

Contra invidentium effascinationes: Prophylaxis and the evil eye in some gems of the republican Roman era with grotesque subjects

MARCO GIUMAN* and MIRIAM NAPOLITANO

Dipartimento di Storia, Beni Culturali e Territorio, University of Cagliari, Italy

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: December 31, 2018 • Accepted: May 22, 2019

© 2020 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



ABSTRACT

In the glyptic repertoire of roman-republican age, numerous subjects that must be recognized as amulets with *probaskanica* function. These objects are designed to protect the owner from the negative effects of the evil eye. The ridiculous and caricatural aspect often seen in these engraved gems characterized the grotesque and/or deformed beings such as hunchbacks, bald, dwarfs, pygmies. A further common typical element is the sexual hypertrophy, another characteristic that, in literature, has always been associated with a clear apotropaic function. From a functional perspective, all these features would contribute to identify these characters as useful expedients to ward off the charm. Instead, from a perspective of antithetical analogy, they communicate positive symbolic concepts, such as the fullness of life, fertility, rebirth and victory over death.

Thanks to the analytical study of some pictures engraved in gems conducted by the authors, it has been possible to define a singular set similar for style, subject and type of material, produced between the second and first century BC in the Italian peninsula. The paper intends to explain the figurative and material elements, both constant or variable, that contribute to reinforce the symbolic and amuletic meaning of these gems.

KEYWORDS

ring, *probaskania*, *apotropaia*, republican engraved gem, pygmy, grasshopper, cicada, evil eye, *Phthonos*

* Corresponding author. E-mail: mgiuman@unica.it

In the ancient world, rings played an important symbolic role in the self-representation of power of which the seal is the emblem,¹ according to dynamics for which it is often possible to find an echo in myths. Among these is the story of the release of Prometheus by Heracles, on condition that the former always carried with him an iron ring set with the rock of the Caucasus to which he had been chained, a symbol of a penalty to be served for eternity. It can also be, for example, the case of the episode of Minos' ring, in which precisely the discovery of the object by Theseus becomes itself the starting element in the path that will end with the acquisition of royalty by the son of Aegeus. A further example is given by Polycrates of Samos's ring, in which a sardonix was set, who, to redeem himself from the envy of the goddess Fortuna, threw the ring into the sea to then reclaim it later.²

To the significance of the former, and in close functional symbiosis with it, we can find a second exegetical key, more intimately linked to the sphere of magic (Fig. 1). This is well illustrated in the episode of Gyges' rise to the throne, as found in the lesser-known tradition reported by the *Republic* of Plato. There a simple shepherd of Lydia, Gyges, would acquire the right to royalty as a result of a miraculous event by which he would accidentally take possession of a gold ring, whose particularity, beyond its intrinsic value, would consist of possessing magical virtues, capable of making his owner invisible:

While [Gyges] sat among all the others, he accidentally happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself, towards the palm of his hand, and suddenly became invisible to those who sat next to him, who spoke of him as if he had left. I will not tell you his wonder, especially since, once again putting his hand to the ring and turning the setting on the outside, as soon as he had his face, he became visible again.³

The Platonic episode allows us to focus on an additional functional key that helps to define the magical value of the ring, that is, a kind of meta-symbolic contiguity that binds the gem to the eye, concerning its shape, colour, brightness, and reflective capacity.⁴ In this sense, acting on the mobility of the setting, similarly to the ocular mechanism of the eyelid, Gyges alters the sphere of visibility, causing an interruption of the visual signal; not forgetting that, according to the laws of ancient catoptrics, the dynamics of sight worked through a mechanism of emission and reflection

¹Torelli, M.: *Autorappresentarsi. Immagine di sé, ideologia e mito greco attraverso gli scarabei etruschi. Ostraka 11.1* (2002) 101–155.

²Plin. *HN* XXXVII 1–2.

³Pl. R. 359e–360b: καθήμενοι οὖν μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων τυχεῖν τὴν σφενδόνην τοῦ δακτυλίου περιαγαγόντα πρὸς ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸ εἶσω τῆς χειρὸς, τοῦτον δὲ γενομένου ἀφανῆ αὐτὸν γενέσθαι τοῖς παρακαθημένοις, καὶ διαλέγεσθαι ὡς περιοιχομένου. καὶ τὸν θαυμάζειν τε καὶ πάλιν ἐπιψηλαφῶντα τὸν δακτύλιον στρέψαι ἔξω τὴν σφενδόνην, καὶ στρέψαντα φανερόν γενέσθαι.

⁴It is no coincidence that in the oniromantic language of Artemidorus, the disappearance of precious rings in dreams corresponds to blindness: Artem. II 5. With death, the pupil loses its reflective abilities, by failing the soul, the source of light: GIUMAN, M.: *Archeologia dello sguardo. Fascinazione e baskania nel mondo classico*. Roma 2013, here 42–43; DASEN, V.: *Sexe et sexualité des pierres dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*. In DASEN, V. – SPIESER, J. M. (eds): *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*. Firenze 2014, 195–220, here 200. Pliny the Elder refers to several examples of stones that, due to their characteristics, appear similar to the eyes, such as the Indian onyx (*HN* XXXVII 26), the asteria (*HN* XXXVII 47), the eye of Belo (*HN* XXXVII 55), the chelonia and chelonitides (*HN* XXXVII 56), the leucophthalmos (*HN* XXXVII 62), the eye of Adad and the triophthalmos (*HN* XXXVII 71).



