending the use of gems and rings: above, n. 33.

known magical gems, only a couple can be securely identified as harmful.⁴³ It is thus clear what a grave mistake it would be to connect these gems with some kind of black magic. Their three main fields of use, love, health and general success in life, are perennial concerns. Thus, a fourth conclusion as to their users also presents itself. Magical gems were the amulets of the living: they were neither magical weapons of destruction, nor parting gifts for the dead.

One fundamental type of love charm was made of lapis lazuli. The engraving represents the Aphrodite *anadyomene*-scheme after Apelles' famous painting, usually accompanied by the magical name *arrôriphrasis*.⁴⁴ It is hardly surprising that love charms should have been engraved with the image of Aphrodite, although we would be mistaken to think that listing the gods in a simplified classification ('Aphrodite is the goddess of love') would provide a safe key to understanding the function of the gems. The image of the *par excellence* infant god, Harpocrates on the lotus flower, was also used for love charms, as is attested by a recipe known from a papyrus⁴⁵ and by the inscription on a number of gems.⁴⁶ These types were thus engraved – if we want to understand the function of the gem – with the image of the deity who ensured success. It is in the name of this deity that the *magos* attempts to force the achievement of the aims of the *praxis*.

⁴³ Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 229–30; probably Michel 2001, 5, no. 8 (= CBd-387), and 133–34, no. 216 (= CBd-614). Joachim F. Quack doubts the dating of the latter piece as ancient: Quack 2004, 262. Our present concepts would also list pieces belonging to coercive love magic in this category. The most famous example for these is the praxis of 'The Sword of Dardanos', see below, n. 55.

⁴⁴ E.g. Michel 2001, 51, no. 76 (= CBd-476); 52–53, nos. 78–79 (= CBd-478, 479). The list of known gems: Michel 2004, 250–51. This function is also attested by an external source, the Cyranides containing magical recipes (s.v. *epsilon*, see Waegeman 1987, 40–46).

⁴⁵ PGM LXI 1–38.

⁴⁶ The Harpocrates-scheme may at times be accompanied by other types of love charms: e.g. Michel 2001, 86–87, no. 133 (= CBd-533): *arrôriphrasis*, Aphrodite (but cf. Quack 2004, 262: post-antique?); Michel 2001, 173–74, no. 278 (= CBd-664): *arrôriphrasis*, Aphrodite and Ares, further motives; Bonner 1950, 263, D. 61 (= CBd-1100): the three Graces. The function of a further gem is specified by the engraved inscription: 'Grant Theanous favor in the eyes of Serapammon!' (Michel 2001, 87–88, no. 134 = CBd-534).

The other important area in which the gems were used was personal health. Some areas of medicine developed clearly delineated series. Magical gems were most often used to protect mothers and infants, and to cure digestive problems, gynecological, joint and eye diseases. For example, the most frequent iconographical motif of ophthalmic gems is the lizard, which was actually used in curing eye diseases.⁴⁷ Although we know of only a few examples of the type, its popularity is shown by the fact that its characteristic scheme is also attested on a medieval copper lamella (of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century date?) with an Arabic inscription – the first case in which the unique motifs of magical gems could be identified in an Arabic cultural context.⁴⁸ The principal iconographic motif of these gems is thus also the main instrument of the *praxis*.

The variant aimed at curing articular diseases follows an entirely different logic. It depicts a reaper, characteristically accompanied by a Greek inscription: *schîon*: '(for the health of) the hips!'⁴⁹ The reaper scheme easily associated with the function of the gem can perhaps be traced back to a prototype in pharaonic Egyptian art: the representation of the deceased happily living off the products of his fields, which acquired renewed popularity through Alexandrian coins during the reign of Antoninus Pius.⁵⁰ The image here may therefore help the healing process by evoking a concept of happiness in the afterlife, (*historiola*; see below, 2.3). This is the third type of operational mechanisms that can be reconstructed for magical gems.

A fourth type features the body part to be protected as the principal element of the iconographical scheme. The most frequent type of gynecological gem thus represents the uterus, while the long key below it refers to the eternal desire to control ('lock' or 'unlock') childbirth.

⁴⁷ See Bonner 1950, 69–71; Gaillard-Seux 1998; most recently: Faraone in press. I warmly thank the author for showing me his manuscript. A gem in Berlin that bears an engraved inscription in Latin beside the image of the lizard testifies to the memory of a healing attributed to such a *praxis*: it is a votive gift offered in return for the vision restored (*lumina restituta*). See Mastrocinque 2009, 55–56 (= CBd-178).

⁴⁸ Dasen and Nagy 2012, 307–08, fig. 10. Two Chnoubis-figures and the name of Chnoubis on the lamella are also motifs from magical gems. The Arabic inscription still awaits interpretation.

