

Magical amulets in the British Museum

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SIMONE MICHEL, herausgegeben von P. und H. Zazoff, *DIE MAGISCHEN GEMMEN IM BRITISCHEN MUSEUM* (British Museum Press, London 2001). Bd. 1: Text, pp. xv + 383; Bd. 2: Tafeln und Indices, pp. 41 with 8 col. and 95 black and white plates. Slip case. ISBN 0-7141-2802-3 (both vols.). £195.

The collection

Among the thousands of books, curiosities and samples of natural history bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane in 1753 to what later became the British Museum were just two magical amulets. Though the Museum's relation to these objects is thus coeval with itself, it was only with the acquisition of 14 under the will of Sir William Hamilton in 1803 and 51 from Lord Towneley in 1805 that Montague House could lay claim to a collection. And it was not until the mid-1860s, with the purchase of the Chester and Eastwood collections, that the Museum came to possess an important holding.¹ Rather rapid growth continued until the First World War with the entry of some smaller collections (e.g., Castellani in 1872) and with the readiness of individuals to donate or sell amulets — the author Rider Haggard gave two, as did W. H. Buckler, the epigrapher of Asia Minor.² By the middle of the last century, the collection had declined relative to that of the Cabinet des Médailles (Bibliothèque Nationale), which had actively sought acquisitions from archaeologists and collectors.³ In 1986, however, the Museum acquired a magnificent collection of 130 items bought from an unknown Swiss collector through Frank Sternberg AG (Zurich) by the London silversmith J. Ogden. With c.590 antique amulets, it can now again claim to be the largest, and perhaps the most important, such collection in the world.

A substantial group of 66 items actually connects the Museum's holding to another European collection — indeed, one of the earliest and most distinguished of all, having been assembled originally by Paul Praun junior of Nuremberg (1548-1616).⁴ As a merchant whose business journeys often took him to Bologna, Praun was able to scour the Italian antiquities market, and preferred small objects since they were easier to ship back to southern Germany. In the late 18th c., his family had the collection inventoried,⁵ and shortly afterwards sold it to a local antiquities dealer. However, the Nurembergers had left matters a little late: the time for magical amulets had passed — to the Enlightenment they represented superstition, to Hellenophile aesthetes such as von Klenze and Winckelmann artistic degeneracy. It took nearly 40 years before Frauenholz managed to persuade Sibylle Mertens-Schaaffhausen of Bonn to buy das Praun'sche Kabinett complete.⁶ In 1859 her collection (or at any rate most of it) was auctioned in England and all trace of it seemed to have been lost. One of the revelations of S.

1 Chester's high-quality collection (he continued to give or sell items to the Museum until 1889) contained 94 items, Eastwood's 140. A catalogue of the regular engraved gems was published already in 1888 by A. H. Smith.

2 In 121 cases (18.6% of the total) the source, and even the date of acquisition, is unknown/unrecorded.

3 A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain, *Bibliothèque Nationale, Les intailles gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris 1964), catalogue 526 items. Of these, 15 belong to the Louvre's Département des Antiquités Orientales, a further 15 to the personal collection of A. Blanchet which were not given by him to the nation, and 5 to other museums. Until the 1920s, however, the French national collection contained only about 200 items; the decisive acquisitions between 1929 and 1960 were of the Collections Froehner (112 items), Schlumberger (90), and Blanchet (87).

4 S. Michel, "Nürnberg und die Glyptik: Steinschneider, Sammler und die Gemmenkunde im 17. und 18. Jhd.," *Nürnberger Blätter zur Archäologie* 16 (1999/2000) 65-90; G. Weber, "Das Praun'sche Kunstkabinett," *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg* 70 (1983) 125-95.

5 C. Th. von Murr, *Description du Cabinet de Mr. Paul de Praun à Nuremberg* (Nuremberg 1797).

6 So far as I know, a mere 13 gems of this collection as such were ever published, only one of which is magical: L. Urlichs, *Dreizehn Gemmen aus der Sammlung der Frau Sibylle Mertens-Schaaffhausen* (Bonn 1846) no. 13 = Michel no. 133 (Urlichs' publication unknown to her).