MAGICAL GEMS					
Γαλακτίτης/ Galaxias	L 224-5	K 2	DE 34		Plin. NH 37.10.59
Glossopetra					Plin. NH 37.10.59
κουράλιον	L 588-93	K 20	DE 7		Plin. NH 37.10.59
Antipathes					Plin. NH 37.10.54
Λίθος όπάλλιος				SD 38	
Λίθος σαρδαχάτης				SD 43	
Achates					Plin. NH 37.10.54
Lapis diadochos			DE 5		
Gagates			DE 20		
Syrtius			DE 22		
Chrysolithus			DE 47		
Topazion			DE 54		
Antropocrinus			DE 53		
Lapis de nido avis upupe			DE 67		
Heliotropium			DE 2		Plin. NH 37.10.60
μαγνήτης/ Lapis magnes	L 313-6	K 11	DE 30		
Λιπαράλιον	L 691-97	K 23			
Λίθος φρονίτης				SD 52	
Λίθος σαυρίτης				SD 51	
Lapis adamas = Anancitide			DE 3		Plin. NH 37.4.15, Plin. NH 37.11.73
Lapis medius			DE 21		
Lapis panchrus			DE 37		
Lapis melas			DE 40		
Lapis pyrites			DE 56		
Lapis epignathion			DE 66		
Lapis hephaestites			DE 15		
Lapis ceranius			DE 12		Plin. NH 37.9.51
Lapis obsianus			DE 25		
Lapis aetites			DE 1		
Lapis memnonius			DE 4		
ύαινίτης/ hyaenia				SD 53	Plin. NH 37.10.60
Molochitis					Plin. NH 37.8.36
Iaspis					Plin. NH 37.9.39
Amethystus					Plin. NH 37.9.40
Synochitide					Plin. NH 37.11.73

Fig. 1. Magical gems from Ancient Lapidaries (L = *Orphei Lithica*, *Όρφείως Λιθικά*; K = *Orphei Lithica Kerygmata*, *Όρφείως λιθικά κηρύγματα*; SD = *Socrates et Dionysius, Περὶ λίθων*; DE = *Damigeron-Evax, De Lapidibus*; N = *όσοι τῶν λίθων εἰς ἀνακωχὴν ζάλης καὶ τρικυμίας θαλάσσης*; Plin. NH = *Naturalis Historia*)



of rays.⁵ These luminescent characteristics are also recognized in gems, in particular those that take their names from nocturnal animals,⁶ which were believed to have retroreflective capacities. It is precisely the combination of these characteristics that constitute the *dynamis* of the ring, as confirmed again by Herodotus' version of the Gyges myth in relation to the mythical *dracontia*,⁷ a stone which is able to boost the ophthalmic capabilities of its owner.⁸

It is not surprising then, in light of this overall picture, that many stones were used in the treatment of ophthalmic diseases. Furthermore, the descriptive ways used to define the imperfections of precious stones are often the same used in medical terminology for diseases of the eye, for which Lapidaries prescribed the use of certain gems as a cure (Fig. 2).

In ancient times, however, the eye is also a powerful and dangerous tool for sending negative and evil forces. This is the world of *Baskania*, where the contact between the enchanter and victim develops itself through the dynamics of sight.⁹ Precisely by the analogy between eye and gem, numerous stones and organic materials have important protective power against fascination and enchantments.¹⁰ This is, for example, the case of a particular type of coral, the *antipathes*, which is black in colour and able to hide its user from view, and whose name derives from its supposed antipathetic properties;¹¹ *Galactiten*, too, a stone capable of protecting from envy and the evil eye, rendering any curse useless, with particular regard to children, and preventing them from being exposed to and weakened by the evil eye, as can be seen in a passage of the Orphic Lapidaries.¹²

Now it is evident how the ring and the gem can have an additional symbolic vector, that of protection, upon which their magical potential is amplified. This powerful tool is the iconographic datum.¹³ The image is famously a favoured tool for the transmission of symbolic

⁵Chrysipp. fr. 860. 2 “... as is convenient, the pneuma is directed mostly from its beginning to the organ of sight to make it bright and shining”.

⁶Pliny reports that the emeralds of Ethiopia resemble the eyes of cats and panthers (HN XXXVII 18), the lycopthalmos is similar to the eye of the wolves (HN XXXVII 72) while the *hyaenia* would even be extracted from the hyena's eyes (HN XXXVII 60); the astolon recalls the eyes of the fish (HN XXXVII 50), the egophthalmos instead the goat's eye (HN XXXVII 72).

⁷Plin. HN XXXVII 57, extracted from the brain of dragons; MACRÌ, S.: *Pietre Viventi. I minerali nell'immaginario del mondo antico*. Druento 2009, here 98–104.

⁸Instead the heliotrope, a variety of chalcidony able to make invisible if mixed with the homonymous plant and pronouncing some spells: Plin. HN XXXVII 60; CAVENAGO-BIGNAMI MONETA, S.: *Gemmologia*. Milano 1980, here 864; MACRÌ (n. 7) 96, 150. The hyaenia also allows you to see in the dark: Plin. HN XXXVII 169; BIANCO, L.: *Le pietre mirabili. Magia e scienza nei lapidari greci*. Palermo 1992, here 135.

⁹GIUMAN (n. 4).