⁴⁹ As a starting point: Michel 2004, 175–77, 329.

⁵⁰ Geissen 2010.

Contrary to what present-day associations would suggest, the primary aim of the motif was not contraception, but rather a successful birth.⁵¹

Lastly, the third main area to which the use of magical gems applied was individual prosperity: personal success, gaining the sympathy of one's superior, the opening of all closed doors, etc. These functions are, however, only rarely spelled out in detail by the inscriptions on the gems.⁵²

1.4 MAGICAL GEMS - 'CHIEFLY GRAECO-EGYPTIAN'?

As stated above, a number of magical gems were produced following the prescriptions of Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. These provide the most important key to the interpretation of the gems – and in two senses: because of what they tell us, and because of what they don't. As regards the former: we know of fifteen recipes that prescribe the use of gems and rings,⁵³ and a more or less corresponding gem can be found for all of them. The conclusion thus arises that we should regard magical gems as the products of Graeco-Egyptian culture, an idea that is reinforced by the significant presence on them of Egyptian and Greek iconographic motifs.⁵⁴ Even so, it has become increasingly evident that some distinctions are called for here. The closest connection between the papyri and the magical gems is exemplified by a love charm, the Sword of Dardanos — its prescriptions are mirrored with a surprising precision by a gem in Perugia and another piece in Beirut (although even here we cannot speak of a perfect identity).⁵⁵ But the 'Sword of Dardanos' *praxis* is represented only by these two examples in the vast corpus of gems, whereas the most frequent love charm, the above mentioned Aphrodite *anadyomene* – *arrôriphrasis*-type is attested by almost fifty examples.

⁵¹ On this type, as a starting point: Michel 2004, 178–202; Dasen 2007.

⁵² E.g. CBd-5 (cf. Dasen and Nagy 2012, 296, n. 16); Michel 2001, 167, no. 271 (= CBd-158); *ibid.*, 17, no 28 (= CBd-407) etc. The most important Imperial Period source on the use of magical gems is Lucian, *Navigium*. See most recently Nagy 2012b, especially 102–03.

⁵³ For their list, see Nagy 2002a, 177–79, and above, n. 33.

⁵⁴ This was the subtitle of Campbell Bonner's fundamental work (Bonner 1950): *Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*.

⁵⁵ Sword of Dardanos: PGM IV 1716–1870). The gem in Beyrouth: CBd-1555. The Perugia gem: Vitellozzi 2010a, 419–20, no. 518. For the detailed analysis of the *praxis*, see Vitellozzi forthcoming.

Thus, from the perspective of magical gems, the Sword of Dardanos proved to be a dead-end development.

A survey of the other fourteen gem types recommended by the papyri gives a similar picture. The types indicated in the recipes are attested only in a few pieces (such as PGM I 144–49 and the five related ‘Heliôros’-gems⁵⁶), or the scheme referred to is too general for us to decide whether any given gem really belongs to this praxis or not (PGM LXI 1–38 and Harpocrates on the lotus flower with the magical name *abrasax*⁵⁷). But the reverse of all this is also true: the two most significant deities on the gems, Chnoubis and the Anguipes, are represented on over eight hundred pieces, or more than 20 percent of all magical gems. Neither, however, is attested in the papyri. These gems are really ‘chiefly Graeco-Egyptian’ – as Campbell Bonner once wrote – but *not in the same way* as the papyri.⁵⁸ The two sources – the gems and the papyri – overlap, but far from completely: they represent two close dialects of Imperial magic. The pictorial motifs, that are most important on the gems are not represented in the papyri, and the gem-motifs that are mentioned in the papyri, are underrepresented on the gems. Among the characteristics of the version of this magical practice represented by the magical gems it is the following that seems most important. As stated above, the majority of magical gems were intended as jewellery (rings or a pendants): they were jewellery and amulets at the same time. In consequence, they were part of a Hellenised material culture, making visible in everyday life the magical names, signs, and composite iconographical schemes that were only seldom disclosed on the other genres of *magica* (defixiones, papyri or precious

⁵⁶ As a starting point: Michel 2001, 163, no. 265 (= CBd-159).

⁵⁷ The Harpocrates-scheme is too frequent, and the recipe too concise to decide on the exact number of gems belonging to this praxis. The basic syntagm: Michel 2001, 74, no. 112 (= CBd-512). Complemented with the name Iaô: Philipp 1986, 75, no. 96 (= CBd-2070). Harpocrates in papyrus boat, with baboon and two falcons: Michel 2001, 81, no. 123 (= CBd-523); on papyrus boat, with pairs of baboons, snakes and falcons: Michel 2001, 81–82, no. 124 (= CBd-524). The Harpocrates-scheme with a different magical name: Bonner 1950, 285, no. D. 191 (= CBd-1101).