Michel's excellent catalogue is the discovery that the Eastwood collection, acquired in 1864, contained many items from this 'lost' collection.

The project⁷

A good number of the Museum's long-standing items had been illustrated by C. W. King, the best of the 19th-c. scholars of magical amulets,⁸ but the publication of the Paris collection (1964) and the project *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen* organised by P. Zazoff in Hamburg and begun in the early 1960s, made the absence of a modern catalogue of the British collection something of an embarrassment.⁹ Part of the problem was that the gems were kept in at least 5 different departments and so appeared only to outsiders as a single collection. A proposal in 1971 by Morton Smith of Columbia University, supported by A. A. Barb of the Warburg Institute and other scholars, that he should edit the gems was finally accepted by the Museum in 1975. Only then were they assembled into a single department¹⁰ and a programme of photography started. Unfortunately, this was initially done with a plate camera, and never completed, so that it was also deemed necessary to draw them all, a task which occupied one of the Museum's draughtsmen for 19 years. Over a number of long vacations Smith visited London to work on the task, and he did publish a short article on selected gems.¹¹ But when other obligations and then ill health forced him to give up the project, he generously offered the Museum \$50,000 to carry on with it and named Zazoff as the best man for the job. He died in July 1991, and without his gift there would be no catalogue.

When Zazoff, his wife and Michel, who had just finished her M.A. in Classical Archaeology at Hamburg under Zazoff, arrived at the Museum in January 1991, to their surprise they found nothing in the way of a manuscript. All that existed were hand-written record-cards with facsimiles of the inscriptions and occasional suggested identifications, which they received from America only after Smith's death.¹² My own view, supported by his article, is that Smith began the project under the impression (shared by Barb) that E. R. Goodenough's intuition of Jewish influence on the magical amulets could be widely applied,¹³ but, recognising as he went on that he was not competent to deal with the more obvious and numerous Graeco-Egyptian motifs, privately abandoned the task without openly admitting the fact. At any rate, the entire task of classification and description had to begin afresh. One of the former

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- 7 This brief account is put together from D. Buckton's preface (vii), and private information from S. Michel, D. Buckton and T. Francis of the British Museum Press.
- 8 E.g., C. W. King, *The Gnostics and their remains, ancient and medieval* (1st edn. London 1864, 2nd 1887).
- 9 C. Bonner included only 12 gems from the British Museum in *Studies in magical amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor 1950), and a larger selection in "Amulets chiefly in the British Museum," *Hesperia* 20 (1951) 301-45, but he never visited the Museum and knew the gems only from photos of plaster-casts, as was then usual. According to my count, 239 (about 40%) of the gems published here, exclusive of modern imitations, are wholly unpublished. A further 46 items, all from the Ogden collection, were first published (or cited) only very recently, 34 by Michel herself in "Medizinisch-magische Amulettgemmen. Schutz und Heilung durch Zauber und edle Steine in der Antike," *AntW* 26.5 (1995) 379-87, and 12 by C. Walter, "Some unpublished intaglios of Solomon in the British Museum," *ΘΥΜΙΑΜΑ* (1994) 365-68, pl. 34 (pp. 205-6).
- 10 Not all were brought together: the Department of Prehistoric and Early Europe was unwilling to release its magical gems, and they are not covered in the catalogue.
- 11 M. Smith, "Old Testament motifs in the iconography of the British Museum's magical gems," in L. Casson (ed.), *Coins, culture and history in the ancient world: Numismatic studies for Bluma Trell* (Detroit 1981) 187-94.
- 12 Where possible, these notes have been incorporated into the catalogue and marked 'M. Smith'.
- 13 E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman period* vol. 2 (Toronto 1953) 208-95, stressing the Judaic contribution to the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. Derchain, who was an Egyptologist, regretted that he had not been able to consult an expert on ancient Judaism during work on the Paris catalogue: *Les intailles* (supra n.3) 10 n.1. Nagy's article in this issue, which I refer to again below, lends renewed support to the claim.

curators of the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities (now Medieval and Modern Europe), D. Buckton, to whom the ultimate appearance of these volumes owes a great deal, persuaded the Museum at this time to re-photograph all the gems using 35-mm film.

