

# Notes on Some Greek Magical Gems in New England

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THESE NOTES were drafted during a recent trip to study and photograph magical gems in Boston, Cambridge, and New Haven. In a number of cases enlargements of these digital photographs revealed erasures, re-inscriptions, and other important details that were not easily detected in available photographs or even autopsy. These new insights deepen our understanding of how one gem acquired a new owner in antiquity, how another was revised by its scribe, and how a third creatively reuses the iconography of the punishment of Prometheus in a magical spell designed for erotic conquest. These tiny gems, moreover, often give us glimpses into the daily lives and histories of their owners. On the back of an apparently effective childbirth amulet, for example, an unnamed woman asks that she be preserved from old age, and on another a man asks the god to prevent his rivals (two other men) from “persuading” a third young man in whom all three are apparently interested. In the process, we will uncover three hitherto missing persons.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I use the following abbreviations:

*BM*: S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (London 2001)

*D&D*: A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris 1964)

*DMG*: S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen* (Berlin 2004)

*DT*: A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (Paris 1904)

*GMA*: R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets I* (Opladen 1994)

*SMA*: C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Ann Arbor 1950)

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*Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 326–349

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1. An Emphatic Plea or a Missing Third Party on a Spell that Binds Conversation?

In 1954, Campbell Bonner published a curious red jasper gem in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (MFA 1997.174: II–III CE), which has a typical *gorgoneion* on the obverse and a long text on the reverse. The linkage of the head of Medusa and the red jasper stone brings together one of the most popular protective images in the Greek world with a similarly popular protective medium,<sup>2</sup> but the text on the reverse seems out of harmony with the rest of the gem, because, as Bonner saw, it belongs to a genre of Greek binding curses that aim to silence a rival or enemy:<sup>3</sup>

ΓΟΡΓΩ  
 ΝΑΧΙΑΛΛ  
 ΕΥΧΟΑΛΙ  
 ΟΤΟΥΤΑΥΡ  
 ΟΥΙΟΥΛΙΟΘ  
 ΑΝΑΛΛΩΩ  
 ΚΙΝΑΛΕΙΩ  
 ΜΗΤΙΣΤΕΥΕ  
 ΚΘΩΚΑΝ  
 ΧΝΟΥΒΙ

<sup>2</sup> For the use of the *gorgoneia* see A. M. Nagy, “*Gemmae magicae selectae*: Sept notes sur l’interprétation des gemmes magiques,” in A. Mastrocinque (ed.), *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica* (Verona 2002) 153–179, at 157–161 (most of his examples are on red jasper or other red or orange gems); for the importance of red jasper, A. E. Hansen, “A Long-lived ‘Quick-birther’ (*oky-tokion*),” in V. Dasen (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l’Antiquité* (Göttingen 2002) 265–277, at 277, who quotes Dioscorides (*MM* 5.142): “everyone believes amulets of red jasper to be prophylactic.”

<sup>3</sup> C. Bonner, “A Miscellany of Engraved Stones,” *Hesperia* 23 (1954) 138–157 (pls. 34–36), at 154–157 no. 42; he also offers “Alius (nicknamed) the bull” as an alternate to “son of Taurus.” The letter at the end of line 5 is in fact *theta*, which nonetheless clearly was meant to be an *epsilon*, as Bonner printed.

Despite the common scribal confusion, e.g., of *lambda* for *alpha* and *tau* for *pi*, Bonner was able to make sense of the text as follows: Γοργών. Ἀχιλλεὺς ὁ Ἀλίου(υ) τοῦ Ταύρου. Ἰούλις. ἐὰν λαλῶ(ω)σιν, ἀ(λ)ξιῶ, μὴ πιστευέσθωσαν. Χνουῦβι. “Gorgon. Achilles son of Alius, son of Taurus; Ioulis; if they talk, let them not, I pray, be believed! Chnoubis!” The syntax is telegraphic and therefore unusual for an amulet, but not for binding curses, which often list names and patronymics in this manner, followed by brief commands or prayers. Even the framing of the request with Gorgon and Chnoubis finds a parallel in a contemporary curse tablet from Kenchreai,<sup>4</sup> which in the first line lists three Greek powers (Bia, Moira, and Ananke) and in the last invokes three magical names (Lord Chan, Sêreira, Abrasax)—precisely the arrangement here. “Gorgon,” of course, refers to the image on the obverse.

There is, however, a problem with Bonner’s interpretation of ΑΛΞΙΩ as ἀ(λ)ξιῶ (“I pray”). Although the verb does appear in the Greek magical papyri in a few rather sophisticated hymns or prayers, claiming connection with Greek mystery cults or asking for oracles, it is nearly always accompanied by the pronoun σέ or ὑμᾶς, e.g.: “I beg *you* (ἀξιῶ ὑμᾶς), lord gods, Seth Chrêps: reveal to me the things I wish!” (*PGM* VII.368).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> C. A. Faraone and J. Rife, “A Greek Curse against a Thief from the North Cemetery at Roman Kenchreai,” *ZPE* 160 (2007) 141–157.