¹⁰On the use of precious stones in a prophylactic and therapeutic function: WALLIS BUDG, E. A.: *Amulets and Superstitions*. Oxford 1930, here 306–325; ELWORTHY, F. T.: *The Evil Eye: An Account of this Ancient and Widespread Superstition*. London 1895, here 130–133; SELIGMANN, S.: *Der Böse Blick und Verwandtes: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiten und Völker*. Bd. II. Barsdorf 1910, here 24–38; ELLIOTT, J. H.: *Beware the Evil Eye*. Vol. II: *The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World, Greece and Rome*. Eugene 2016, nn. 1277–1280.

¹¹Plin. HN XXXVII 54.

¹²Orph. L. 24 in BIANCO (n. 8) 74; Orph. L. *kerygm*. in BIANCO (n. 8) 108; Damigeron-Euax *De lap*. in BIANCO (n. 8) 177; JOHNSTON, S. I.: Defining the Dreadful. Remarks On the Greek Child-killing Demon. In MEYER, M. – MIRECKI, P. (eds): *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Leiden – New York – Köln 1995, 361–387, here 384–385.

¹³J. ENGEMANN in RLAC XI (1981) 270–313, s.v. *Glyptik*, here cols 284–294.



MEDICAL GEMS FOR EYES					
αίματίτης / haematites	L 666-72	K 22	DE 24		Plin. NH 37.10.60
Λίθος ὀπάλλιος	L 284		DE 24		
Λίθος ὀφίτης ἑτερος	L 465	K 13			
Lapis chelidonium			DE 10		
Lapis berillus			DE 35		
γαλακτίτης		K 2			
Λίθος ἱερακίτης				SD 48	
Λίθος δρακοντίτης				SD 49	
Lapis saphirus			DE 14		
Lapis chrysolithus alter			DE 48		
Λίθος τοπάζιος		K 8			
Λίθος ὑαινίτης				SD 53	
Lapis medius			DE 21		
Lapis lychnites			DE 28		
Lapis adamicos			DE 62		
Smaragdus					Plin. NH 37.5.16
Achates					Plin. NH 37.10.54
Glaesum					Plin. NH 37.3.12

Fig. 2. Medical gems from Ancient Lapidaries (L = *Orphei Lithica*, Ὀρφέως Λιθικά; K = *Orphei Lithica Kerygmata*, Ὀρφέως λιθικά κηρύγματα; SD = *Socrates et Dionysius*, Περὶ λίθων; DE = *Damigeron-Evax, De Lapidibus*; N = ὅσοι τῶν λίθων εἰς ἀνακωχὴν ζάλης καὶ τρικυμίας θαλάσσης; Plin. NH = *Naturalis Historia*)

values that can be variously abated on the functional level; at least in relation to protective dynamics, as shown by many typologies of *apotropaia*, which had the purpose of drawing a cursed gaze to it, distracting him from the victim. This is possible through the vision of obscene, indecent (ἄτοπον, *turpe*) and/or ridiculous (γελοῖον, *ridiculum*) objects, able to neutralize its evil and harmful effects.¹⁴ The devices designed to perform this protective

¹⁴G. LAFAYE in DAREMBERG, C. – SAGLIO, E.: *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines d'après les textes et les monuments* II 2 (1896) 983–987, s.v. *Fascinum*, here 985; Poll. VII 108; Plu. Mor. 681F.



function can be identified in different sets: that of gestures and behaviours; of form expressions and invocations addressed to deities, objects; representations of gods and their symbols, masks; and grotesque characters.¹⁵ All these amulets, useful against curses and spells, can be packaged in various materials, whose intrinsic nature often appears directly connected to a specific prophylactic power.¹⁶ In this perspective, we will deal with some Roman-Republican iconographies that seem to have played a protective role, despite not apparently having any evident connection with the concept of fascination and the evil eye.¹⁷ These figures, which we could call ‘grotesque’, since they are characterized by physical anomalies, are counted among the expedients able to ward off the evil eye. Their effectiveness is represented by their strangeness, similar to other apotropaic representations such as *Gorgoneion* or *genitalia*, that appear able to arouse a natural curiosity and move one to laughter, and so distracting the look of the *baskanos*.¹⁸

[M. G.]

The first of these iconographies consists of some gems in carnelian, sard, sardonyx and glass, all characterized by the presence of male figures related to some animals, such as crane, stork, grasshopper, locust, cicada or cricket and other objects such as ear¹⁹ (Figs 3–4). These figures have particular physical traits: they are depicted naked, ithyphallic, humpbacks, exasperatedly thin. The small size of the characters and the presence of cranes,²⁰ of which there is a known link with the events of *geranomachia*, has created the hypothesis that these figures can be identified

¹⁵LAFAYE (n. 14) 985–986; ELLIOTT (n. 10).

¹⁶E. LABATUT in DAREMBERG–SAGLIO I 1 (1877) 252–258, s.v. *Amuletum*.

¹⁷On the other hand, there are the representations of the *oculus invidiosus* or the female demon trampled in the category of bronze amulets that bear the name of Solomon, packed in memory of the seal entrusted by God to the wise: COSENTINO, A.: La tradizione del Re Salomone come mago ed esorcista. In MASTROCINQUE, A. (ed.): *Atti dell'incontro di studio "Gemme Gnostiche e cultura ellenistica"*. Bologna 2002, 41–59.