The group from Hamburg worked to such good effect (Zazoff at first taking the main rôle but quickly ceding it to Michel) that within little more than a year a vast draft manuscript, enough to fill several volumes, was produced. This had to be cut down radically and rewritten, a task that was again assigned to Michel (who by now knew more than Zazoff about magical gems) and completed early in 1993. As a result Zazoff generously recognised her as the author, so that he and his wife appear as 'editors'.¹⁴ The strictly academic component of these volumes, first projected in 1971, thus occupied almost exactly two years.

In selecting Zazoff, Smith had not considered the issue of language. The manuscript was in German, and there was no money to have it translated into English. Buckton himself translated many pages, and farmed out pieces to acquaintances. But it was too difficult, too technical and too long. Two years were then spent in fruitless negotiation with von Zabern to arrange for a joint publication in German. At the same time, British Museum Publications was reluctant to undertake such a costly project in a foreign language. In the end, a precedent was found for publishing a British Museum catalogue in German; but more months passed while the manuscript was (lightly) revised by Michel and then re-read by the press's own designated 'German reader', who knew nothing of the subject. The production itself took two years. At some point in the process, it was decided, apparently by the press and to cut costs, to excise Michel's extensive Introduction. The book that has now at last appeared is essentially therefore the manuscript that was finished in January 1993 minus a history of the collection, a general account of antique magical amulets, and a discussion and justification of the procedures adopted — in short, minus the usual contextual matter of such a catalogue. This is most regrettable, but the author, just one player among many, can hardly be held responsible. The present catalogue is therefore just that, a commentated catalogue; it really needs to be used along with Michel's Habilitationsschrift, partly based on the missing Introduction, and due to appear in the *Schriften aus dem Warburghaus* (Hamburg).¹⁵

The catalogue

Through the AGDS project, Zazoff had had extensive experience of cataloguing gems, and it was he who laid down the basic framework for the catalogue, which follows best standard practice.¹⁶ The team disposed of two sorts of illustrations of each amulet, drawings and photos, and so it was decided to follow Delatte–Derchain and place one at the head of each entry (in this case, the drawings, obverse and reverse) for ease of reference. Since the draughtsmen had worked independently (and often years in advance) of the Hamburg team, however, and their interpretations often differed in minor ways from what the archaeologists saw, it was decided to let these discrepancies stand and allow the reader, with the aid of the photos in vol. 2, to judge which is the more accurate. One should therefore never base an opinion simply on the drawing. As for the plates, the older orthodoxy (Bonner; Delatte–Derchain) had been that such gems should be illustrated from casts to avoid interference from striations in the stone; 35-mm film gives a much sharper image, however, and the Hamburg team rightly decided to have the stones photographed directly and reproduced in enlargement¹⁷ (such amulets are not seals and should not be treated as such). In addition, 93 of the gems, in many types of minerals, are

14 The Zazoffs also commented on her entries as she wrote them and assisted with proof-reading.

15 *Die magischen Gemmen. Eine Studie zu Zauberformeln und magischen Bildern auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit* (Gießen 1997). The Aby Warburg Stiftung awarded her the Hans Reimers prize for 2001 in recognition of her work on the catalogue.

16 P. Zazoff, "Vorwort der Herausgeber," xi. He had also written the standard handbook on ancient gems: *Die antiken Gemmen* (Munich 1983).

17 So also E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Magische Amulette und andere Gemmen des Instituts für Altertumskunde der Universität zu Köln* (Opladen 1992), an exemplary publication of a small collection.

reproduced again in colour, so that the user can experience at first-hand the sensual impression made by such amulets, which monochrome reproduction renders dull and lifeless.