⁵⁸ It is important to note that the majority of magical papyri come from a single context, although the precise identification of the find has not been possible. The most recent overview of the so-called Theban library, also known as the Anastasi-papyri: Dieleman 2005, 11–21. A different reconstruction of the group: Gordon 2012, 148–51.

metal amulets rolled up and hidden in capsules).⁵⁹ In other words: these gems made the tradition of Imperial Period magic a part of everyday life, and in this sense made it legitimate. This is the fifth and perhaps most significant characteristic of the social context of magical gems.

1.5 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAGICAL GEMS - ONE AMULET TO RULE THEM ALL

As a summary, it is worth highlighting the four characteristics of magical gems that make this object group the most 'developed' talisman genre known to ancient magic. They represent, in *concentrated* form, all of the most active ingredients of magical technology, condensing into a single object the power of the precious stone, of jewellery, of colour, and the performative image, word and sign. Their makers *integrated* all the cultural traditions, both ancient and contemporary, that they found effective. They were also *inventors*: the radical re-interpretation of the figure of Chnoubis or the creation of the Anguipes-scheme are both to their credit. Finally, they *incorporated* the elements of *magica* into the Hellenized culture of the Imperial period, making them an integral part of everyday life.

In the light of all the above, let us now examine what is perhaps the best known glyptic amulet from Antiquity, the nicolo Perseus gem from the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg.

2 A SMALL MASTERPIECE: THE PERSEUS GEM FROM SAINT PETERSBURG

The obverse shows the flying Perseus with his usual attributes: sandals, chlamys, and cap. He is holding a curved sword (*harpê*) in his right hand, and the head of Medusa in his left. The reverse bears a Greek inscription (fig. 2):

ΦΥ[- -] / ΠΟΔΑΓΡΑ / [-] ΕΡΣΕΥΣΣ / ΕΔΙΩΧΙ.
 Φύ[γε] ποδάγρα, [Π]ερσεύς σε διώχι (that is: διώκει).
*Flee from here, Gout! Perseus is after you!*⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See also the important comment of Richard Gordon: it is worth examining magical gems in the context of the 'social life of things' as well (Gordon 2011b, 44). Judicial prayers were sometimes also made public, see Versnel 2010, especially n. 281 and 22.

⁶⁰ Inv. no. Ж.1517. 16 × 13 mm.

The piece is of unknown provenance: it was acquired by the Hermitage in 1836 from the Breteuil Collection. The gem was possibly made around the middle of the Imperial period, but the lack of definite evidence makes precise dating impossible. It is set in a modern golden ring, but there is no way of knowing whether it was also used this way in Antiquity. Although it is one of the talismans most often mentioned in the literature,⁶¹ little has really been said about the piece, possibly because the way it worked seems so obvious. It is generally considered as a classic example for magic operating on the principle of analogy. *Pars pro toto*: ‘He who is capable of defeating the Gorgo can also overcome the other horrors that threaten mankind’.⁶² But the gem can only be considered to function evidently as a talisman, if magic – whatever is understood by the word – is taken to be something trivial. In Cartesian everyday experience a legendary hero like Luke Skywalker cannot cure gout by himself, just like that: such a dull analogy in itself has no healing power.

But there is a point worth considering behind the apparent simplicity of the gem. The Hermitage gem is one of those rare pieces that belong to two worlds at the same time: the inscription and the genre connect it with Imperial-period magic, while the iconography associates it with Greek mythology. It may thus be regarded as a witness to an experiment that aimed to connect the two worlds. In the second part of my paper I will analyse this experiment, first by placing it in four different contexts: (1) comparing it to similar magical texts; (2) to representations of Perseus; (3) to similar healing practices; and (4) discussing the genre of the Perseus gem. Afterwards, I will try to reconstruct the outcome of the experiment: the ancient reception of the Perseus *praxis* (5). The assessment of this response will, finally, designate the place of the Perseus gem among magical gems (6).

2.1 THE INSCRIPTION OF THE GEM

The inscribed text is an incantation. The so-called *pheuge*-formula (*‘Flee from here, So-and-so! So-and-so is after you!’*) was one of the principal incantation types in international magic. It is known from Greek magical texts from the fourth century BC, but is also attested in countless

⁶¹ The bibliography expanding since 1836 today numbers c. 30 items. See e.g.: Bonner 1950, 43, 75–76; Kotansky 1991, 118–19, esp. n. 86; Michel 2004, 174–75; Faraone 2012, 61, n. 169.

⁶² Wilcken 1901, 422.



