

DIE MAGISCHEN GEMMEN IM BRITISCHEN MUSEUM

EDITED BY SIMONE MICHEL, WITH PETER ZAZOFF AND HILDE ZAZOFF. 2 VOLS. VOL. 1. PP. 428; VOL. 2. PP. 136, COLOR FIGS. 8, B&W PLS. 96. THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS, LONDON 2001. £195. ISBN 0-7141-2802 (CLOTH).

In the last few decades, there have been several notable leaps forward in the cataloguing, publishing, and interpretation of magical gemstones. For a variety of reasons, historical and otherwise, the most significant is probably the recent appearance of Michel's dazzling catalogue of the gems in the British Museum. In some ways, this work picks up the thread begun precisely in the middle of the 20th century, when Bonner published his important, albeit eclectic, study of gemstones from several collections, including some in the British Museum (*Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* [Ann Arbor 1950]; see also "Amulets Chiefly in the British Museum," *Hesperia* 20 [1951] 301–45). A decade and a half later, Delatte and Derchain examined the 500 or so gemstones in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (*Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* [Paris 1964]), and since that time, scholars have been publishing smaller European collections in civic and state museums. The best of the bunch have been from the various teams of the Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen (AGD) project, who, in the process of producing (in 14 vols. [1970–1991]) excellent catalogues of the ancient gem collections mainly in German and Russian museums, did not neglect (as others had in the past) to offer full and serious treatment of the magical gemstones that often lay forgotten in museum storerooms.

But until recently, the mother lode of magical gems—the nearly 600 examples housed in the British Museum—had not been fully or properly published, though not for want of effort. In 1975, the museum accepted a proposal from late historian Morton Smith of Columbia University to produce a catalogue. When he realized that he would not finish the job in his

lifetime, he graciously donated substantial funds to the museum to ensure that the work would be completed. Smith died in 1991, and a decade later, the catalogue has finally appeared (for a concise discussion of the history of the collections, see R. Gordon, "Magical Amulets in the British Museum," *JRA* 15 [2002] 666–70). The result has been well worth the wait. It is a handsomely produced large-format two-volume work that offers both a drawing and a black-and-white photograph of each gem, as well as additional color photographs of about 90 of them. In its format, attention to detail, and superb photography, this volume is clearly a direct descendent of the AGD series. This is not surprising, since work on the British Museum catalogue was overseen by P. and H. Zazoff, who both played significant roles in the AGD project.

The organization and writing of the catalogue, however, with all its detailed descriptions, full indices, and numerous cross-references to other published and unpublished gemstones, is primarily the work of Michel, and to her we are greatly indebted. There is no doubt that this catalogue of such a large collection with so many wonderful pieces, when used in concert with the others mentioned above, will finally allow scholars of ancient art, religion, philosophy, magic, and medicine complete access to these objects and thereby spur many valuable studies. This might also be said of Delatte and Derchain's catalogue of the gems in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Michel's catalogue, however, in addition to the best photographs and drawings that money that can buy, is superior because of her wide-ranging knowledge of the artifacts—both those in the British Museum and in other locations.

It is difficult to see her full erudition in the relatively crisp entries, and it is a shame that the museum decided in the end to cut costs by removing her long introduction. Luckily, much of this material has found its way into her equally admirable *Habilitationsschrift, Die magischen Gemmen: Eine Studie zu Zauberformeln und magischen Bildern auf geschnitten Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit* (Geissen 1997 [hereafter *DMG*]), which can almost be used as a third volume of the British Museum catalogue since it gives us much insight into how she decided to categorize and interpret the gems in the museum.

Michel's vast knowledge of this material is hard earned. She visited and studied numerous unpublished, partly published, or poorly published collections in various European and American museums (see list, xiv–xv). As a result, she is deeply familiar with the wide-ranging and often difficult repertoire of magical gemstones, as well as the problem of distinguishing ancient objects from the high-quality imitations created in the Renaissance and early modern periods.

As I have worked with the catalogue, I have been repeatedly astounded by the number of parallels Michel can bring to bear in her discussions of individual gems. A single example will have to suffice here. A fairly famous type of hematite gemstone is inscribed with a uterine symbol on the reverse and on the obverse with a figure of an armed Ares-like figure who stands under and to the left of the inscription of a curious command, which (although still somewhat disputed) reads something like "Thirsty Tantalus drink blood!" This command is repeated in the next line but with the first letter removed. This process is repeated until all the letters are gone. The result is a device that the Greeks called a "wing-formation" on account of the triangular shape that results. In the first half of the 20th century, there was a great deal of interest in the two putatively unique gems of this type. They were the subject of a lively series of articles by some of the greatest experts of the day (e.g., Seyrig, Delatte, Bonner, Barb, and even Rose). As a result, this type

(expanded to three examples in the 1960s) is still often referred to by scholars of magic and medicine (myself included). However, what most of us did not know until the publication of Michel's catalogue is that there are, in fact, nine examples (two of them fragments). Three turned up in the various British Museum collections, two are unpublished (one is in the Getty Museum, and the other is for sale at a Zurich auction house), and one was published in 2001, the same year as the British Museum catalogue. These six additional versions have important enough variations in iconography (on two of them, a bound, animal-headed demon replaces the military man) and in the "wing-formation" to warrant an entirely new study of the lot.

More surprises and work lie ahead. This is another marvelous feature of the book. Reading it (with *DMG* at your side) provides almost as much valuable information as visiting the collection itself. Inevitably, in a work of this length and detail, the catalogue has a few weaknesses (see, e.g., the suggestions on nos. 68, 159, and 160 offered by R.W. Daniel, "Some Magical Gemstones in the British Museum," *ZPE* 142 [2003] 139–42). But the beauty of the volume is that Michel provides a drawing, a photograph, and a simplified diplomatic transcription of every inscription in addition to her own final reading, all of which allows readers to make their own decisions regarding the material. And thanks to the detailed indices and registers (vol. 2) of inscriptions, minerals, and gem shapes, as well as a detailed general index, one can easily trace a path through the rich collection of the British Museum, and further (thanks to the dense references to parallels), to the many other published and unpublished examples that lie beyond its doors.

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