<sup>5</sup> There are two other examples of its use in a direct prayer. *PGM* IV.477, “Be gracious to me, O Providence and Psyche, as I write these mysteries handed down ... and for an only child I request (ἀξιῶ) immortality”, and *Supplementum Magicum (SM)* 41.6–8, “I beg (ἀξιῶ) and call on your power and your authority ... drive Termoutis ... mad with unceasing, perpetual love!” All the other examples appear in a standard phrase (περὶ ὧν (σε) ἀξιῶ) embedded in similarly formal prayers for answers to the questions that the petitioner will ask the god when he or she appears, e.g. *PGM* I.297 (part of *PGM* Hymn 8, which is composed of faulty hexameters), “Lord Apollo ... give an oracular response, concerning the things I ask”; IV.951 (immediately after *PGM* Hymn 3, which is composed of faulty hexameters), “Reveal to me the things, about which I ask”; *PGM* VII.330, “Open my ears, so you

More importantly, perhaps, it appears, again in the full phrase ἄξιῶ ὑμᾶς, on only four curses, all derived from the same handbook:<sup>6</sup> “I beg you (ἄξιῶ ὑμᾶς) by the one who, under the power of Necessity, restrains the circles (of the zodiac) and by Oimênebenchich Bachaksuchuch, in order that you bind...”<sup>7</sup> It does not seem to appear, moreover, on magical gems or gold or silver phylacteries.<sup>8</sup>

Bonner, moreover, understood this to be a spell to prevent Achilles and Iouilis from persuading anyone “if they talk”; but the verb λαλεῖν is a bit more specific, usually referring to daily speech and not to the formal rhetorical performances like courtroom speeches or petitions before public officials, which I think is what Bonner had in mind because of the emphasis in this short text on persuasion. It appears, for example, in anger-management spells, e.g. *PGM* VII.925–939, which ends with the plea: “Bind down the anger of so-and-so and the anger and tongues of everyone, in order that they be unable to speak (λάλειν) to him, so-and-so.”

I suggest, moreover, that in the case of the gemstone in question love talk and sexual jealousy were involved. First of all λαλεῖν and its cognates do not seem to appear on *defixiones* designed to prevent litigants or others from speaking or persuading in public venues—in fact few verbs of speaking do appear, because the focus of these curses is usually on binding the

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may give an oracular response to me concerning the things I ask you.” For similar expressions see *PGM* LXII 35: “Come in Lord and reveal to me about the things I request of you.”

<sup>6</sup> The plea in *PGM* LI.21 (“I beg you [ἄξιῶ σε], *nekydaimon*, not to listen to them”) is not a curse, but rather a text modeled on the Egyptian ‘letter to the dead’; see the note by R. K. Ritner in H. D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*<sup>2</sup> (Chicago 1992) 283.

<sup>7</sup> *DT* 156, 161, 166, 167 (all charioteer curses found in the same place). The expression ἄξιῶ ὑμᾶς seems to vary with “I adjure you” (ὀρκίζω ὑμᾶς) found in the parallel texts (e.g. *DT* 159).

<sup>8</sup> The verb does not appear in the indices of Michel, *DMG*, which covers all the major collections, or in Kotansky, *GMA*.

person or specific parts of his or her body, for example, the tongue, the mouth, or the voice.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of a pair of curse tablets from Roman Cyprus, which use the adjective ἄλαλοι “speechless” to describe rivals in an upcoming legal trial,<sup>10</sup> all the other parallels for the use of *lalein*, (*dia*)*legein*, or *phthengesthai* in curses seek to silence a personal rival, often in an erotic context.<sup>11</sup> A love spell (*PGM* IV.1496–1595) has a long list of activities to be banned for the victim, including sitting, strolling, kissing, and: “if she is chatting (λαλεῖ) with someone, let her not keep chatting” (1511–1512). A pair of curses from the Piraeus against a man named Mikion and three associates (two men and a woman) contain the repeated request:<sup>12</sup> “If X is about to utter (φθέγγεσθαι) a wicked word about Philon, may his/her tongue become lead.” Since these texts also refer to property and business, they probably reflect commercial com-

<sup>9</sup> Tongue(s): *DT* 15–16, 87; mouth(s): 15–16, 49, 74; voice(s): 15–16, 22–26, 29–33; *logoi*: 32 and 49 (“the speech he is practicing”). This last example also refers to the “testimony (*marturian*) which Pherekles gives as a witness” and the courtroom (*dikastêrion*). For the rare use of a verb of speaking, see D. Jordan, “A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora,” *GRBS* 26 (1985) 151–197, at 106 (“and whoever else is about to speak (*legein*) or act on their behalf”), and “New Curse Tablets (1985–2000),” *GRBS* 41 (2000) 5–46, at 21, no. 79 (“bind him down in lead ..., so that he will be unable to speak against me”).

<sup>10</sup> *DT* 25.3–5 (*DT* 27 is very lacunose but seems to have the same formulation) addresses the spirits of people apparently killed in a mass crucifixion: “Just as you (plural) are without burial, without voice (ἄφωνοι), without speech (ἄλαλοι), without tongue (ἄγλωσσοι), so too may ... and my legal opponents (ἀντίδικοι) be without voice, etc.” At line 7 the simplex form *legein* seems to have been used in a similar locution.

<sup>11</sup> The verb is used in other magical spells to describe the speech of the gods to men: *GMA* 32.16 (Yahweh speaking in a quotation of Deut 32:1–3); *PGM* I.79 (an angel); I.187 (conversation with the “King of the Gods”); IV.134 (Isis); IV.3039 (a *pneuma daimonion*); XIII.244 (a demon speaking through a possessed man); *SM* 66.19–20 (a spell to cause a prophetic demon to enter someone: “Come, speak, enter me Alexander ...!”); and *SM* 90.D.16 (probably part of “Dream Request from Bes”).

<sup>12</sup> *Def.Tab.* Wunsch 96, 97.

petition between Mikion and Philon, which apparently included some kind of slander. There is no mention of any legal context.

A lead tablet from Attica (*DT* 68), on the other hand, is clearly set in a context of erotic rivalry. Dated to around 300 BCE, it asks that a woman named Theodora “be unsuccessful (ἀτελής), whenever she is about to converse (διαλέγειν)” with two men, Kallias and Charias, and that “Charias be forgetful of the bed (κοίτης) and child of Theodora.”