2a Nicolo gem. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. Ж.1517 (GR-21714)

Latin and post-antique examples.⁶³ The inventor of the *Perseuspraxis* was following one of the most frequently employed magical techniques.

The shape of the letters is well known from the paleographical repertoire, with nothing indicating that the text could have been incised at a later date.⁶⁴ It will suffice to refer briefly to two of its linguistic characteristics. The *pheuge*-formule contains an aorist imperative instead of the usual present imperative – which, although infrequent, does appear in other genres of *magica*.⁶⁵ The alteration of k and ch (*diôchi* – *diôki*) is

⁶³ Its earliest example is the early Hellenistic lead amulet from Phalasarna in Crete: Jordan 1992; Faraone 2000, 211–12. The fundamental collection of Greek and Latin magical texts containing the *pheuge*-formula: Heim 1892, 463–575, esp. 477, 479–82. A few supplements: Björck 1944, 61–62; Maltoni 1988, 46; Önnersfors 1993, 177–81. See also Versnel 2002, 111, 117–18.

⁶⁴ Thus, cautiously, Michel 2004, 174, n. 899.

⁶⁵ Papyrus: PGM P 5 d, 4 (see PGM vol. II, 214). Silver *lamella*: Kotansky 1994, 279, no. 52, 91 (with commentary on pp. 295–96). The uniqueness of the aorist is also indicated by the fact that the verb form engraved on the



2b Reverse with a Greek inscription

a well known phenomenon in Greek linguistics, but only a few examples of it are known from magical gems.⁶⁶

2.2 THE IMAGE

Analysis of the image leads us further. The *daktyliographos* represented the attributes which had defined the iconography of Perseus since the Archaic period with elaborate precision: defining the characteristic shape of the *harpê*, the winged sandals which gave the hero the ability to fly, and the winged cap which made him invisible (the wings of the sandals are indicated by two slanting incisions, the cap is marked by a

Perseus gem is sometimes emended as an imperfectum: Bonner 1950, 43; Mastrocinque 2003, 60, n. 73.

66 Kühner 1890, 148; Robert 1965, 265 and n. 4; Gignac 1976, 92. The best example of this phenomenon on magical gems that Chnoubis is sometimes written with *kappa* instead of *chi*. See e.g. Michel 2004, 257, 11.2.d), nos. 1–2; Zwierlein-Diehl 1991, 182–83, 2266–67. I am grateful for the kind help of Andrea Hasznos (Budapest) in resolving this question. A linguistic analysis of the inscriptions engraved on magical gems is still a *desideratum*.

groove above the head). The Gorgoneion and the representation of the hero as naked except for a single chlamys is also traditional in ancient art. All this suggests that the engraver was following a model, the composition of which is easily identified — it is known mostly from fresco painting and represents Perseus fighting the sea monster about to devour Andromeda. The most famous example is the fresco of the Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase (pl. 12).⁶⁷ The ancient fame of the iconographical scheme is also attested by its echo in Greek literature: detailed descriptions are to be found in two second-century authors, Achilles Tatius⁶⁸ and Lucian.⁶⁹

We may perhaps get even closer to the direct iconographical source of the gem. Another jasper gem in the Hermitage displays – in a unique manner – the miniature version of the composition known from the frescoes (fig. 3).⁷⁰ We can see Andromeda fastened to the rock, on her left the misshapen representation of the wreath intended as a ‘wedding present’ (the identification is solely based on the frescoes), and on her right a torch (which is missing from the paintings). The engraver departed from his models: it was his invention to show the hero nosediving and the monster turning towards his attacker instead of his victim. The iconographic similarity of the two Perseus figures indicates some connection between the gems. Still, they can hardly be regarded as the works of the same master.

The Perseusamulet also shows, however, some unique iconographical traits. In ancient glyptic art, Perseus always appears in the vertical axis of the gem. The hero is either shown as standing, or, in a few cases,

⁶⁷ Blanckenhagen and Alexander 1990, 33–40, pl. 43. (with a list of further Campanian paintings representing the subject in 38, n. 37); Jones Roccas 1994, 342, no. 178; Squire 2009, 337–38; Colpo and Salvadori 2010. The freeing of Andromeda was depicted on other object groups in the Imperial Period: Schauenburg 1981, 780, the majority of items listed as no. 53–63.

⁶⁸ *Leucippe and Cleitophon* 3.6–7 (= Schauenburg 1981, 778, no. 24; Jones Roccas 1994, 342, no. 175). Its recent analysis: Laplace 2007, 132–37.

