

# Protective Iambic Incantations on Two Inscribed Octagonal Rings

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**I**N AN ARTICLE published in this journal in 2009, C. A. Faraone identified and discussed a group of four inscribed instances of a protective iambic incantation formula, a version of which is also prescribed in the late ancient medical treatise of Marcellus Empiricus.<sup>1</sup> The latter text, an iambic trimeter, runs θεὸς κελεύει μὴ κύειν κόλον πόνους, “a god commands that the belly not conceive pain,” and is recommended for inscription on a gold ring. Two such gold rings inscribed with similar formulae (θεὸς κελεύει μὴ ἔχειν πόνους κόλον and θεὸς κελεύει μὴ κύειν κόλον πόνον ἐν δυνάμει Ιαω) have been examined by Faraone,<sup>2</sup> along with variants on a gold band, a bronze ring, and a prism-shaped bronze pendant.<sup>3</sup>

Two further examples, both inscribed with iambic trimeters directed against pain in the intestines, can now be added to this group, objects already published but not yet so identified. I provide here a text, translation, and brief commentary for both.

The first of these, an octagonal gold ring now in Belgrade and said to have been found in Serbia or Macedonia, expands

<sup>1</sup> “Stopping Evil, Pain, Anger, and Blood: The Ancient Greek Tradition of Protective Iambic Incantations,” *GRBS* 49 (2009) 227–255 (hereafter ‘Faraone’), at 235–239 with bibliography on previous discussions; Marcellus 29.23, ed. M. Niedermann, *Corp.Med.Lat.* V 231.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively, Faraone 237 no. 2 (once in Florence), and his “Notes on Some Greek Amulets,” *ZPE* 172 (2010) 213–219, at 213–215 (purchased in Beirut, now in Paris). I present a normalized Greek text here in both cases.

<sup>3</sup> Faraone nos. 4, 3, and 5 respectively.

the geographic scope of the tradition of this particular iambic incantation formula to the Balkans and allows it to be traced into the sixth or seventh century A.D. Furthermore, the verb used to describe the ‘growth’ of pain combatted by the incantation (φύειν) suggests a connection with another literary parallel adduced by Faraone, an incantation for abscesses mentioned by Pliny the Elder: *negat Apollo pestem posse crescere cui nuda uirgo restringat*.<sup>4</sup> The second object, a late ancient octagonal bronze ring of unknown provenance now in London,<sup>5</sup> preserves a garbled version of the formula that may be the result of direct copying from a similar ring. Together the two rings also provide further instances of a variant of the formula in which the verb of command appears in the first person, as seen previously in a gold band from the Castellani collection.<sup>6</sup>

**1.** An octagonal gold ring said to come from Serbia or Macedonia is now in the National Museum of Belgrade (inv. 113/IV).<sup>7</sup> It was published with a drawing and partial photograph by I. and A. V. Popovic<sup>8</sup> and reviewed, with an improved text, as *SEG LII* 655. The ring was dated to the sixth or

<sup>4</sup> “Apollo says that no disease can grow in one for whom a naked maiden quenches it,” Plin. *HN* 26.93, to be spoken by a *nuda uirgo* while applying a poultice to the patient; discussed at Faraone 239, where the incantation is also identified as an iambic senarius.

<sup>5</sup> Described as “late Roman” in the first edition, F. H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman, in the Departments of Antiquities, British Museum* (London 1907) no. 641 (see further below), with specification of a date range from the third to fifth centuries A.D. in the introduction, p. xlvii. More precision does not seem possible.

<sup>6</sup> Faraone no. 4, θεὸς κελεύω ...

<sup>7</sup> The photograph provided in the first edition shows that the inside of the ring bears a further modern processing number of uncertain significance: 137.

<sup>8</sup> “Greek Inscription on Golden Finger Ring from National Museum in Belgrade,” *Starinar* 52 (2002) 157–160; previously mentioned in I. Popovic, *Late Roman and Early Byzantine Gold Jewelry in National Museum in Belgrade* (Belgrade 2001), cat. no. 29, where it is said to have been acquired from D. Obradovic in 1908 (p.159).

seventh century A.D. on palaeographic grounds in the first edition. One further improvement can now be made to the text in light of the identification of the type. The inscription runs counterclockwise across the eight faces (separated here by |) on the outside of the ring:

θεὸς | καὶ | ἰλεὺς | ὠ μὴ | φύιν | κόλ|ω(ν) πό|νον.

2–4 *l.* κελεύω || 5 *l.* φύειν || 6–7 ΚΟΛΩ *ring, l.* κόλον

“I, a god, command that the belly not produce pain.”

5 φύιν: The other examples discussed by Faraone (237), and the new instance identified below in text **2**, use either κύειν or ἔχειν for the forbidden action. The present locution recalls the incantation in Plin. *HN* 26.93 (quoted above), in which Apollo forbids disease to grow (*crescere*), though there the verb is intransitive. Cf. the metaphorical usage applied to the begetting of unsatisfactory children in Soph. *Ant.* 645–647: ὅστις δ’ ἀνωφέλητα φιλύει τέκνα, / τί τόνδ’ ἄν εἴποις ἄλλο πλὴν αὐτῶ πόνους / φῦσαι.