¹⁸*Vita Aesopi* 3 in ANDREASSI, M.: Il *λυμόξηρος* nella Vita Aesopi e nel Philogelos. ZPE 158 (2006) 95–103; JAHN, O.: Über den Aberglauben des bösen Blicks bei den Alten. *Berichte der Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig* (1855) 28–110, here 66–67; WACE, A. J. B.: Grotesque and the Evil Eye. *ABSA* 10 (1903–1904) 103–114; SELIGMANN (n. 10) 308; ENGEMANN, J.: Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nichtchristlichen und Christlichen Spätantike. *JbAC* 18 (1875) 22–48, here 30–34; TRENTIN, L.: What's in a Hump? Re-Examining the Hunchback in the Villa Albani-Torlonia. *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 55 (2009) 130–156; ELLIOTT (n. 10).

¹⁹WALTERS, H. B.: *Catalogue of the engraved gems and cameos, Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the British Museum*. London 1926, 121, pl. XV, nos 1039–1040; FURTWÄNGLER, A.: *Beschreibung der geschnittenen Steine in Antiquarium. Königliche Museen Berlin*. Berlin 1896, 77, pl. 14, no. 1196; FURTWÄNGLER, A.: *Die Antiken Gemmen. Geschichte der Steinschneidekunst im klassischem Altertum I–III*. Leipzig 1900, 144, pl. 29, nos. 38, 40; BRANDT, E. – SCHMIDT, E.: *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen. I: Staatliche Münzsammlung München. 2: Italische Gemmen etruskisch bis römisch-republikanisch. Italische Glaspasten vorkaiserzeitlich*. München 1970, 68–69, pl. 109, nos 958–960; HENIG, M. – SCARISBRICK, D. – WHITING, M.: *Classical gems. Ancient and modern intaglios and cameos in the Fitzwilliam Museum*. Cambridge 1994, 84–85, nos 147–148; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL, E.: *Antiken Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen. II: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Antikenabteilung Berlin*. München 1969, 160, pl. 74, no. 422; BRANDT–SCHMIDT 195, pl. 169, no. 1883; ANGIOLILLO, S. – MARTORELLI, R. – GIUMAN, M. – CORDA, A. M. – ARTIZZU, D. (eds): *Corpora delle antichità della Sardegna. La Sardegna romana e altomedievale*. Sassari 2017, 362, no. 1.170; SCHLUTER, M. – PLATZ-HORSTER, G. – ZAZOFF, P.: *Antiken Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen. IV: Hannover, Kestner-Museum, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*. Wiesbaden 1975, 58, pl. 32, no. 184; ZAZOFF, P.: *Die antiken Gemmen*. München 1983, 31, pls 70, 74, nos 6.26, 8.38.

²⁰The apotropaic value of which is underlined in LEVI, D.: The evil eye and the lucky hunchback. In STILLWELL, R. – CAMPBELL, W.: *Antioch-on-the-Orontes III. The excavation 1937–1939*. Princeton 1941, 220–232, here 223.



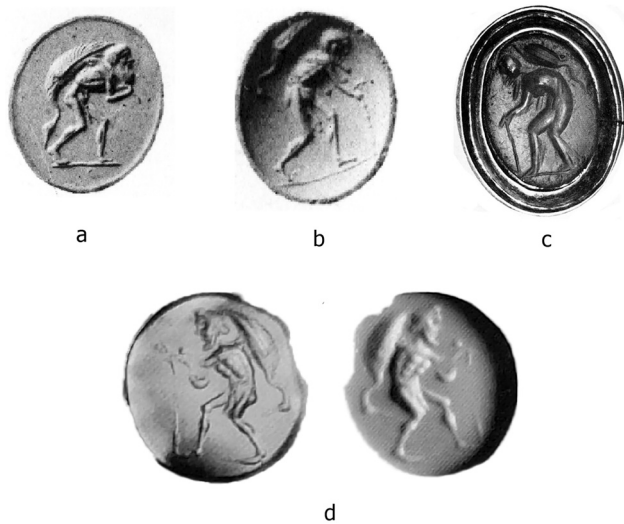


Fig. 3. a) sard: WALTERS (n. 19) no. 1039. – b) sard: WALTERS (n. 19) no. 1040. – c) carnelian: BRANDT-SCHMIDT (n. 19) no. 960. – d) carnelian: HENIG-SCARISBRICK-WHITING (n. 19) no. 148

with the Pygmies.²¹ Their apotropaic importance is in fact well-known in literature, as also remarked by D. Levi, according to whom it would be their ridiculous appearance, often accentuated by obscene details, that cause them to fit into the *atopa*.²²

Some iconographic elements seem to call into question the exact identification of these characters with the Pygmies:²³ the absence of biometric features clearly found in pathologies typical of nanism; the indication of the beard, rarely attested to the Pygmies in the Roman repertoires; the extreme thinness, the presence of a gnarled stick used as support, the submissive attitude. If the figures in question are Pygmies, as F. Dolce points out, mentioning the impressions present in the Dehn collection,²⁴ it is clear that the association with other animals instead of the crane²⁵ can only take place according to an analogue replacement mechanism, that regards other animals/objects however referable to the apotropaic sphere.

²¹V. DASEN in *LIMC* VII (1994) 594–601, pls 466–486, s.v. *Pygmaioi*; PANNUTI, U.: *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Catalogo della Collezione glittica*. Vol. II. Roma 1994, 235, n. 200.

