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Trois figurines d'ivoire de site prédynastique de Tell el-Farkha

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FOUILLES ARCHEOLOGIQUES EN POLOGNE

Bolesław Ginter, Marta Połtowicz-Bobak: *Dzierżysław 35 – an open-air Magdalenian site in Upper Silesia (part III)*

Paweł Valde-Nowak: *Early farming adaptation in the Wiśnicz Foothills in the Carpathians. Settlements at Łoniowa and Żerków*

Piotr Godlewski: *Rescue excavations at the multi-cultural site 1 in Grodowice, Kazimierza Wielka district, season 2005*

Tobias L. Kienlin, Paweł Valde-Nowak: *Bronzezeitliches Siedlungswesen im Vorfeld der polnischen Westkarpaten: Geomagnetische Untersuchungen und Geländebegehungen im Bereich des Dunajectals*

Wojciech Blajer: *Die Ausgrabungen an der Fundstelle 5 in Lipnik, Kr. Przeworsk (Siedlung der Trzciniec-Kultur, Gräberfeld der Tarnobrzeg-Gruppe), in den Jahren 2004–2006 (7.–9. Grabungssaison)*

Anna Gawlik, Piotr Godlewski: *Rescue excavations at site 1 in Witów, Proszowice district. Seasons 2004–2006*

Ulana Zielińska: *Bone material from the Lusatian culture settlement in Witów*

Karol Dziegielewski, Urszula Bąk, Tomasz Kalicki, Barbara Szybowicz: *Investigations in 2004–2006 at the Bronze Age cemetery (site 3) at Zbrojewsko, district Kłobuck, voiv. Śląskie*

Agnieszka Klimek, Łukasz Oleszczak, Zbigniew Robak: *Forschungen an der Fundstelle der Lausitzer Kultur in Sufczyce, Fst. 8, Kr. Staszów, im Jahre 2005*

Marcin S. Przybyła: *Sondierungsausgrabungen auf der Siedlung aus der Bronzezeit und der römischen Kaiserzeit in Markowa, Kr. Łańcut, Fst. 85*

Marzena J. Przybyła: *Bericht von den Rettungsausgrabungen in Lipnik, Fst. 3, Gde. Kańczuga, Kr. Przeworsk, voiv. Łódzkie. Saison 2003–*

Jacek Poleski: <i>Results of excavations conducted on the stronghold at Damice, commune Iwanowice, district Kraków, in the years 2004 – 2006</i>	327
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Fragment der städtischen Wehrmauer des Krakauer Kazimierz, freigelegt 2005 an der Podgórska-Straße im Bereich des Spitals der Barmherzigen Brüder</i>	341
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Archäologische Grabungen im Bereich des Wróblewski-Collegium der Jagiellonen Universität in Kraków in den Jahren 2003–2005</i>	347
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Archäologisch-architektonische Untersuchungen im Hof des Collegium Novum der Jagiellonen-Universität in Kraków in den Jahren 2005–2006</i>	363

RECHERCHES ARCHEOLOGIQUES A L'ETRANGER

Valery Sitlivy, Krzysztof Sobczyk, Margarita Koumouzelis, Panagiotis Karkanis: <i>The New Middle Palaeolithic Human Occupations in Cave 1 in Klissoura, Greece. The Investigations in 2004–2006</i>	377
Małgorzata Kaczanowska, Janusz K. Kozłowski, Adamantios Sampson: <i>Results of investigations into the Early Mesolithic site of Maroulas on the island of Kythnos (Western Cyclades)</i>	397
Marek Nowak, Magdalena Moskal-del Hoyo, Maria Lityńska-Zajac, Tomasz Kalicki, Janusz K. Kozłowski, Georgiy I. Litvinyuk, Marian Vizdal: <i>A settlement of the early Eastern Linear Pottery Culture at Moravany (Eastern Slovakia) – Preliminary report on seasons 2004 and 2006</i>	407
Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz: <i>Excavations of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha in 2006</i>	429
Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin: <i>The catalogue of graves from Tell el-Farkha</i>	457
Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka, Eugenia F. Redina, Jarosław Bodzek, Wojciech Machowski: <i>The Koshary Project (Ukraine, Odessa province), seasons 2004–2006</i>	487
Wiesław Koszkuł, Jarosław Żralka, Bernard Hermes: <i>Archaeological Investigations at Nakum, Peten, Guatemala: New Data on the Site's Development and the Discovery of a Royal Tomb</i>	509
Radosław Palonka, Kristin Kuckelman: <i>Goodman Point Pueblo: Research on the Final Period of Settlement of the Ancestral Pueblo Indians in the Mesa Verde Region, Colorado, USA. The Preliminary Report, 2005–2006 Seasons</i>	543