6–8: I print κόλ|ω(ν) πό|νον in preference to κόλω πόνον (*SEG*) or κολωπόνον (ed. pr.). The latter compound is unattested; the new reading follows the syntax expected based on the identified parallels, while the loss of final -ν and conflation of vowel quantity in ο and ω are trivial,<sup>9</sup> as are the phonetic graphemes noted in 2–4 and 5. The intransitive use of φύω in the present active, which both previous readings seem to require, would be unusual, this sense being usually restricted to the passive voice or the active in the second aorist, perfect, and pluperfect tenses (cf. LSJ and Lampe s.v.); so too the locative dative without a preposition in the *SEG* version (cf. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* §§1530–1536).

**2.** An octagonal bronze ring once in the collection of Sir A. W. Franks entered the British Museum through his bequest in

<sup>9</sup> Cf. F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Milan 1976) I 111–112, 275–277.

1897. It was first described in the catalogue of F. H. Marshall.<sup>10</sup> Marshall, who identified the ring as “Gnostic,” provided only a majuscule transcription, beginning at an arbitrary point and reading counterclockwise around the ring:

ΠΕΚ | ΟΥΕΝ | ΟΛΟΝ | ΚΕΛ | ΘΥΩ | ΗΜ | ΘΕΟΣ | ΥΕΙΝ<sup>11</sup>

As no facsimile has yet been published, I provide here photographs of the ring (*fig. 1*). Choosing a different starting point but reading in the same direction, I number the segments thus:

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8  
 ΘΕΟΣ | ΥΕΙΝ | ΠΕΚ | ΟΥΕΝ | ΟΛΟΝ | ΚΕΛ | ΘΥΩ | ΗΜ

Now supposing an easy graphic confusion of Θ for the rounded uncial E in 7 and a transposition of M and H in 8, we readily find the opening element in the protective command formula, θεός ... κελ(ε)ύω (μή) ... In light of that parallel, further corrections can be made: <κ>ύειν in 2 and π(ό)νο)ν | <κ>όλον in 3–5. These errors are somewhat more complex, but E for O and OY for N are graphically plausible; ΠΕΚ in 3 perhaps represents an uncorrected false start in the writing of <Κ>ΟΛΟΝ in 5, with further confusion of O and E.

Accordingly, so far we can reconstruct

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8  
 θεός | <κ>ύειν | π(ό)νο)ν | <κ>όλον | κελ | (ε)ύω | (μή)

Here we find all the expected elements of the formula, with a particularly close resemblance to the gold band from the Castellani collection (Faraone no. 4: θεός κελεύω μή [κ]ύειν π(ό)νο[v] κόλον), but in a nonsensical order. This larger dislocation is obviously the result of some more serious textual corruption. It would be possible to attribute that garbling to various layers of corruption in a written formulary employed by the engraver; but I suggest that the situation can be most

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, *Catalogue* no. 641.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall’s readings have been confirmed on the original by C. A. Faraone (see n.12 below); the E of ΘΕΟΣ is somewhat obscured by surface damage, but clear under raking light (see *fig. 1.A*).

readily explained by reference to direct copying from another octagonal ring with the expected order, whose faces I designate as A–H:

A      B      C      D      E      F      G      H  
 θεός | κελ | εύω | μῆ | κύειν | πό | νον | κόλον

Suppose that the engraver of the present ring began his copy with face A of the hypothetical original, θεός, then carelessly skipped to the face diametrically opposite it (E, κύειν) and continued in order counterclockwise from there, moving on to F, G, and so forth. He will then in due course have reached A, realized the mistake, and therefore avoided copying this face a second time, skipping now to B and ending with D. Such an order yields exactly what is observed in the British Museum ring, with the additional graphic errors explained above, perhaps present in part already in the exemplar. I present finally a re-ordered text noting in parentheses the original order:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

θεός | κελ | (ε)ύω | (μῆ) | (κ)ύειν | π(ό | νο)ν | (κ)όλον  
 2–3 (6–7) ΚΕΛΘΥΩ *ring* || 4 (8) ΗΜ *ring* || 5 (2) ΥΕΙΝ *ring* ||  
 6–7 (3–4) ΠΕΚΟΥΕΝ *ring* || 8 (5) ΟΛΟΝ *ring*

“I, a god, command that the belly not produce pain.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I would like to thank Christopher Faraone for first suggesting to me the identification of the second text discussed here, sharing photographs and notes from autopsy of the original, and reading a draft of the present article. I am also grateful to the editorial board of *GRBS*, and an anonymous referee, for further suggestions. Any remaining errors are my own.

*Figure 1.A–D*  
 Octagonal gold ring, British Museum  
 Marshall, *Catalogue* no. 641  
 All images © Trustees of the British Museum



A: faces 8, 1, 2 (original numbering)



B: faces 4–6 (original numbering)



C: faces 6–8 (original numbering)



D: seen from top