²²LEVI (n. 20) 225. On the concept see too DASEN, V.: *L'enfant qui ne grandit pas. Medicina nei secoli: arte e scienza* 18.2 (2006) 431–452, here 448.

²³For the iconographic evolution of the Pygmy's representations see: DASEN, V.: *Dwarfs in ancient Egypt and Greece*. Oxford – New York 1993; GIUMAN, M.: *Il fuso rovesciato. Fenomenologia dell'amazzone tra archeologia, mito e storia nell'Atene del VI e del V secolo a. C.* Napoli 2005, 183–188.

²⁴DOLCE, F. M.: *Descrizione Istorica del Museo di Cristiano Dehn dedicata alla Regia Società degli Antiquari di Londra II*. Roma 1772, 61, nn. Q49–Q50: “Un Pigmeo, quale conduce sopra le spalle un Grillo: Intaglio antico in Corniola, originale nel Museo” e “Questa Pasta sunta da un antico Intaglio parimente in Corniola rappresenta lo stesso soggetto”.

²⁵DASEN: *Pygmaioi* (n. 21) 597, nos 37–38.





Fig. 4. a) carnelian: ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL (n. 19) no. 422. – b) purple glass gem: BRANDT-SCHMIDT (n. 19) no. 1883. – c) carnelian: BRANDT-SCHMIDT (n. 19) no. 958. – d) sard: BRANDT-SCHMIDT (n. 19) no. 959. – e) carnelian: ANGIOLILLO-MARTEORELLI-GIUMAN-CORDA-ARTIZZU (n. 19) no. 1.170. – f) sardonyx: SCHLUTER-PLATZ-HORSTER-ZAZOFF (n. 19) no. 184. – g) sardonyx: ZAZOFF (n. 19) pl. 74, no. 8.38 = PANNUTI (n. 21) n. 200. – h) sard: ZAZOFF (n. 19) pl. 70, no. 6.26

This is the case of locusts,²⁶ insects whose dangers are known for farmers' fields represented symbolically by the ear of grain. Many sources inform us about the devastation of crops following the passage of these animals.²⁷ On the other hand, according to S. Seligmann, only the cricket, the mantis and the grasshopper were animals endowed with an autonomous apotropaic power. On account of this, their image is used against enchantment itself, according to the principle of ambivalence and of sympathetic magic common to this type of superstition.²⁸ In

²⁶DAVIES, M. – KATHIRITHAMBY, J.: *Greek insects*. London 1986, 134–149.

²⁷DAVIES-KATHIRITHAMBY (n. 26) 141; Bible, Exodus 10. 14–15.

²⁸SELIGMANN, S.: *Der Böse Blick und Verwandtes: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiten und Völker*. Bd. I. Barsdorf 1910, 135, who remembers that the grasshopper was considered an insect with magical and prophetic powers; SELIGMANN: *Der Böse Blick II* (n. 10) 308. The locust, grasshopper and mantis according to DAVIES-KATHIRITHAMBY (n. 26) 176–180 were considered insects carriers of bad luck. We also know from Hesychius that Pisistratus had the image of a grasshopper placed in the Acropolis of Athens, in order to avert the Athenians from the evil eye: ELWORTHY (n. 10) 121; LEVI (n. 20) 222.

ancient times, the belief that such insects were capable of enchanting the victim was so widespread that when a person was ill without an apparent cause, people would say: *Mantis te vidit* so “a mantis has looked at you”,²⁹ an expression that further emphasizes a symbolic relationship between this insect, the magic sphere of the *mantica* and the bewitching power of the gaze.

In any case, whatever the correct iconographic interpretation of our figures, the protective value of the image remains certain. The need to protect oneself from the negative influences of the evil eye, so powerful as to make even inanimate objects such as cultivated fields vulnerable to envy, is also widely attested in the ancient world.³⁰ On the contrary, the physical characteristics of our characters seem to recall the iconographic profile³¹ of the victims of Envy, an allegory as told by Ovid in this way: “the pallor is lying on her face, mawkish throughout the body, never a straight look, her teeth are bruised and broken, her breast is green with gall, a patina of poison on her tongue”.³²

It also seems interesting to consider how, throughout the centuries, this depiction of gems and gemmary was received: in its description, the Visconti recognizes it as “un uomo d'estrema ed esagerata magrezza, che si reca sulle spalle come un grave peso una locusta di mole enorme a proporzione dell'uomo. Sembran simboli della carestia e della fame. Impressione d'incerto originale, il cui tipo vedesi ripetuto in altre gemme d'antico lavoro”.³³ The same interpretation is attested in the manuscripts that accompany the gems kept in modern collections of gem carvings such as that of Pietro Paoletti.³⁴ The figure of an emaciated being might then have been chosen to illustrate the ‘starving dead’ character of *Philogelos* called *Limoxeros*, a term also used to refer to the figure of Aesop, described as a hungry and poor slave who carried a full basket of bread.³⁵ But again, we know from Herodotus,³⁶ Strabo³⁷ and Diodorus Siculus³⁸ that in Africa there were Acridophagi, human beings characterized by short stature, by the thinness of their body and dark skin, which fed on milk or focaccia kneaded with grasshoppers and salt. A further ethnographic note enlightens us as to the influence that such a diet had in the life of these populations, since it would be this source of subsistence to cause the premature death of the

²⁹ELWORTHY (n. 10) 15.