THESES DE DISSERTATIONS

Jacek Poleski: <i>Frühmittelalterliche Burgen am Dunajec</i>	569
Grażyna Bąkowska: <i>Oriental elements in the iconography of magical gems (1st – 3rd centuries A.D.)</i>	579
Marcin Biborski: <i>Schwerter aus der jüngeren und spätrömischen Kaiserzeit sowie der Frühphase der Völkerwanderungszeit aus dem Gebiet des europäischen Barbaricums und des Römischen Kaiserreichs. Typologie, Chronologie, Identifizierung römischer Erzeugnisse</i>	587

Mikołaj Budzanowski: <i>The cult niches on the upper court of the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari. Royal cult aspects in the Temple of Millions of Years Djoser-Djeseru during the reign of Queen Hatshepsut</i>	599
Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin: <i>Burial custom in Lower Egypt in the Pre- and Early Dynastic period</i>	601
Anna Gawlik: <i>Scythian influences on the western and north-western borderlands of Great Scythia</i>	605
Dorota Gorzelany: <i>Burial form vs. ideologia funeraria. Formation of monumental tombs in Macedonia in the Classical and Hellenistic periods and their impact on the funerary complexes of Alexandria</i>	613
Wojciech Machowski: <i>Kurgans in the necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast</i>	623
Jacek Pierzak: <i>Mittelalterliche Topfhelme auf polnischem Boden im Hinblick auf Westeuropa</i>	629
Aleksandra Zięba: <i>The Middle Palaeolithic in Kraków region: Piekary IIa and Kraków ul. Księcia Józefa sites, in European context</i>	641
Leszek Zinkow: <i>Legacy of the Ancient Egypt in Polish literature (until 1914)</i>	655
Jarosław Żrałka: <i>Terminal Classic Occupation in the Maya sites located in the Triangulo Park area and the problem of their collapse</i>	657
Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka, Wojciech Machowski, Marta Kania: <i>Black Sea links: exhibition and conference in Cracow</i>	659

Grażyna Bąkowska

Oriental elements in the iconography of magical gems (1st-3rd centuries AD)¹

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Magical gems, called also Gnostic, are dated mainly to the 1st-3rd centuries AD, although they occur in later period too. "A magical (or Gnostic) gem" is a conventional term. Images, symbols and inscriptions cut in them often refer to Gnosticism, a religious-philosophical current very popular at that time. However, the term "magical gems" is more correct, as they include various motifs referring to the magic, and to diverse cultures and religions of the Mediterranean.

Artifacts analyzed in this work were amulets. They were made of hard semiprecious stones. The most popular shapes were oval, elongated, less frequently rectangular or heart-like.

Amulets were set and worn in rings, necklaces or other items of jewellery. Figural representations or inscriptions were often engraved on both sides of the stone. This required setting the stone in such a manner that both sides were visible. Gems could also have been carried in small bags. This is proved by the lack of marks effected through setting the stone in jewellery, and

by damages and marks of wearing visible on broader surfaces.