A lead tablet of Roman date from the Athenian Agora provides the best parallel for the use of *lalein*: it is inscribed by one unnamed man to prevent two other men (Leosthenes and Pius) from conversing with a woman named Juliana: ὅπως μὴ δύνωνται λαλήσαι Ἰουλιανῆ.<sup>13</sup> Two other, similar spells of Roman date also aim to prevent one person from chatting with another in probably erotic contexts:<sup>14</sup> a handbook recipe for a submission spell to be inscribed on a lead tablet (*PGM* VII.937–939, ἵνα μὴ δυνήθωσιν λαλεῖν τῷ δεῖνα); and a binding curse inscribed on an *ostrakon* designed to prevent a man named Horos from chatting with another man named Hatros (*PGM* O 1, μὴ ἐάσης αὐτὸν λαλήσεν ἌτροϜ). All these curses differ from the gemstone in that they aim to prevent communication entirely, whereas the owner of the gem apparently allows it, but desires that it be unpersuasive.

Since all three of these parallels designate the fought-over person in the dative, I suggest that ΑΛΞΙΩ should be understood as a proper name in the dative, Ἀλ<ε>ξίω. This interpretation complicates Bonner’s scenario: the creator of the gem apparently hopes to prevent Achilles and Ioulis from persuad-

<sup>13</sup> D. R. Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 225–227, no. 8.13–14, who suggests that Juliana may have been a courtesan or prostitute.

<sup>14</sup> See C. A. Faraone, “*Thumos* as Masculine Ideal and Social Pathology in Ancient Greek Magical Spells,” in S. Braund and G. Most (eds.), *Ancient Anger: Perspectives from Homer to Galen* (*YCS* 32 [2003]) 144–162, at 149–150, for a full discussion.

ing a third party (Alexius) with their conversation. We will never know the precise social context, of course, or the precise goals of their persuasion, but Peitho played a big role in the Greek conception of *eros* and thus we should not rule out a three-way competition (Achilles, Ioulis, and the unnamed author or owner of the gem) for the favors of a single young man, the same scenario as in the first of three binding curses discussed above, which seeks to prevent conversation by Leosthenes and Pius with Juliana.

The question remains, however, how do we understand a curse on a gem? The Agora curse was found in a well and thus in close contact with the underworld deities it invokes, while the *PGM VII* recipe tells us to inscribe the curse on a lead tablet with some symbols and then place it under the heel of our left foot: the idea here seems to be that the constant pressure of the foot on the text will prevent the victim from speaking.<sup>15</sup> Our red jasper *gorgoneion* gem may have been treated in a manner similar to the lead tablet. In any event, the gem was probably carried or worn on a human body, where its effect would presumably be triggered whenever either of the two men spoke to Alexius.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, it is hard to see how this gem would prevent either of two men from taking the floor and persuading a crowd in the forum or a courtroom.

## 2. Ptolemaios Recycles a Charisma Amulet

A dark-green jasper gem in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (inv. 2000.991) has on its obverse an image found on many Greek magical gems: a snake-footed figure with the head of a rooster, who wears the cuirass of a Roman soldier and holds an Egyptian flail in one hand and a small round shield in

<sup>15</sup> Treading on the images or names of enemies seems to have been a particularly Egyptian form of cursing; see R. K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Egyptian Magic* (Chicago 1993) 119–136.

<sup>16</sup> If the ring in which the stone was set had a full metal back, the inscription would have been invisible to all, which leaves open the possibility that the person who created or commissioned it may have given it to Alexius as a gift.

the other. On the periphery various letters float about: the usual vowels, a pair of *tau*'s by the feet, and the name *Iaô*, the typical Greek rendition of the Jewish god *Jahweh*. On the back we find the following inscription:

ΙΑΩ CABAΩ AB  
 PACAC HXAPICAM  
 ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΩ Π  
 ΡΟCΠΑΝΤΕC

The first three words extend the name of *Jahweh* by adding one of his regular Hebrew epithets, *Sabaôth* (“Lord of Hosts”), and a version of a well known magical name, *AbraXas*. The last three words tell us the name of the owner of the amulet (*Πτολεμαίω*) and the range of its effectiveness, *πρὸς πάντας* (“against” or “before all people”).<sup>17</sup>

The middle section is, however, a bit of a puzzle. Six letters seem to be the word for ‘charm’ or ‘grace’ with its article (*ἡ χάρις*) and thus this would seem to be an amulet for charisma. This word with or without its article appears about two dozen times on the extant magical gems, mainly on green jasper or dark-glass gems depicting *Harpocrates*, usually sitting on the lotus leaf, or on stones of lapis lazuli depicting *Aphrodite* or the so-called pantheistic deity.<sup>18</sup> Some of them have the same syntax as this gem: (*ἡ*) *χάρις* + a personal name in the dative,

<sup>17</sup> This is a fairly common use of the preposition *pros* on victory or charm amulets, e.g. *SM* 63.14–16 (a papyrus amulet), “Give me victory, repute and beauty before all men and all women (*πρὸς πάντας καὶ πάσας*)”; *BM* 134 (an oval heliotrope gem), “Give grace (*χάρις*) to Theanous before Serapammon (*πρὸς Σεραπάμμωνα*)!”; *BM* 159 (rectangular lapis-lazuli amulet), “Give grace (*χάρις*) to Hieronima before all people (*πρὸς πάντας*)!”; *PGM* XXIIa.19–20 (prayer to Helios), “Give me steady grace before the whole human race, before all women (*πρὸς πᾶσαν ἀνθρωπίνην γε[v]e[λ]α]ν καὶ πάσας γυναῖκας*) and especially So-and-so”; XXXVI.47 (text to be inscribed on a silver amulet), “Give me, So-and-so, whom So-and-so bore, victory, favor, reputation, advantage before all men and women (*πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ πάσας γυναῖκας*), especially So-and-so, whom So-and-so bore.”