³⁰This protective necessity, already documented in the Twelve Tables (Table 7, Law 3, Table 8, Law 8a), occurs in many other sources. Thus, for example, in Gell. NA XI 4. 7–8) and Seneca (QN 4. 7). Pliny, who remembers special laws promulgated against the destruction of crops by enchantment and fascination, cites the story of such a *Caius Furius Cresimus*, who would have been accused by his neighbors of having cast spells to attract their crops to his property. Cited in court by the curule aedile *Spurius Albinus*, he would have managed to get acquitted. See in this regard: ELLIOTT (n. 10) 149–150.

³¹J. R. GISLER in LIMC VII (1994) 992–996, s.v. *Phthonos*.

³²Met. II 775–777.

³³*Opere varie italiane e francesi di Ennio Quirino Visconti*. Raccolte e pubblicate per cura del dott. Giovanni Labus. Tom. II. Milano 1829, 329, no. 553*.

³⁴PIRZIO BIROLI STEFANELLI, L.: *La collezione Paoletti. Stampi in vetro per impronte di intagli e cammei*. Vol. I. Roma 2007, 77, Tomo I, cassetto 10, no. 711 “Il simbolo della Fame”; 232, Tomo III, cassetto 7, no. 369 “Il Simbolo della Fame”.

³⁵MASTROCINQUE, A.: *The hungry Wolf*, forthcoming. We take this opportunity to thank Professor Attilio Mastrocinque for valuable advice and suggestions.

³⁶Hdt. IV 172.

³⁷Str. XVI 4. 12.

³⁸D.S. III 29.



Acridophagi; they perished when they were consumed by ingested insects and that multiplied starting from the belly and chest, then spreading throughout the body causing an irritating itch.³⁹

Pygmies, Dwarfs, *Limoxeroi* or Acridophagi, however, are all characters that portray precise somatotypes that, precisely because of their particular physical characteristics that are far from the norm and the ridiculous or obscene aspect, would seem endowed with a force suitable for capturing and remove the harmful look of the *fascinator/enchanter*.⁴⁰ The grotesque character and prophylactic value of such images have recently been confirmed by C. Weiss and V. Dasen. According to C. Weiss,⁴¹ these are devices that can protect against problems and the advance of old age, providing a reminder of the proper conduct of life. Considering the association with insects such as cicadas and grasshoppers, V. Dasen⁴² defines these characters in relation to the myth of Tithonus, Priam's brother and Eos's young lover. According to the myth, the goddess of the dawn asked the father of the gods to grant her husband immortality but forgot to ask for eternal youth. This condition led to Tithonus becoming progressively older until he was transformed into a cicada. The scholar identifies these emaciated characters with old Tithonus or the personification of old age, who carries the cicada, his double, on his back, alluding to his miserable fate and mortal human condition, but implying a promise of immortality, the hope of rebirth and regeneration.

To introduce the second type of iconography, it may be useful to refer to a famous mosaic of Antioch (Fig. 5a), in which, amongst the various elements that attack the evil eye, we also find the trident.⁴³ It also appears, significantly together with a crane, in a well-known relief from the first half of the 3rd century AD, in which it the trident is a protective weapon used by the gladiator to attack a *baskanos ophthalmos*⁴⁴ (Fig. 5b). It is evident the strong iconographic affinity that exists between this figure of the *Retiarius* and that of a dwarf carved on a carnelian from Zurich dated between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD (Fig. 5c). This character, depicted with the connotations of dwarfism, is preparing to stab an octopus with a trident and trampling it with his right leg.⁴⁵ To this gem, apparently an iconographic *unicum*, V. Dasen refers the representation to the traditional nilotic scenes and to the field of magic gems. She also recognizes in the octopus a womb, an organ notoriously placed under the protection of the dwarves and whose symbolism of protection would be further strengthened by the carnelian, considered a uterine stone.⁴⁶ In fact,

³⁹G. POZZOLI, F. ROMANI, A. PERACCHI in *Dizionario d'ogni mitologia e antichità* (1826) 60, s.v. *Acridofagi*.

⁴⁰DASEN: *Pygmaioi* (n. 21) 448.

⁴¹WEISS, C.: Non grylloi, baskania sunt. On the significance of so-called grylloi/grilli or grylli in Greek and Roman glyptics. In VAN DER BERCKEN, B. J. L. – BAAN, V. C. P. (eds): *Engraved gems from antiquity to the present*. Leiden 2017, 145–153, here 149–150.

⁴²DASEN, V.: Metamorphoses of Tithonus in Roman Glyptic. *Gemmae. An International Journal of Glyptic Studies* 1 (2019) 63–80.

⁴³GIUMAN: *Archeologia* (n. 4) pl. XIV b.

⁴⁴GIUMAN: *Archeologia* (n. 4) pl. XIV a.

⁴⁵V. DASEN in *LIMC Supplementum I* (2009) 440–443, pls 211–213, s.v. *Pygmaioi*, here 442–443 add. 13.