⁶⁹ *Peri oikou* 22 (= Jones Roccas 1994, 343, no. 186); *Dialogi marini* 14.3. Descriptions have survived of other ancient paintings representing the freeing of Andromeda, such as Philostratos, *Imagines* 1.29 (iconographical comments: Abbondanza 2008, 178–81); Heliodoros, *Aethiopiaca* 4.8.

⁷⁰ Jasper gem, inv. no. ж.6589. 19 × 13 mm. Purchased from the collection of J. B. Mallia in 1813. I am grateful to Oleg Y. Neverov and Elena Arsentieva for granting me the possibility of studying the piece.



3 Dark green jasper gem. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. ж.6589 (GR-26783)

as he flees the Gorgons.⁷¹ But the Perseus gem is a diagonal composition, since this provided the greatest space for showing the flying hero. The stretched feet and the cape waving behind the figure also emphasize flight. The hero is not simply holding the Gorgoneion, but is lifting it up; his right hand, grasping the sword, is slightly bent in attack: this is indicated by the fine shortening of the forearm. These tiny differences allowed the engraver to make a new scheme from the old model. In the frescoes, Perseus is attacking the sea monster, on the gem he has another opponent: he must repel Gout, flying always in its footsteps (*diôkei*).

This interpretation is evident in light of the inscription. But it was precisely this obviousness that has concealed the fact that the maker of the Hermitage gem created a new way to represent Perseus. He changed the scheme he had taken as his model in one crucial point: he set the figure of the hero in the context of a new story, and subordinated his com-

⁷¹ This mode of representation is so general that in *LIMC* the picture of the gem was rotated so that Perseus could be seen in the usual way, standing: see Jones Roccas 1994, 336, no. 55, and the relevant commentary, 347.

position to this new context. A new iconographical version of a Greek hero creates a new version in the mythology of that hero. The mythological tradition does not know of a fight between Perseus and Podagra. The Hermitage gem is thus the only known source of a Perseus story: a new variant of his myth. Its maker set Perseus at the service of curing gout by creating the small story of his struggle with the personalized Podagra through iconographic means. The gem is a *historiola* in a picture.

2.3 HISTORIOLA

The *historiola* is one of the most often used magical techniques in the ancient Mediterranean. It is attested in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Hellas, from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity.⁷² In such magical practices, the magician attempts to achieve his aim by telling a story. One of the protagonists of the story is the malady to be repelled, the other is the repelling god or hero. The following incantation – perhaps the most well-known ancient magical *historiola* –, which was incised on a silver tablet, and found hidden in a third-century tomb in the military cemetery of Carnuntum (Pannonia),⁷³ may serve as an example (I follow Roy Kotansky's translation): '*For the 'Half-Head'[Migraine]. Antaura (the demon of the disease) came out of the sea. She shouted like a hind. She cried out like a cow. Artemis of Ephesos met her (saying): 'Antaura, where are you going?' (Antaura): 'Into the half-part of the head.'* (Artemis): '*No, do not [go] into the [half-part of the head...]*'. The text breaks off here, but it can safely be reconstructed on the basis of parallels: the goddess probably ordered the demon not to harm her victim, and sent her to the end of the human world. As is well known, this magical procedure was also widespread in medieval and modern Europe: it is attested till recently in Hungarian folk tradition:⁷⁴ '*And the blessed Virgin Mary set off with her blessed, holy son. And she came upon the evil spell. Where are you heading, you evil spell? To see Anna's beauty, pain her bones, drink her red blood. Get back, you evil spell. Get back, behind the hills, behind the valleys, behind the rocks...*'⁷⁵

⁷² As a starting point: Brashear 1995, 3395, 3438–40; Faraone 1995; Versnel 2002, 122–30, 150–51. The *historiola* in magical healing: Gordon 1995, especially 371: '*historiolae*, by which the (imputed) past is established as a normative parallel to a present instance'.

⁷³ Kotansky 1994, 58–71, no. 13.

⁷⁴ The *opus magnum* compiled by Zsuzsanna Erdélyi: Erdélyi 1999.

⁷⁵ Salamon 1987, 191, no. 177.

In research on ancient magic, it was David Frankfurter who recognized that these ‘small stories’ are not remnants of lost myths; the Antaura story is not the distant reflection of an ancient, pre-existent ‘Babylonian’ myth, but rather is the myth itself.⁷⁶ The *historiola* is a living shoot from the tree of mythology. It is not the work of a great artist or poet, but a witness to live tradition’s ability to renew itself. It indicates that myth is able to describe the world; that there is still life that is expressed through the language of mythology.⁷⁷

The maker of the gem did not regard Perseus as a figure of a rigidly prescribed cultural tradition, but as a living, effective force, ready to be mobilized for the realization of a direct, everyday purpose.⁷⁸ Achilles was doing the same thing when in Book XXIV of the *Iliad* he comforted the tormented Priam by telling him the story of Niobe losing her children (597–620). The magician intended to heal through the help of the *historiola*, but not by word of mouth, which was how these stories most frequently operated, and not by writing the text on a papyrus or on a sheet of precious metal. He was an innovator in this respect, too: he transformed the story into an image and engraved it upon a precious stone. One thing that might have stimulated this enterprise is easy to define. To wit: despite all the uncertainties concerning its dating, the Perseus gem was created in the heyday of magical gems and rings.