<sup>18</sup> See Michel, *DMG* 526 s.v. *χάρις*.



which seems to be the equivalent of the short prayer that we find on other gems of the same type: δὸς (τῆν) χάρις + a personal name in the dative.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, one problem with reading χάρις in line 2: the unattached *alpha* and *mu* that follow it. Now it is true that they might be construed as a form of the preposition ἀνά shortened to ἄν and then changed to ἄμ before the plosive at the start of Ptolemaios' name. But it is not at all clear—not even in the often tortured syntax of these magical texts—that this could mean “for Ptolemaios,” especially since on the gems, at least, the simple dative is so common. High magnification of a digital photograph of the stone revealed, however, that the entire next line on the gem (line 3) had been erased and then re-inscribed in antiquity, revealing that Ptolemaios was in fact using a ring originally created for another person. I suggest, then, that the best explanation for the two letters at the end of line 2 is that they are the beginning of the name of the original owner of the gem, someone with a long Greek name that began with AM in line 2 and then took up most of the space in line 3. There are a number of possible candidates, e.g. Amphidemides, Amphiptolemos, Ameinokleides, Ameinodoros, Ammoniades, Ammonodotos, etc.

### 3. A Spouse and Eternal Love or a Woman named Poseidonia?

While looking for parallels for the use of the word χάρις on magical gems, I came across another dark-green jasper that

<sup>19</sup> (ἡ) χάρις + dative or genitive: *BM* no. 75 (“for Poseidonia”—I propose this reading in the next section); *D&D* nos. 223 (τῶν φοροῦντις = τῷ φοροῦντι or τοῦ φοροῦντος?), 468 (“for Candidus”), 470 (“for Agrippina”); and an unpublished gem in the Harvard Art Museums (inv. TL38193.1: τῇ φορούση). For the prayer δὸς τῆν χάρις + dative: *BM* 120 (τῷ φοροῦντι), 134 (“to Theanous”), 159 (“to Hieronima”); P. Zazoff, *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen* III (Wiesbaden 1970) 233, no. 148 (“to Alexander”); S. Michel, *Bunte Steine-Dunkle Bilder: “Magische Gemmen”* (Munich 2001) no. 133 (“to Alexander”); *SMA* 7 (“to Dionysias”), 206 (τῷ φοροῦντι), 265 (δός μοι χάρις), 355 (τῷ φοροῦντι); *D&D* nos. 130 (μοι), 199 (“to Sphyridas”), 333 (τῷ φοροῦντι).

resides beyond the borders of New England: a gem in the British Museum (Michel, *BM* 75) with a unique combination of images on its obverse—to the left it shows a fairly common version of Artemis in hunting garb with a hound before her feet; she draws an arrow from her quiver with one hand and holds her bow with the other. She is staring, however, at Aphrodite, who appears to have her arms bound behind her back. The editor suggests rightly that the artist has redeployed a familiar image of Artemis and used it in a love spell, where the archer goddess replaces Eros, who indeed shows up on other gems in similarly combative poses, e.g. *DMG* Taf. 87.3, on which Eros draws his bow against a woman with her hands tied behind her back to a pillar; Michel (*BM* p.50) rightly adduces an erotic curse (*SM* 49) written on lead that invokes Hekate-Artemis “to bend [her] bow towards the heart of Matrona!”<sup>20</sup>

The text on the reverse of the gem, however, takes a calmer approach:

ΠΟΙ  
ΕΩΝΙΑ  
ΗΧΑΠΙ  
C

Michel suggests that we interpret this as *πόσει αἰωνία ἢ χάρις* (“dem Ehegatten die ewige Liebe”), but magical texts are usually quite conventional and neither spouse nor eternal love appears elsewhere in magical amulets. The parallels discussed above for *χάρις* + a personal name in the dative suggest, in fact, that by switching the two letters of the diphthong and adding a *delta* we should read: *Ποσει(δ)ωνία ἢ χάρις*, “charm for Poseidonia.”

<sup>20</sup> Erotic *agôgê*-spells are a form of curse that tortures a usually female victim with fire, whipping, and other images drawn from the real world of torture, until the woman yields and comes to the usually male practitioner; see C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1999) 41–95, for full discussion.

## 4. An Amulet for a Quick Birth and Agelessness?

My search for χάρις turned up yet another under-appreciated gem in Britain. A red jasper in the Southesk Collection shows Helios on his speeding chariot holding the usual whip and globe; before him we see Phosphorus bearing a torch with both hands.<sup>21</sup> On the beveled edge of the stone are the letters ΑΥΞΟΝΙΕΗΠΙΟΔΙΑ and on the reverse are the following words: ΛΑΧΑΜΑΡ ΜΑΡΑΦΒΑ ΣΥΝΤΗΡΗCΟΝ ΜΕ ΑΓΗΡΑΤΟΝ ΚΕΧΑΡΙΤΩΜΕΝΗΝ. More than a century ago, the editor Helena Carnegie, daughter of the Earl who owned the collection, commented somewhat mysteriously: “The reverse bears a long untranslated inscription.” It is, in fact, a simple prayer of a woman, as the gender of the final word reveals: συντήρησόν με ἀγήρατον κεχαριτωμένην. The first three words are the request (“Keep me unaging!”) and the final participle, probably passive in voice,<sup>22</sup> means “because I have been favored (i.e. by you after previous prayers)” and probably refers to past favors that Helios has given the petitioner in previous requests, in other words: give, because you have given before.