In gems studied in this work, the image was made by engraving into a flat surface. Such gems, also known as intaglios, were simpler to produce than cameos, in which the image was raised against the background. In the case of amulets, more important was the meaning they conveyed than their esthetic values. That is why the subjects depicted on gems are often schematic and negligent. There was a great demand for such amulets; it is evidenced by their abundance in the 1st-3rd centuries AD. The production had to meet this demand. What counted were particular representations, signs and inscriptions, as well as the kind and color of stone. Many images depicted on gems remain unclear today, and the interpretation of others is ambiguous. Some amulets were apotropaic, bringing good fortune and protecting its owner from dangers or evil forces, others granted health, cared for small children and pregnant women. Amulets permitted its bearer to get a special God's favor. They linked an individual man with God and magic. Magical gems are very important

¹ Dissertation defence in 2004.

artifacts, popular in the whole Mediterranean world for several centuries. They are mentioned by Pliny (NH, XXXIII, 41), who writes that wearing rings with images of Harpocrates and Egyptian gods was widely practiced in Rome. Gems belong to very few categories of antique artifacts that are, in majority, completely preserved. This is important, because it allows us to better understand and study the representations depicted on other artifacts. Subject matter depicted in engraved gems is a comparative source for studying the iconography in the first centuries of modern era.

The interpretation of the representations is difficult, as these images are often syncretic and refer to many traditions and new religious-philosophical currents. Some of these latter, for example Gnosticism, remain not quite clear even today. When studying the iconography and inscriptions carved in gems, one should refer not only to the art of the Mediterranean world, but also to ancient texts, apocrypha and magical papyri.

Studies of magical gems have been limited until recently, when an interest in gemology has increased owing to new works published by renowned scholars representing various disciplines: archaeologists, Egyptologists, historians, classical philologists, and specialists in matters of religion. Of great importance is also the international committee *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum* appointed several years ago. The committee collects and catalogues magical gems from various countries, and performs analytical studies of representations, inscriptions and magical symbols carved in them.

The iconography depicted on amulets in question is characterized by strong syncretism. Influences of various Mediterranean countries traditions are clearly noticeable. Elements taken from the Egyptian iconography are predominant. Greek or – less

frequently – Roman motifs appear as well. One can also notice strong influences from the Jewish religion, Mithraism, Gnosticism and sometimes the Christianity. All these influences combined into very interesting syncretic representations.

The majority of scenes are connected with **BM** and **GR** and **EG**. These representations invoke motifs known from Egyptian iconography, and very often their **Jewit**

on magical gems sway Egyptian scepters, and some of them also hold a whip. However, it should be noted that Egyptian gods very often are equipped with the attributes referring to Greek culture. The most popular is *kerykeion*, symbol of Hermes. This symbol accompanies Isis, Osiris, Horus, Anubis, Thoth, Hellenistic Sarapis as well as anguipede. Another Hermes' attribute – a pouch, appears with Anubis and Thoth. Cornucopia is also very frequent. A club, Hercules' attribute, accompanies both Thoth and Anubis. A globe, in the Greek art connected with Nemesis, is a popular attribute as well. Isis, Sarapis, Anubis, anguipede, and also Archangel Michael are depicted on gems with a globe. Some symbols refer to other cultures of the East. Common is a cock, known from the Persian and Greek tradition as the attribute of Hermes and Helios. Sometimes, a cock accompanies the representations of Anubis, Thoth and Sarapis. A solar symbol – swastika – can be seen together with anguipede. Deities on magical gems were provided with various attributes, which gave them greater power and made them more versatile or even universal. Sometimes one deity assumed the features of other gods. The best example is the so called Bes-Pantheos, whose body, as well as attributes, is composed of elements referring to other deities. The anguipede is another syncretic deity. The roots of this mysterious character should be sought in Judaism, gnosis and magic. Connections with Persian culture and Babylonian astrology can be detected as well. This divinity refers to a solar idea, underworld and – wearing the legionary soldier's uniform – to the earthly life. The same uniform was also worn by Horus, Anubis and Archangel Michael. It should be mentioned here that – like the anguipede – also Anubis, Chnoubis, baboon and Osiris' mummy can have snakes for legs. The anguipede was sometimes labeled as Abaxas.