2.4 THE GENRE OF THE PERSEUS GEM

Greek sources testify to the use of healing magic rings, the so-called *daktylios pharmakitês* from the end of the fifth century BC. Reference works on the healing effect of images incised into precious stones (*Lithika*)

⁷⁶ Frankfurter 1995. See also Brashear 1995, 3438–40, with a selected bibliography of the general religious historical analyses of the *historiola* on 3439, n. 288.

⁷⁷ Two vivid examples from our days that may serve as distant parallels: in the fall of 2006 a 96-year-old woman described the rich harvest of the year before: ‘*there was as much corn as in the Garden of Eden before Adam’s sin*’. But where the corn came up only in patches because of the weeds, it ‘*was not sown by me, but by the devil, whose sack had got torn there, and the seeds fell out. That’s why it shoots up like that, in bulk*’. I am grateful for Gábor Komjáthy (Vanyarc) for the information.

⁷⁸ It is important to note here that in the Middle Imperial Period the interpretation of myth as opposed to ‘logos’ as customary today was far from general, see e.g. Calame 1992.

are attested since the Hellenistic Period in Hellas.⁷⁹ What is common in these rings and gems is that their magical purpose is not indicated by any exterior, formal, textual or iconographical characteristic – an outsider cannot tell the difference between ordinary pieces and the ones used for magical purposes. The use of such rings and gems continued into the Imperial period, but by this time their story ran parallel with that of the new category of magical gems. The new genre established a new stage for the rivalry of different magical traditions.

The Perseus gem shows two of the structural characteristics of magical gems (engraved on both sides, inscription read directly), but none of the unique constituents (see above, 1.1). The engraved image depicts a mythical hero without any reference to magic; without the reverse it would be impossible to interpret the gem as an amulet – and in this sense it is much like a *daktylios pharmakitês*. The inscribed text is an incantation, one of the most general magical ‘technologies’. As regards the structure, the gem thus belongs on the periphery of magical gems.⁸⁰ it is modelled after magical gems, but uses the technique of traditional amulets.

2.5 THE ANCIENT RESPONSE TO THE PERSEUS PRAXIS

The idea of the creator of the Perseus gem was to take a *praxis* established for curing gout that was based on the structural principle of the *historiola* and to realize it in a new genre characteristic of his time. This promised to be an excellent idea: the endless power of Greek mythological tradition must have seemed a token of success. But that success apparently never came. There are five signs that indicate that the path blazed by the Perseus gem proved to be impracticable.

First, the piece has no parallels. In this case, the *argumentum ex silentio* provides stronger than usual evidence, since a gem’s chances of survival are higher than those of any other kind of archaeological object (precious stones are indestructible, and ancient engraved gems continued to be valued and collected). There was free competition on the market of Imperial-period talismans, and lacking official support, it was only the judgement of the customer that counted. Amulets deemed effective were, as we have seen, produced in series. In contrast, the Perseus gem is unique: it does not constitute a series. It seems not to have been in

⁷⁹ Nagy 2012b.

⁸⁰ Pace Nagy 2011, 76, where I did not take into consideration the structural motifs connecting the piece with magical gems.

demand. Nicolo, the material of the gem, is also extremely rare among magical gems.⁸¹ The third sign of failure is that no such *praxis* has so far been found among ancient cures for gout. There are two longer lists worth mentioning here. The author of the first is Alexander of Tralles, a great figure of sixth-century AD medicine, who does mention the use of magical gems for other illnesses. Even though he recommends a number of 'alternative' cures for gout, he does not mention any gems.⁸² The second is a mock tragedy of disputed authorship which survives in the textual corpus of Lucian, where the protagonist, the goddess Podagra, enumerates all the cures which ineffectively try to limit her endless power, making however no mention of a healing gem.⁸³

The remaining two factors are even more important than the first three just mentioned. Representations of Greek hero-myths on precious stones intended for magical healing are few and far between. Among the thousands of magical gems, there is only one significant iconographic type of this kind: it represents Heracles' fight with the Nemean lion.⁸⁴ Many examples are known, which proves that it was held to be effective. Its use is attested in written sources, including the recommendations of Alexander of Tralles himself, as a possible cure for colic. But other Greek heroes seem to have remained outside the sphere of magical gems: they were not associated with healing *in this way*, even though they are frequently mentioned in incantations.⁸⁵ Last, the impracticality of the Perseus gem is also indicated by its unique structure: there is no other