No wholly satisfactory method for writing a large catalogue of this kind has been found, but in practice there are two main models. One is Delatte-Derchain's, who divided their material into 'chapters' and 'sub-chapters', each with a short general introduction discussing the basic motif — the 'Bes-headed God', for example. This is the one I prefer, but professionals in the field find H. Philipp's model more satisfactory. According to that, the first gem of each series receives a full discussion of the type, the remainder a summary one.¹⁸ In general, Michel follows Philipp closely: a detailed description of the images is followed by a commentary, remarks on the technique, citation of the relevant literature and parallel gems in other collections. But Michel also alludes to the other model in providing brief preliminary discussions as a preface to larger groups, such as Harpokrates or Triumph over death. There is no agreed order of topics for such catalogues, which must partly be a function of the character of the collection in question, and there is no general agreement where to allocate different types: magical amulets are essentially individual creations that invoke esoteric knowledge, much of which is now irrecoverable. Michel has followed her own line here: though she starts conventionally with the Isis-group, she links Anubis, Thoth, Hekate, Artemis etc. under the heading 'Moon', and a large group of over 100 gems, including Pantheos, the cock-headed Anguipes (she prefers the pedantic 'Anguipedes') and lion-heads, under 'Sun'. Chnoubis, normally considered solar, falls under 'decan melothesia' and is associated with the astrological types. The remaining chapters deal with healing amulets, of which the British Museum has nearly 80 specimens, Jewish and Christian motifs, and more than 60 gems bearing a text only. Two further chapters deal with scarcely-classifiable miscellanea.

Technically, the catalogue is superb: once having agreed to publish the book, the Press has spared no effort. Design, paper, printing, plates are all excellent. Misprints are few.¹⁹ Four features of the text are especially noteworthy. First, Michel is extremely conscientious: the descriptions of the designs are the fullest and most careful of any such catalogue I know. She has a gift for varying dry descriptions, and holds firmly in check the features of German syntax most off-putting to foreigners. She makes a particular point of commenting on technique and cutting. Second, the commentaries provide rapid but accurate surveys of current interpretations. To take the cock-headed Anguipes, for example, the subject of A. Nagy's article above in this issue: Michel starts from the premise that, while some elements can be interpreted, the composition as a whole remains enigmatic. She then runs through the solar associations of the cock's head, its apotropaic value, the Schwartzes' interpretation of the angel Gabriel as both 'God is mighty' and 'cock of God',²⁰ the association of snake-legs with Greek giants and Jewish Giber (*sic*), Basilidian Abrasax, Zwierlein-Diehl's point about the Septuagint translation of Hebrew *mogen*, 'shield' (= God) as *hyperaspistes* (i.e., 'shield-bearer'), concluding that the Anguipes would then represent God;²¹ and Philonenko's argument that Demotic/Coptic *papoi* (bird, perhaps esp. chicken) resembles *pipi*, a Greek transcription of the tetragrammaton²² — in that order. There are thus several pointers to the conclusion that Nagy now argues for, but it is not drawn. On the other hand, one might well claim that the function of a catalogue of this kind is not to promote new theories but to provide an accurate report of current thinking. This Michel does, and on a grand scale. Third, the references to secondary literature and to parallel gems considerably exceed those of any previous catalogue. This is partly due to the fact that many minor collections have recently been published, but mainly to Michel's broadly-based

18 *Mira et magica. Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Charlottenburg* (Mainz 1986).

19 They occur mainly in the Greek: e.g., nos. 24, 25, 499, 543.

20 F. M. and J. H. Schwartz, "Engraved gems in the collection of the American Numismatic Society, 1: ancient magical amulets," *ANSMN* 24 (1979) 157-59, picking up a suggestion by A. A. Barb.

21 Zwierlein-Diehl (*supra* n.17) 30-31; she owed the point to R. Merkelbach.

22 M. M. Philonenko, "L'anguipède alectorocéphale et le dieu IAO," *CRAI* 1979, 297-304.

knowledge and confident handling of the subject. Finally, modern imitations are not excluded, but incorporated into the catalogue (mainly in chapt. 10: 'Neuwirkung in der Neuzeit') as continuations of the mind-set which produced these gems in antiquity. Michel identifies 30 of the British Museum's imitations as copies of engravings in J. Chiflet's *Abraxas Proteus* (1657), the most widely influential of the early works on these gems; more than half stem from Towneley's collection. This novel emphasis (most such catalogues ignore modern work) fits well with her insistence on the colours and textures of the stones.