The inscription on the bevel ΑΥΞΟΝΙΕΗΠΙΟΔΙΑ is also Greek, with one mistake in the second word of Η for Π: αὔξονι ἐπιόδια. The first word with an additional *tau* would be the dative participle of the verb αὔξω, which is the common short form for the verb αὔξάνω, ‘to cause to grow’ or ‘increase the number (of things)’. Its active form in later Greek is often intransitive and means ‘to grow up’ (of children) or ‘grow larger’ (of the waxing moon). The phrase ‘for the growing child’ would, thus, be sensible on an amulet, as would ‘for the rising sun’, which does grow larger as it rises over the rim of the horizon. The latter, of course, could refer to the image of Helios on the obverse. But like many participles, this one could also be a personal name, Auxon.

<sup>21</sup> H. Carnegie, *Catalogue of the Collection of Antique Gems formed by James, Ninth Earl of Southesk I* (London 1908) 173, no. N51 with pl. XIV.

<sup>22</sup> LSJ s.v. allows the middle to be used actively, but as Kent Rigsby points out to me, in the LXX and afterwards the passive use predominates.

The second word is more difficult, because of its rarity: LSJ s.v. ἐπιπόδιος list only one occurrence, in a lyric passage of tragedy (Soph. *OT* 1350), translating “upon the feet.” The word does appear, however, on at least one other gem (Bonner, *SMA* no. 134), another red jasper, this one with an *ouroboros* enclosing the common uterus-and-key design, usually found on hematite gems that controlled menorrhoea or childbirth, by opening or closing the womb at the appropriate moments. Around the edge of this gem are inscribed some vowels and the magical word Ororiouth, which usually appears on the reverse of such amulets. On the back, however, we find ΕΗΠΟΔΙΑ, which Bonner articulated as ἐπὶ ποδία, “for the feet,” and understood this to be an amulet for curing the feet,<sup>23</sup> an explanation that is entirely at odds with the womb-design on the obverse. Ann Hansen, however, has more convincingly explained the phrase as a reference to a quick birth, addressed to the fetus, either “feetward!” i.e. “(go) to the feet (of your mother)!” or “onto your little feet!” She also explains the odd red jasper medium with a passage from Dioscorides, the medical writer of the first century CE, who noted that everyone supposed amulets of red jasper to be prophylactic and to promote “quick delivery when worn on the thigh.”<sup>24</sup> Our red jasper gem provides good support for Hansen’s interpretation: it is of the same medium and the longer inscription shows that the prepositional phrase probably does refer to the unborn child in the dative: αὐξ<ο>ντι ἐπὶ ποδία (“Feetwards for the growing baby!”). Dioscorides refers to the red jasper amulets as *okytokia*, “quick-birthers,” which may also explain the image on the obverse of the speeding chariot of Helios.

But how do we link the two inscriptions on the same stone? Perhaps the stone was originally used successfully for quick-births by the woman who owned it and at a later time she had

<sup>23</sup> Bonner, *SMA* p.76 n.41.

<sup>24</sup> Hansen, in *Naissance* 265–277: Diosc. *MM* 5.142, φυλακτῆρια περίπ-  
τα καὶ ὠκυτόκια μηρῷ περιεπτόμενα.

added the prayer on the back, which asks Helios to preserve her unaging. Such a scenario might, at least, provide a more precise context for the final participle (κεχαριτωμένην): “Keep me unaging, because I have been favored (viz. by you).” These favors, one might surmise, included one or more healthy and easy births.

#### 5. Prometheus as the Model for the Victim of an Erotic Curse

A dark-green gem with light-green flecks, formerly in the Sossidi Collection, now resides in the Harvard Art Museums. It has a unique scene:<sup>25</sup>



Michel rightly identifies Eros in the lower left corner aiming his bow at a long-haired female victim, who in this case is suspended by her hands or wrists from a ring. The toes point

<sup>25</sup> See Michel, *DMG* 266–267 with Taf. 88.2, for discussion and photograph. The Harvard accession number is TL38193.10 and the photograph here is my own.

downward and the ankles are bound together. Three other forces join the attack: a mace with a spherical head seems to float opposite Eros, and above them two animals approach the figure from the sides: from the right a winged lion burns the victim with a torch held in its front paws—a role that Eros often plays in other scenes of erotic torture on magical gems—and an eagle attacks from the left. The apparatus to the right of the victim's elbow has yet to be explained.<sup>26</sup> The inscription on the back, moreover, confirms that the target of this gem was a female.<sup>27</sup> It reads in part: “Burn with fire the woman who is associating [i.e. with me]!” (τὴν συνγεινομένην πυρὶ φλέξατε). The participle can also mean “who is having sex [i.e. with me].” Our gem-cutter, then, clearly intended that the long-haired figure on the obverse be an effigy of the female victim, and indeed the plural imperative suggests that all four figures on the obverse—Eros, the mace, the lion, and the eagle—are invoked to inflame the victim with fiery passion, although only the lion does so literally.<sup>28</sup>

There is, however, one small problem: although all the data adduced above imply that the victim of this gem was female, Michel suggests very cautiously that a vertical stroke on the

<sup>26</sup> Michel, *DMG* 223, suggests that it might be a monogram (ιση) and this is probably correct, but its placement seems important near the victim and the lion. Could it identify the victim by her initials?

<sup>27</sup> Michel, *DMG* 223 n.1170.