81 Among the 649 magical gems kept in the British Museum, and published by Simone Michel, there are altogether 3 made of nicolo. None of them belong to the usual types of magical gems. Michel 2001, nos. 18, 19 and 468 (= CBd-397, -398, -826). Among the 1120 gems accessible now in CBd today there are three further nicolo gems: the votive gem CBd-178 mentioned above, see n. 47; an amulet-gem with Latin inscription (Nagy 2011, 76, pl. 2, = CBd-1020) and a gem representing Anubis (Bonner 1950, 259, no. D. 37, = CBd-1031). Strictly speaking, only the last one belongs among magical gems.

82 Alexandros, ed. Puschman II p. 581–85. Amulets against gout: Kotansky 1991, 109–10, 118–19. On the palaeopathological identification of articular diseases: Roberts and Manchester 2005, 132–63.

83 *Podagra* 138–90; cf. Karavas 2005, especially 305–09. Rheumatic diseases in the Lucianian corpus, see also *Philopseudes* 6–8; *Ocyrus* passim (recently attributed to Acacius rhetor, cf. Karavas 2005, 237–42).

84 Bonner 1950, 62–64; Blakely 2006, 139–51; Faraone 2013.

85 See above, n. 63.

example for the simultaneous use of a *historiola* both in picture and in text. The *pheuge*-formula, though common in incantations, appears on only one surviving gem – an example of the Heracles-scheme mentioned before.⁸⁶ We may occasionally come upon a textual *historiola*: for example, the inscription ‘*Are you thirsty, Tantalos? Drink blood!*’ can be read on a talisman-group used presumably against internal bleeding. These gems, however, bore the representation of the god Ares, which means that the image was not itself connected to the myth of Tantalus.⁸⁷ The figure of Omphale also appears on a series of gynecological magical gems, although these do not represent the myth itself, but a cross-cultural net of puns and pictorial motifs, as recently analysed by Véronique Dasen.⁸⁸ There is thus every indication that the Perseus gem, as an attempt to create a magical cure for gout, simply failed.

2.6 THE PERSEUS GEM: GREEK MYTH VERSUS CROSS-CULTURAL MAGIC

We can only guess about the reasons for the failure, since the question is by and large outside the scope of science. Two possible factors can nevertheless be outlined. It seems that the attempt did not prove effective from the perspective of either myth or magic. If we take myth, the maker of the gem was too ambitious. The solution he chose, transforming a story into an image, was more ambitious than to serve as a single *historiola*. Greek art was an equal partner to poetry in the continuous recomposition of myth and in ensuring its topicality. But this needed an intellectual and artistic force, through which the story transmitted in the picture said something true and timely to its viewers, something that was more than a mere summary of its elements. Apparently, the Perseus gem did not have this force: the power of images is not unlimited. The gem seems to have continued the myth-making tradition of Greek art, but it hardly had more to say about Perseus than the following incantation about its own hero: ‘*Circe and Medeia were sitting facing east, looking for*

⁸⁶ Most recently: Faraone 2013, 90.

⁸⁷ Barb 1952; most recently see Faraone 2012, 35–49. I do not agree with the translation he proposes (‘O Tantalus, because you thirst, drink [the] blood [of the patient]!’). As pointed out by Faraone himself, the participle would be *dipsêsas*, but gems are always engraved with *dipsais*. This question is still to be resolved.

⁸⁸ Dasen 2008.

*some medicine against inflammation using stone, wood or dog-bite...*⁸⁹ The gem speaks about the same thing in word and in picture: about Perseus chasing Podagra. The image, however, has no independent meaning: it is a mere illustration to the text – something that never occurs in a living representation of a myth. It is worth referring here to the above mentioned Heracles gems. We do not know how the defeat of the Nemean lion and overcoming colic became associated. But Heracles' healing and apotropaic role was widespread and manifest in cult from the Archaic period,⁹⁰ and according to a plausible interpretation of a comedy fragment, the voracious hero was connected to the idea of being free from colic from as early as the fourth century BC.⁹¹ It must have been easy to link healing gems to this network of ideas, as a further thread.