According to Basilides, one of the earliest Gnostics, Abrasax (Abraxas) was a Jewish god, commanding the angels who had created humans. According to the Greek notation the letters comprising this name give the number 365. This number is equal to the number of heavens and the number of days in the year. Seven letters of the name refer to seven planets and to seven days of a week. The anguipede is often accompanied by the name Iao, which is identified with the Jewish god Jahve. One of the most recent interpretations suggests that the anguipede is an angelic work. The Book of Genesis comprises a story about angels, children of God; they coupled with women, who gave birth to sons named GiBoR, which means hero, demigod, great man. The connection between the anguipede and angels is evidenced by names of angels found on gems with the representation of the anguipede. They are: Michael, Gabriel, Ariel and Raphael. The representations of the anguipede are also accompanied by the divine names Sabaoth and Adonai. Sabaoth is the Greek version of Hebrew "Lord of Hosts". Adonai – "My Lord" – is associated with the first Decane of Lion. There often appears a palindrome *ablanathanalba*, which is the word of Hebrew origin, translated as "Father, come to us". On magical gems one can often discover encoded cryptic words, purposely obscure, with the letters permuted and arranged in curious designs. Sequences of vowels appear as well. Each one corresponds to an individual note, a musical tone emitted by one of the seven planets. It was believed that reaching god required breaking the rules of common language. Secret symbols called *charakteres* were also used. Like many inscriptions, numerous *charakteres* are still incomprehensible.

The most mysterious representation was the symbol of uterus. There were many

attempts of its interpretation. It was considered to be a vessel attached to an irrigation wheel, a musical instrument or a blast furnace.

Usually, a uterus symbol is depicted on amulets together with Egyptian gods. These deities were to protect uterus, which was locked with a key. The amulet protected uterus from diseases, assured fertility and safe delivery. Gems with the representation of uterus were mainly carved in hematite. Called the “bloodstone”, in antiquity hematite was believed to protect from miscarriage and to favor fertility. Amulets with the symbol of uterus belong to medical gems, along with those bearing the representation of Chnoubis, the lion-headed serpent. This deity is linked with Egyptian god Khnum. Chnoubis gems prevented stomach ache and cured the indigestion. A crown with rays points to connections with the sun, which is also indicated by inscriptions. A snake-like body reflects its chthonic character. Chnoubis is also related to astrology. He was believed to belong to Decane of Cancer or Lion and was to herald the flooding of the Nile.

Sometimes the deities on magical gems were depicted in the form of a snake with human head, like Isis and Sarapis. There appeared also a deity in the form of a human with a snake head. The representation of a snake appeared on gems very often and in various forms. It should be noted that on artifacts in question gods were depicted in the shape of animals or with animal heads. Such complex, hybrid forms are known mainly from Egypt, where the image of a deity was to indicate its role in nature. The manner of portraying depended on the feature which was the primary focus of the representation. Deities engraved on magical gems usually appear as complex forms. Their shape or attributes often indicate some sort of connection both with the underworld and with