<sup>28</sup> The inscription begins with the words Βλαρθαρ εἰμι Αραχθα and ends with Ωσαρβαθαιρας. Michel, *DMG* 223 n.1170, rightly understands the first three words to be a version of the ἐγὼ εἰμί formula, whereby a magician claims to be a powerful god in order to gain authority over those he addresses. So in this case, he says “I am Blarthar Arachtha.” It seems best to separate the last word as ὡς Αρβαθαιρας (the latter is a variant of the well-known name Αρβαθ-Ιαω, “Fourfold Jahweh”) and translate the entire inscription as “I am Blarthar Araxtha. Burn with fire the woman who is associating [i.e. with me] as would four-fold Iaô!” The number four is significant here given the number of attackers on the other side of the gem. Could it be, in fact, that the eagle, lion, archer, and mace are symbols for four-fold Iaô?

belly may be a phallus.<sup>29</sup> In fact the digital photograph of the gem, when enlarged, revealed three important details: (i) the gem-cutter attempted with moderate success to depict two breasts on the front of the figure, who is shown nude (the breast on the left is round and more clearly visible); (ii) the vertical shape on the belly of the figure is not a phallus but rather a flap of skin indicating a wound, into which the eagle inserts its beak; and (iii) below this wound is a puzzling horizontal dash (which does not touch or intersect the vertical ‘phallus’ line) and below that the pubic triangle. The figure is definitely a female with a vertical gash in her belly.

This is a puzzling scene, until we recall the punishment of Prometheus, who was indeed shackled and attacked daily by an eagle, which fed on his liver. The bow-bearing Eros in the lower left corner likewise seems modeled on the figure of Heracles, who in many of these scenes is about to rescue Prometheus by killing the eagle with his arrow. Extant versions of the scene, however, do not preserve any exact parallel. In the earliest scenes Prometheus either sits or crouches low (e.g. *LIMC* VII s.v. nos. 68–70: VI BCE), in some cases with his arms and feet tied to a stake that stands behind his back (e.g. nos. 26, 28, 54, 71). Later versions show him with his arms spread-eagled and pinned to the wall by metal bands (e.g. nos. 44–45, 72, 77–79). The only scenes that show Prometheus hanging with his arms directly over his head are on a series of glass gems of the first century BCE (nos. 63a–h), but in these Prometheus chats with a Heracles in repose, who leans on his club. The manner in which the female victim is bound on the gem is, however, nicely illustrated on one of the earliest ‘phlyax vases’ (ca. 400 BCE), now in the Metropolitan Museum, which depicts a scene from some lost Italian comedy.<sup>30</sup> At the center of the scene a slave stands naked on his tiptoes with his hands stretched directly over his head, just like the figure on the gem,

<sup>29</sup> Michel, *DMG* 223 n.1169.

<sup>30</sup> G. M. A. Richter, “Two Theatre Vases,” *BMMA* 22 (1927) 54–58, at 54–56.

and he says, “He has bound my two hands above” (κατέδησ’ ἄνω τὸ χεῖρε).<sup>31</sup> The scene suggests, then, that the audience for the play must have been familiar with this form of bondage. It is most likely, then, that the creator of our gemstone knew of a lost version of the punishment of Prometheus, in which he was bound in this way with his hands above his head.

But regardless of the precise source of this iconography, it is clear that the gem-cutter has reconceived this scene with two fundamental changes: (i) the gender of the victim has been changed from male to female; and (ii) in the scenes of the liberation of Prometheus, the archer Heracles is the savior who kills the eagle, whereas on our gem Eros joins forces with the eagle to torment the female victim. The motivation for including the eagle’s attack on the liver makes good sense on this kind of torture spell, however, because the liver was believed to be the seat of violent emotions and passion—indeed, as Michel notes, a pair of erotic *agôgê*-curses actually take aim, like Prometheus’ eagle, at the liver, for example: “Lead Ptolemais to Ptolemaios ... burn her liver (πύρωσον τῆς αὐτῆς τὸ ἥπαρ), her breath, her heart, until she leaps forth and comes ... to Ptolemaios!” and “Burn her limbs, her liver (καύσατε αὐτῆς τὰ μέλη, τὸ ἥπαρ) ..., until she comes to me!” (*SM* 40.12–19 and 45.31–32).

#### 6. A Protective Amulet of Roman or Post-Classical Date?

A rather large chalcedony gem in the Harvard Art Museums (inv. no. 1969.189; Michel, *DMG* 145) is unique in its design, and Simone Michel, one of the world’s leading experts on Greek magical gemstones, has deemed it post-classical on a

<sup>31</sup> There is one difficulty: the slave’s hands are not in fact tied. J. Whatmough, “On a New Fragment of Dorian Farce,” *HSCP* 39 (1928) 1–6, at 3, suggests that the slave is pretending to be bound as an excuse for not doing his job or following a command, while J. D. Beazley, “The New York Phlyax-Vase,” *AJA* 56 (1952) 193–195, at 193, suggests that the man is claiming to be spellbound, pointing out that his words recall contemporary binding spells, which often use the verb *καταδῶ* with various body parts, including hands, in the accusative case.



number of grounds: its size (4.90 x 4.02 cm.) is uncommonly large; its medium (a light brown, polished and translucent chalcidony) is rare; and on the obverse its beetle-like design with three *ouroboros* snakes aligned vertically, each smaller than the last (it looks to me more like a child's drawing of a snowman), is unique:



Since she has questioned the antiquity of a number of similarly large brownish chalcidony gems, it seems best to examine the group as a whole, before arguing the merits of the Harvard gem. Here are the descriptions of the other gems she suspects (the Harvard gem is summarized at the end of the chart for comparison):<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The first four gems are numbered according to the catalogue in Michel, *Bunte Steine*, where she makes her arguments seriatim.