The situation is not better from the perspective of magic either. Even Campbell Bonner noted that this gem is a talisman constructed from purely Greek elements.⁹² It bears no magical names or *caractères*, and without the incantation on its reverse no one would classify it as an amulet. The gem stayed wholly within Greek tradition, yet it tried to join a market one of whose main features was its cross-cultural character. Taking the example of the Heracles gems yet again: these offered their uses more than one way of interpretation. While in the *interpretatio Graeca* the incised image may have represented Heracles, others may have seen him as Melqart. Researchers today are looking for the interpretation of two magical names characteristic of this genre and still undeciphered – *kkk* and *kolokerkolophoseir* – both in the Greek and Egyptian and also in the Jewish tradition⁹³ This multiplicity of meanings could hardly have been different in Antiquity. The 'monstrous figures' and *barbara onomata* of magical gems may have seemed grotesque and ridiculous to Neo-clas-

⁸⁹ Oder and Hoppe 1927, 40, 22–4. Cf. Björck 1944, 63–65.

⁹⁰ See: Salowey 2002; Manganaro 2005; Fusco 2009, 455–62 (for Etruria). The cult of Perseus was far less widespread. As a starting point, see Jameson 1990; Jones Roccas 1994, 332.

⁹¹ PCG II, 409, fr. 175 (177) = Athenaeus 3.123B. Its analysis: Nagy 2012b, 94–95. For similar texts and the interpretation of the meaning of *stomachos*: Dasen 2008, 269–71.

⁹² Bonner 1950, 43, *pace* Michel 2004, 174–75.

⁹³ A summary of the two above: Bonner 1950, 63–64. A good overview of the *interpretatio Hebraica* (*kkk* = *trishagion*): Barb 1969, 302, n. 1, *kolokerkolophoseir*: Michel 2004, 281. A new, Greek interpretation: Faraone 2013, 90, n. 15. The possible international character of the iconographical scheme has most recently been analysed by Faraone 2013, 85–92, especially 91–92.

sically trained taste, but in its own context the Perseus-gem might well have been regarded as old-school and anachronistically simplistic in the cross-cultural variety of magical traditions. Apparently, in the world of Imperial-period magic the key to success lay in staying traditional and creative at the same time, in being able to make something new from various different cultures.⁹⁴ The inventor of the Perseus *praxis* definitely lacked this ability.

Perseus thus never made his way into the world of Imperial period magical gems. But a hero has time: he spends his life waiting for his strategic moment. Perseus' time came with the Middle Ages: it was then that he became an important figure of so-called astrological images.⁹⁵ The scheme represented on the Hermitage gem is to be found in a number of important medieval lapidaria (e.g., Techel, Albertus Magnus, Arnoldus Saxonus) – pars pro toto: '*Perseus, sword in his right hand, and the head of the Gorgo in his left: he is said to protect from lightning, storm and the curse of the envious*'.⁹⁶ It is attested up until the end of the tradition of medieval lapidaries.⁹⁷ There is a perfect iconographic correspondence between the Saint Petersburg gem and the medieval recipes. However, the correspondence is only illusory. The recipes belong to the series of constellations and planets in medieval astrological lapidaries, and even differ from the gem in their suggested fields of application. It seems thus that these medieval amulets do not belong to the *praxis* represented by the Hermitage gem.

The Perseus gem failed: as a myth told in pictures it did not have enough power, while as a magical *praxis*, it was not up-to-date. The strategy of turning inwards into a single tradition did not prove success-

⁹⁴ See above, n. 35.

⁹⁵ Weill-Parot 2002. On the medieval tradition of ancient magic: Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 249–264, esp. 256–58; Zwierlein-Diehl 2014; Nagy 2014.

⁹⁶ Albertus Magnus, *De mineralibus et rebus metallicis libri quinque*, 2.3.5. A few further sources, as a starting point: Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 252 (Arnoldus Saxonus); Evans 1922, 244, cf. 104–05 (Thetel/Techel; on the author see Zwierlein-Diehl 2014, 103–07). The comprehensive analysis of these sources is still a future task. Attempt at surveying the medieval sources of Anguipes gems: Nagy 2014.

⁹⁷ It was a version of this text encountered by Edmond Le Blant, who noticed for the first time the medieval sources of this iconographical type: Le Blant 1892, esp. 56.

ful at a time and in an area that aimed precisely at the creative connection of different cultures.

To sum up: thanks to the intensive research and exemplary cooperation of scholars in the past one and a half decades, magical gems have become an important genre of classical material culture. The earlier instinctive anathema is fading away, and the significance of magical gems is beginning to be recognized by a growing number of disciplines. They can no longer be regarded as the *par excellence* object group of an Imperial period ‘counterculture’.

PHOTO CREDITS

Fig. 1 Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts

Fig. 2, 3 Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, Photo: Svetlana Svetova and Konstantin Sinyavsky

Pl. 12 New York, Metropolitan Museum

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PLATES



12 Fresco with Perseus and Andromeda. From the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. no. 20.192.16