the sun. In other cases, the connections with underworld gods themselves, like Hekate, Persephone and Hades, Babylonian Ereshkigal, or Egyptian Hathor, Anoubis and Thoth, are noticeable. A deity associated with the sun is, first of all, Helios. The depictions of Heliorus, Harpocrates, Horus, Sarapis, Chnoubis, and Mithra refer to the sun as well. Gods often have crowns with rays and sun-related symbols, accompanied by solar inscriptions. One should mention here the motif of a lion and a scarab frequently encountered on gems. Heliorus, Chnoubis, anguipede, Aion, as well as Moses and Judah son of Jacob, are represented with a lion-head with rays. The deities are often surrounded by animals – one should mention here Harpocrates, Isis, Sarapis, Thoth, Chnoubis, baboon or phoenix. Sometimes they are at the center of the Zodiac circle. For example, Sarapis and Mithra are depicted in this way. Such depiction emphasizes a deity’s rule over the universe. The same meaning is attributed to a globe that accompanies the deities. A globe gives also the power over destiny. The rule over the cosmos is also invoked by other references to zodiac signs, decans or planetary names, as well as by the recurrent motif of stars and the moon on amulets. As mentioned before, the majority of deities depicted on magical gems has simultaneously solar and chthonic features, the same attributes, and sometimes are accompanied by the same inscriptions. The names Iao and Abrasax are the most common, but there appear also various names of deities or angels from the Jewish tradition, as the latter was a rich source of inspirations for Gnostics. Very often on gems were engraved magical inscriptions, similar to those found in magical papyri. Various gems bear also the invocations to “the one Zeus Sarapis Iao”, or declaring Sarapis Iao the one god. Also Jaldabaoth, the most important Gnostic demiurge and the creator of humans is

identified with Sarapis. This name was also attributed to Alexandrian Aion. Aion was identified with Mithra and he, in turn, was identified with Osiris, Cronus and Chronos. Aion as lord of the universe was sometimes compared with Ouroboros

The study of iconographies on magical gems reveals the intermingling of ideas, deities and names which led to certain unification. By referring to various traditions, ideas could become accepted by many nations and be adopted by most peoples of the Mediterranean. Roots of each religion could have been traced back. Universal ideas, such as resurrection or a solar cult were invoked, which again was accepted by most communities. Magical gems reflect the situations and tendencies present in cultures of the communities living in the first centuries of modern era. They are one more record of that period's history.

This work also attempted to establish main localities of magical gem's production. As was already noticed, the borrowings from both the Ancient and Greco-Roman Egypt iconographies were very common. Particular scenes were referring to other monuments of art. The majority of them were in Egypt. Less apparent are references to art of Syria and Palestine, Asia Minor or Greece. Some gems can be connected with Roman art, and in particular with paintings from Pompeii. In most gems one can find the elements of Egyptian art, or rather of Hellenistic art with distinct Egyptian motifs. Sometimes the depictions on gems invoke more or less popular works of art.

The depictions on coins are very important for the studies of iconographies on magical gems. Particularly good comparative sources are Alexandrian coins, bearing the same or similar motifs.

Apart from iconography, also inscriptions are of great importance. They refer most of all to the magic and Jewish religion. Magic

flourished throughout the Mediterranean world at that time. But gems were influenced by Egyptian magic, which is evidenced by their resemblance to magical papyri. Elements of Ancient Egypt magic can be noted as well, for example in the representations of deities, which had the same great magical power and the same roles as in the land of Pharaohs. Influences of hermetism discerned in gems are also linked with Greco-Roman Egypt. The magic was developing equally energetically in the Jewish community at that time. However, the depictions engraved on magical gems cannot be related to the area of Israel. Jews were always a hermetic nation, strictly obeying their religious traditions. Jewish community in Egypt was different. Egyptian Jews of the Greco-Roman times cultivated their traditions, but were open to new ideas. They were not such a hermetic community as in Palestine. Alexandrian Jews were a large community. Undoubtedly, their culture and religion was widely known in this city and in all Egypt. But we cannot consider them as the producers of magical amulets. In the period when gems were spreading, the Jews were almost totally eliminated from Egypt and particularly from Alexandria, in consequence of rebellions and fights with the Romans.