⁴⁶Regarding the symbolic relationship between the uterus and the dwarves, see: DASEN, V.: Métamorphoses de l'utérus, d'Hippocrate à Ambroise Paré. *Gesnerus* 59 (2002) 167–186; DASEN, V.: Représenter l'invisible: la vie utérine sur les gemmes magiques. In DASEN, V. (eds): *L'embryon humain, à travers l'histoire. Images, savoirs et rites*. Gollion 2007, 41–64; DASEN: *Pygmaioi* (n. 45) 443. Carnelian is considered a uterine gem because it is believed to stop bleeding and menstrual flows according to DEVOTO, G. – MOLAYEM, A.: *Archeogemmologia. Pietre antiche, glittica, magia e litoterapia*. Roma 1990, 221.



within the Greek-Roman culture, the iconography of the octopus is used for the representation of the *uterus*, according to the literary sources as Herophilus, Soranus, Galen and many magical prescriptions aimed at treating gynecological disorders.⁴⁷

In appendix to this reading, well argued by the scholar, it is perhaps possible to add an extra notation. It is located in Ostia in the Taverna del Pescivendolo and dated to the second half of the 3rd century AD, a mosaic on which we recognize the image of a dolphin feeding an octopus⁴⁸ (Fig. 5d). The dolphin is traditionally considered a good omen and it is with this meaning, as suggested by K. Dunbabin,⁴⁹ that we can read its opposition to the octopus, a sea animal hostile to man and characterized, according to Aristotle, by an evil ruse.⁵⁰ Aelianus, when describing the tactics of hunting the octopus, remarks his ability to cling and strangle the victim,⁵¹ suffocating it as a fighter with the opponent.⁵² Also, Trebius Niger reports that there is no fish more dangerous than the octopus, which, grasping swimmers or castaways with its tentacles, would suffocate them with its suckers.⁵³ In addition, its ink and bite are considered venomous, making the image of this animal particularly suitable for translating the black and harmful force of envy on the symbolic plane.⁵⁴ The apotropaic meaning of the mosaic of Ostia, specially placed in the threshold of the workshop,⁵⁵ is further strengthened by a protective inscription that reads «*INBIDE CALCO TE*», which emphasizes a gesture, precisely the act of trampling,⁵⁶ which cannot fail to recall the engraved carnelian of Zurich, in which the octopus, attacked by the pygmy, could perhaps be interpreted as an allegory of envy.

The third type to be analysed is the most problematic and is proposed here as an open case study. These are two glass gems, dated between the third and first half of the 1st century BC, which show a naked and ithyphallic male figure, with a bulging belly, apparently thin limbs, one hand carried towards the face, the other holding a jug⁵⁷ (Fig. 6a and b). The physical and postural characteristics of this grotesque character bring us to a series of statuettes, almost all of oriental origin, distinguished by a peculiar iconography. Among these, the best example is

⁴⁷Numerous occurrences are collected in DASEN: Sexe et sexualité (n. 4) 176–180.

⁴⁸DUNBABIN, K. M.: “Inbide Calco Te”. Trampling Upon the Envious. In *Tesserae. Festschrift für Josef Engemann*. Münster 1991, 26–35, here 26–27, pl. 4a.

⁴⁹DUNBABIN (n. 48) 34.

⁵⁰Arist. *HA* IX 621b. 28.

⁵¹Ael. *NA* IX 25.

⁵²Ael. *NA* XIII 6.

⁵³For this and for other references on the octopus we refer to SOLE, G.: *Polpo immondo. Tabù alimentari nel mondo antico*. Soveria Mannelli 2017.

⁵⁴DUNBABIN (n. 48) 35.

⁵⁵DUNBABIN (n. 48) 26.

⁵⁶On the symbolic interpretation of the mosaic as a whole, refer to DUNBABIN (n. 48), with other iconographic occurrences related to the figurative concept of trampling, crushing, appalling the Envy, widespread especially during Late Antiquity.

⁵⁷BRANDT, E.: *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen. I: Staatliche Münzsammlung München. 1: Griechische Gemmen bis zum späten Hellenismus*. München 1968, 103, pl. 62, no. 604. b) purple glass gem: SCHLUTER-PLATZ-HORSTER-ZAZOFF (n. 19) 57, pl. 32, no. 18.





Fig. 5. a) Roman mosaic from Antiochia, House of the Evil Eye (Hatay Arkeoloji Müzesi, Antakya, Inv. nr. 1024): DUNBABIN–DICKIE (n. 58) pl. 8.a. – b) Roman marble from Woburn (collection of the Duke of Bedford): ELWORTHY (n. 10) 137, fig. 24. – c) carnelian, Pygmy attacks and tramples an octopus, Galerie Nefer, Zürich: DASEN (n. 45), add. 13. – d) Roman mosaic from Ostia, Taverna del Pescivendolo

perhaps a little bronze statue of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens⁵⁸ (Fig. 6c). The character is characterized by an unnatural thinness, neck sinking into the shoulders, body and legs that are exaggeratedly long and emaciated, big fowl. The face is twisted in a grotesque expression, the mouth is open and the eyebrows lowered, the body is bent forward. This last posture refers to Nonnus of Panopolis in his *Dionysiaca*, in which Envy is described as a being with curved limbs that, with legs bent, follows a cross and crossed path; in this manner we can

⁵⁸DUNBABIN, K. – DICKIE, M.: *Invida rumpantur pectora*. The iconography of Phthonos. Invidia in Graeco-Roman art. *JbAC* 26 (1983) 7–37, here 22, pl. 4a, b; GISLER (n. 31) 993, no. 10, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, Inv. 447, Collection Demetriou, probably bought in Alessandria.