	size (cm.)	type of chalcedony	convex?	text	ouroborus?	Michel's comments
no. 96	3.26x2.30	brown-gold transparent well polished	barely (both)	only text & symbols διαφύλαξον	yes	Antik?
no. 98	3.70x2.70	milky-brown polished translucent	O: yes R: slightly	only text & symbols	no	Neuzeitlich
no. 99	3.40x3.39	brown polished translucent	yes (both)	only text & symbols	yes	Nachantik?/ Neuzeitlich?
no. 117	3.59x3.39	cloudy-brown polished translucent	barely (both)	text & symbols	no	Neuzeitlich
<i>BM</i> 501	2.4x3.7	white-brown polished translucent?	yes (both)	figures, text & symbols	yes	Antik?/ Neuzeitlich?
<i>BM</i> 555	1.5x2.1	gold polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	no	Neuzeitlich
Harvard 1969.189	4.9x4.02	cloudy-brown polished translucent	barely (both)	only text & symbols διαφυλάξατε	yes (3)	Neuzeit

In her discussion of Harvard 1969.189, Michel (*SMG* 143) summarized her suspicions of this group as follows: (i) the type of transparent brown-gold chalcedony used in these amulets is untypical; (ii) the large dimensions and the shape of the gems—single or double convex—is unusual; and (iii) the exceptionally long Jewish and Gnostic texts they contain are only seldom seen on other magical gems.

Arguments can be advanced against all these positions. Large, brownish, and translucent chalcedony gems that also display a single or double convex shape and mainly textual content do in fact survive in large enough numbers to be considered a bona-fide subgroup of the Greek magical gems. I note, for example, the following gems that Michel and other editors consider to be of Roman date:

	color of size (cm.)	chalcedony	convex?	text	ouroborus?
<i>BM</i> 495	3.1x2.9	yellow/grey polished translucent	yes (both)	figures, text & symbols	no
D&D 505	3.0x2.5	agate chevée polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	circle
D&D 517	3.3x4.75	chalcedony polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	circle
D&D 519	3.5x4.5	onyx cendré polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	on one side
<i>SMA</i> 284	2.85x2.75	onyx polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	on both sides
<i>SMA</i> 291	3.4x2.1	color? polished translucent	yes (both)	text & symbols	on one side

The Harvard gem, then, belongs to a subset of magical gems that are admittedly outliers in the larger corpus, but this fact does not necessarily make them post-antique. Michel (*DMG* 143 with n.748) observed one other oddity about the gems in the first chart: not only were they without images and entirely textual, but the kinds of texts they carried were unusual, heavily “Jewish or Gnostic,” and sometimes with formulae of exorcism. She points out, for example, that the word ἄγγελος appears on only four other gems. But there are good parallels for such texts on amulets inscribed on other media. There are five metal *lamellae*<sup>33</sup> that mention angels and a number of papyrus amulets (*SM* 10.10, 11.9, 14.7, 97.7) or recipes for amulets (*PGM* IV.1936–1949, XXXVI.44 and 176, *SM* 97.7). In three cases these angels are invoked as κύριοι ἄγγελοι, as on

<sup>33</sup> In addition to *GMA* 35.1–2, 39.8, 41.47, and 68.8, Attilio Mastrocicque informs me that he will soon publish a *lamella* from a Roman necropolis at Campobasso that invokes the ἅγιοι ἄγγελοι to save a sick child.

the Harvard gem: *παύσατε Διᾶν ἀπὸ τοῦ ... πυρέτου* (*SM* 11.9 ff.), *σώσετε ... Εὐφήλητον* (*GMA* 39.8 ff.), *δότε μοι ... χάριν, δόξαν* (*PGM* XXXVI.44). Their primary role on amulets seems, moreover, to be protective, e.g. *ἅγιοι ἄγγελοι, φύλακες* (*PGM* VI.1936) and *ἄγγελοι, φυλάξατε με* (*PGM* XXXVI.176). I would conclude, then, that these large, text-only, convex chalcidony amulets represent a subset of the Greek magical gems, a subset that has more in common with textual amulets on metal and papyri than it does with other magical gems.

Let us, then, leave aside the general arguments about the generic form of this subset of magical gems and focus on specific features of the Harvard gem that argue for its ancient date. The details observable in the new digital photographs allow us, in fact, to see two cases of scribal revision that suggest that this amulet is the work of a late-Roman gem-cutter. The text on the reverse is the longest and begins with a series of magical names and words.

In the top half of this side there is an inscribed box filled with magical symbols, at the bottom of which we find the following carefully separated words and our first scribal correction:

ΓΑΝΟΧΑΛ ΛΑΛΑΧΟC  
ΛΑΛΑΧΑΡ {X}ΑΛΛΑΜΕΝΕΥC

Before the last word ΑΛΛΑΜΕΝΕΥC close inspection reveals the remains of a *chi* that has been erased (marked with brackets; only its bottom half is visible); as a result the space between this word and the one before it is two letters wide, rather than one as is the gem-cutter's usual practice. Underneath the box is a second inscription, again with the word divisions of the gem-cutter, beginning:

ΓΑΒΡΙΗΛ ΑΛΛΑΛΑΧΟC ΑΛΛΗΧΑΡ  
ΑΛΛΙΜΕΝΕΥC ΑΚΡΕΘΩΝ ΨΙΚΡΑ  
ΘΑ ΘΑΛΑΚΡΑ ΑΚΛΑCΑΡ ΜΙΛΩΘ  
CΑΩΘ CΑΒΑΩΘ ΘΩΘ ΚΟΠΙΟΡ  
ΝΑΥCΟΙΜΗΜΑΨΙΑΧΑCΧΙΑΥΨΗ  
CΑΠΠΕΥΗΡCΦΑΔ ΚΝΟΥΦΙ ΑΧΗΛ  
ΓΑΜΑΕΦΝΕΩΘ (κτλ.)