This is not the place to discuss detailed interpretations, but I do have some general criticisms. The absence of an Introduction means that there is no account of the strengths and weaknesses of the collection, nor any specific allusion to the rare and unusual types. The longer commentaries on each type-exemplar too often lack direction (the discussion of the Anguipes cited above is an example) and give more the impression of being compilations from a conscientious card-index than short essays guiding the reader to a clear conclusion. They are, if anything, too full of information, which makes it difficult to decide what is important and what not. It is, of course, true that in some cases — such as Pantheos, the lion-heads, or the creatures with snakes' bodies — interpretation is so debated and the significance so obscure that one can only report differences of opinion. A related problem is that there is no connection between the commentaries and the bibliographical references: one cannot link theories with names as I have done above in the case of the Anguipede. It would have been more helpful to have linked commentary to bibliography by means of footnotes.²³ Moreover, this feature sometimes means that, where a specific interpretation is suggested, one cannot locate the supporting evidence: for example, on no. 385 (haematite), an Ares as stiller of liver-pain, we find the claim that the planet Mars was believed to have an astringent effect. This may be so in astral chorography ('fiery' Mars dominating the uninhabitable areas around the equator), but so far as I know is not so in a melothesic context. I am also sceptical of the claim that the link between blood and liver evokes specifically Egyptian notions: Pliny cites the Greek lithicist Sotakos (c.300 B.C.) for the view that the best kind of haematite for liver-afflictions comes from Africa and is actually black magnetite (NH 36.146-47). Such lore had thus long been received in the Greek world, and I incline to agree with Bonner that these types are Greek.²⁴

Some more technical matters. Michel makes a point, like Philipp, of putting a date by each stone. These are frankly educated guesses; but given that she has put considerable effort into noting stylistic and glyptographic issues, this might have been the opportunity to try and specify, even systematise, the type of criteria that one should use in dating these gems. Again, one misses an Introduction. In some cases, indeed, it is extremely important to look at these dates, because, keeping faith with her view of modern imitations as the legitimate successors of antique gems, she has catalogued 10 of them with the ancient pieces. The very first item, for example, is a triangular jadeite with an odd-looking Osiris mummy, and until one notices the date, one is confused and incredulous.²⁵ It would have been better to have removed them from the main catalogue. Michel has also followed Philipp in deciding to print all the *onomata* in Greek capitals. This practice makes it unnecessarily difficult to read these 'words' when one ought to be trying to recognise elements within them, and simply exaggerates their 'coefficient of weirdness'. Not only was the older practice of Bonner and Delatte-Derchain, who printed them in lower case, easier on the eye, it saved a lot of space: the 16 pages of the index taken up with them could easily have been cut by half. I am afraid the elaborate General Index is virtually useless, since it does not distinguish typographically between main discussions and mere mentions — for some reason all the references are in bold type. Who will have the energy or leisure to look through 107 references under 'ouroboros'? Finally, the Index of Materials reveals some oddities. Most of the stones are given in German, but some are taken over in English from the laboratory's report. I cannot see the logic behind this: the German for Albite is 'Albit', for "Jade"/Jadeite = 'Jadeit'/'Nephrit', Siltstone = 'Sandstein', Prase = 'Prasem', and so on, all perfectly easy to discover from an ordinary mineralogical handbook. 'Diorit' is already German, and 'Chalcite' cannot have stood in the list unless the technician was nodding, since in English it is Calcite and in German Calcit.

But I have no wish to end on a carping note. Our main feelings must be of gratitude and respect for Michel's outstanding achievement. With the support of the Zazoffs, the Museum and the Press, she has given us what is likely always to remain the catalogue of reference for magical gems.

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23 As is done by Zwierlein-Diehl (supra n.17). Michel follows Philipp here, whose bibliographical references are much less full; but there may also have been a question of cost and lay-out.

24 See Bonner, *Studies* (supra n.9) 66-67.

25 These pieces are asterisked only in the plates section.