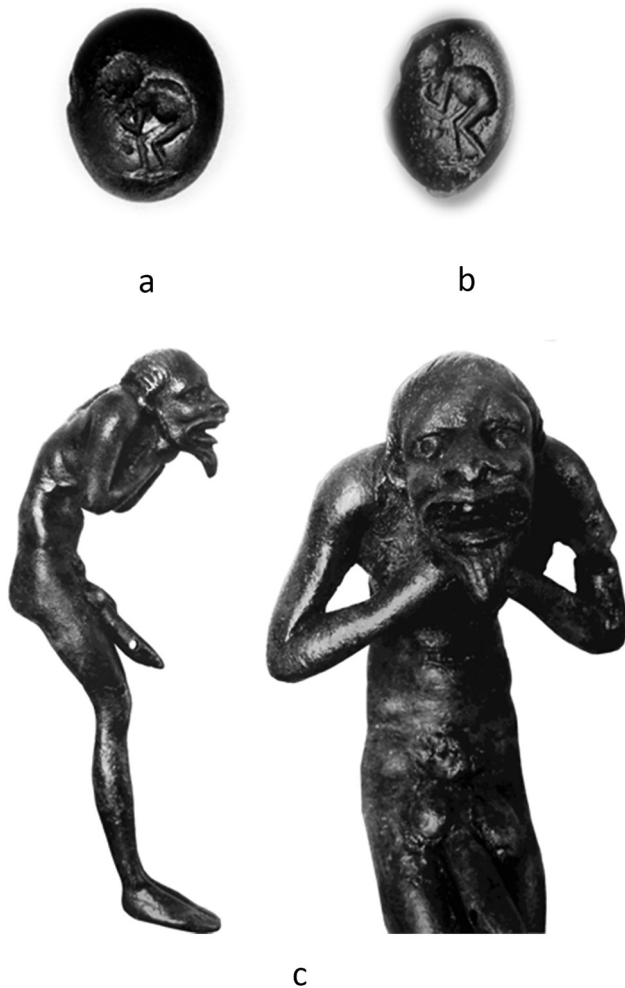


Fig. 6. a) brown glass gem: BRANDT (n. 57) 103, pl. 62, no. 604. – b) purple glass gem: SCHLUTER-PLATZ-HORSTER-ZAZOFF (n. 19) 57, pl. 32, no. 181 = ZAZOFF (n. 19) 276, pl. 77, no. 3. – c) Bronze statuette in Athens, National Archaeological Museum (Demetriou Collection, inv. 447): DUNBABIN-DICKIE (n. 58) pl. 4.a-b

add the hunchback, with the shoulders that curve towards the chest and the whole body reclined forward.⁵⁹

It is on the basis of these elements that K. Dunbabin interprets these connotations as belonging to the *Phthoneroi*, or the envious ones. *Phthonos*, also emerges from a passage by Silius Italicus, consumes its victims by suffocating them, accompanied by personifications that

⁵⁹ Anon. *Physiognomonia*, lib. LXII.



Fig. 7. Mosaic of *Phthonos* from Skala, Kephallenia: DUNBABIN–DICKIE (n. 58) pl. 1.a

mark this particular iconography: “the Wailing that consumes and the Thinness mate of cruel diseases, the Affliction that feeds on tears, the Pallor deprived of blood, the Cares and the Pitfalls”.⁶⁰ This same exegetical key can help us to better understand the gesture with which the characters engraved on our gems bring their hands to the face, since *Invidia/Livor* «*hinc augens utraque manu sua guttura*»⁶¹, as is also seemingly seen in a mosaic image from Skala⁶² (Fig. 7), in which a *phthoneros* chokes his neck, emphasizing once more, as well noted by the inscription accompanying the mosaic:⁶³

⁶⁰Sil. XIII 579–587.

⁶¹Sil. XIII 584. On the overlap between *Invidia* and *Livor* compare Ov. *Trist.* VI 10. 12a s.

⁶²DUNBABIN–DICKIE (n. 58) pl. 1.a.

⁶³On the inscription, compare DAUX, G.: Sur une épigramme de Céphalonie. *BHC* 87 (1963) 636–638.



O Envy, even for you the painter has drawn this figure in imitation of your destructive spirit, which Cratero has translated into stone not because you are honored among men, but because envying the happiness of mortals you have taken this form. Stay under everyone's eyes, stay here, unhappy, carrying the horrendous sign that afflicts the envious.⁶⁴

[M.N.]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

M. Giuman, Università degli Studi di Cagliari, and M. Napolitano gratefully acknowledges Sardinia Regional Government for the financial support of her PhD scholarship in Storia, Beni Culturali e Studi Internazionali (P.O.R. Sardegna F.S.E Operational Programme of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, European Social Found 2014-2020 – Axis III Instruction and Formation, Objective 10.5, Line of Activity 10.5.12.

⁶⁴ "Ω Φθόνε, καὶ σοῦ τήνδε ὁλοῆς φρενὸς εἰκόνα γράψε Ζωγράφος, ἢν Κράτερος θήκατο λαϊνέην, οὐχ ὅτι τειμήεις σὺ μετ' ἀνδράσιν, ἀλλ' ὅτι θνητῶν δόλοισι βασκαίνων σχῆμα τόδε ἀμφεβ[ά]λου. Ἐσ[θα]τι δ[ὲ] πάντεσσιν ἐνώπιος, ἔσταθι τλήμωνι τεκεδόνος φθονερῶν δεῖγμα φέρων στύγιον.