The underlined letters in the fifth line have been inscribed over another erasure. This second text begins with nearly the same run of magical names as the first, but replacing the first word with the name of the angel Gabriel:

ΓΑΝΟΧΑΑ ΛΑΛΑΧΟC ΑΛΛΑΧΑΡ {X}ΑΛΛΑΜΕΝΕΥC (in  
the box)

ΓΑΒΡΙΗΛ ΑΛΛΑΛΑΧΟC ΑΛΛΗΧΑΡ ΑΛΛΙΜΕΝΕΥC (below  
the box)

Both these erasures, moreover, suggest that our gem-cutter was working from a handbook or some other kind of model, which itself included two variants of the same *logos*. This *logos*, in fact, had probably already undergone some evolution before ending up on this stone, as we can see in the differences between the two versions on the stone. The final words in each version, moreover, ΑΛΛΑΜΕΝΕΥC and ΑΛΛΙΜΕΝΕΥC, appear to be a corruption of a common magical word on amulets: ΔΑΜΝΑΜΕΝΕΥC.

Our gem-cutter made one final error, this one of judgment rather than copying. He uses a similar prayer for protection at the bottom of both sides of the gem. On the reverse, after the magical words, he inscribed a rather long version: “Lord Gods Angels, thoroughly protect the person who carries this sacred stele, from every attack, from every poison and disease” (κύριοι θεοὶ ἄγγελοι διαφυλάξατε τὸν φοροῦντα τὴν ἱερὰν ταύτην στήλην ἀπὸ πάσης ἐπιβουλίας καὶ παντὸς φαρμάκου καὶ νόσου). This is, then, the generic version: whoever carries this stele is protected. The word *stele*, incidentally, is a handbook term and seems to call attention to the entirely textual nature of this gemstone.<sup>34</sup> At the bottom of the obverse, however, we get a shorter version that the scribe seems to have improvised to make the amulet more personal. Michel (*DMG* 145) prints the following text: ΔΙΑ(ΦΥ)ΛΑΞΑΤΕ ΘΙΑΙ ΔΥΝΑΜΙC ΕΝ ΤΙΜΟΝ ΕΝ ΑΘΕ(Ξ?)ΟΝ. The first part of this is easy to construe because it follows the syntax of the generic version, δια(φυ)λάξατε θιαὶ δυνάμ(ε)ις. Here, as in the earlier invocations to the “Lord Gods Angels,” we find the awkward double designation “Goddesses Powers,” unless of course these are both adjectives (θ(ε)ῖοι and θ(ε)ῖαι) and the prayer is directed to the “divine

<sup>34</sup> See *SM* 23.10–11 and the editors’ comments there.

angels” and “divine powers.” The second half of this short prayer is more difficult to construe, but when examined in the digital photograph under magnification the last five letters turned out in fact to be ΔΟΞΟΝ,<sup>35</sup> which means that we can construe the last fourteen letters as two adjectives quite similar in meaning: ἔντιμον (“honored”) and ἔνδοξον (“esteemed”). Both adjectives—as is often the case—could also be used as personal names: Entimos and Endoxos. This is, of course, precisely what we expect after διαφυλάξατε, but do we have two people or one? The second name with a change of the last letter from *nu* to *upsilon* could easily be the father’s name, but we would hope for more parental imagination than naming a son “Honored, son of Esteemed.” The second word is used as a title in late antiquity (LSJ s.v.), so our text may be designed to “protect the esteemed Entimos”; but titles are not common on magical texts. Finally we should leave open the possibility that a pair of males are to be protected, but this would imply that the amulet was placed in the house and not carried on the person. In any case it seems that our gem-cutter improvised and personalized the prayer on this side of the amulet.

He did not do a very good job, however: this small portion of an otherwise clearly and well written inscription is the most difficult to read because it seems to have been a last-minute thought added quickly to the bottom of the amulet. First of all, the gem-cutter never finished the last line of symbols, even though everywhere else he seems to have kept Greek letters and symbols in separate and complete lines. He did so, I suggest, when he realized or recalled at nearly the last moment that the client wanted the amulet to be personalized. Apparently worried about fitting the entire prayer into this small

<sup>35</sup> The *delta* is tipped slightly backwards and is easily mistaken for an *alpha*, and what looked to Michel like the top horizontal of an *epsilon* or *theta* is actually the bottom horizontal of the *epsilon* on the previous line. The scribe, in fact, had to make his letters smaller in order to fit them into this final line of the inscription. The second letter is certainly an *omicron* and nearly identical to the second *omicron* in the same word.

place, he begins at the end of the previous line with  $\delta\iota\alpha$ - and then jumps down a line to the point after the last of the symbols and inscribes the rest of the imperative, but omitting the letters *phi* and *upsilon*. Finally the last two words are hastily and sloppily inscribed and the letters throughout are much smaller than elsewhere on this otherwise well designed and executed amulet.<sup>36</sup>

*April, 2013*

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<sup>36</sup> For their kind assistance in my study of these gems and other amulets I would like to thank Christine Kondoleon and Lydia Herring-Harrington of the Museum of Fine Arts, Susanne Ebbinghaus of the Harvard Art Museums, Joseph Greene of the Harvard Semitic Museum, and Ulla Kasten of the Babylonian collection in the Sterling Memorial Museum at Yale University. I am grateful, also, to Brien Garnand for his help at the start putting me in contact with various people in Cambridge and to Tom Carpenter, Ken Lapatin, and Kent Rigsby for comments on the text.