At that period, Gnosticism flourished in Egypt. The Gnostics were known for esoteric practices, secret symbols and adapting Egyptian iconographies for their representations. Gnosticism was significantly inspired by Judaism. Perhaps, the names of Jewish angels appearing on gems may have Gnostic meaning, or may refer to both religions. Very characteristic is also the appearance of names from the Bible or Apocryphon of John. These names are also encountered in hermetic scriptures, and especially in the Gnostic texts. Among other names, Iao, Abraxas, Sabaoth should be mentioned. Also some characteres can be

found in the Gnostic Book of Jeû. Secret signs treated as seals guided the souls of Gnostics through successive eons to reach the transcendent god. In Gnosticism, this ultimate most hidden god, as well as his name, was the object of manifold speculations. Magical power of a name is known in the culture of Ancient Egypt. The same idea appears on magical gems. Here, god assumes many names, which sometimes are written in code and are not accessible for everyone. The invocations used magical language, the so called *voces magicae*, and numerous formulas, which often remain incomprehensible till today. Like in Gnosticism, also on magical amulets the god is not known, perhaps is concealed under various figures. Sometimes, the name of the most important demiurge Ialdabaoth appears on the discussed objects. As already mentioned, he was identified with Sarapis and Aion. It should be also remarked that this god was assuming many shapes, e.g. of a lion or a snake (in the form of a lion he was named Ariel). Deities with a lion-head are frequently represented on magical gems and bear various names. The name Ariel appears as well.

Images and ideas conveyed by magical gems are strongly related to Gnosticism. This religious-philosophic current was very popular in the Roman period in almost all the Mediterranean zone. It seems probable that Gnostics were the producers of amulets, but our knowledge about this religion is still insufficient. The majority of its evidences had been destroyed after it was declared a heresy. Our information is confined to critical texts written by Christian authors and (original) Gnostic texts are rare.

Without any doubt, the spread and popularity of Gnosticism considerably influenced iconographies of amulets. It seems that the main centre of the production of amulets had to be localized in Egypt. It is further

supported by the Greco-Egyptian syncretism noticeable on gems, and by Greek letters used in the inscriptions.

Also clear references to Christianity are noticeable on magical gems. At the period when gems were produced, the Greco-Egyptian pagan-Christianity was developing in Egypt. On magical amulets are seen Christian-related elements, which can be linked, first of all, with the Egyptian or sometimes Greek traditions. It should be noted that also in the Christian iconography are known the representations which were popular on magical amulets. One of them is the figure of Our Lady embracing Christ, referring to the representations of Isis with Harpocrates. Another one is Christ standing on crocodiles, resembling Horus or Bes-Pantheos. Thoth, Anubis, Sarapis and Isis were depicted on crocodiles too. Saint Christopher, like Anubis on the Eastern Church icons, is depicted with a jackal-head and his role is similar. Salomon depicted on gems as a rider with a spear resembles later images of Saint George.

Gems also reflect the concepts popular at the time when they were produced. Some scenes refer to the Mysteries of Isis, known throughout the Mediterranean, others to the Mithraic Mysteries. At that period, esoteric religions known for their mysteries were flourishing.

A thorough analysis of individual deities and their attributes formed the basis for the attempts to identify their role on magical gems. As already mentioned, most of them refer to the concepts of rebirth, regeneration, solar symbolism. Gems of medical character form a large group as well. Deities were depicted in such a way that their role in various illnesses was exposed. Apart from the already known healing gems, the attention was drawn to other depictions with medical meaning. One can mention here, among other things, gems with a snake-like creature,

Isis, Harpocrates and Thoth. Ancient authors and more or less known legends related with individual deities were evoked when interpreting the deities or scenes. Of great importance in the assignment of gems to appropriate groups is colour and kind of stone. One should stress here the significance of inscriptions and charakteres (often neglected in the works on gems), which help to interpret individual deities or scenes.

Among various amulets, also those connected with everyday life can be distinguished. Some were apotropaic; others helped women in maternity and protected

small children. There were also amulets bringing earthly joys and successes.

Magical amulets are valuable artifacts not only because they convey certain ideas and religious-philosophical currents, but also because of their widespread use we can learn about the mentality of people of those days. The study of gems gives us a deeper insight into problems of everyday life and beliefs, makes it possible to learn about superstitions and magic, all of which constitute the life of an ordinary man. This we will not learn from great, magnificent monuments of official art. (2004)

