

Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems

Meanings and interpretations

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In memory of my beloved inspiring mother, Osnat (Sabina) Sagiv

Contents

List of figures	ii
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction.....	1
Engraved gems: a survey	7
1. The Uses of Engraved Gems	7
A. Engraved Gems as Seals	7
B. Engraved Gems as Amulets.....	10
C. Engraved Gems as Jewellery	14
2. The materials used for ancient gems.....	16
A. Chalcedonies or non-crystallising quartzes	16
B. Crystallising quartzes	17
C. Harder, more precious stones.....	18
D. Inferior varieties	19
3. The themes depicted on gems	19
4. References to gemstones in ancient literary sources	20
5. Dating methods	21
A. Archaeological context	22
B. The type and shape of the gemstone	22
C. The technique and style of the gemstone	23
D. Choice of themes	33
E. Comparison to works in other media	33
6. Carving technique	34
7. Artists and workshops	36
Animal images and their meaning	38
Mammals.....	39
Cattle.....	39
Deer.....	50
Goats	55
Horses	63
Boars and sows.....	84
Predatory animals.....	87
Panthers	87
Lions.....	90
Birds, Birds of Prey, and Fowl.....	104
Eagles	104
Parrots	107
Roosters.....	109
Geese.....	115
Swans.....	116

Insects.....	119
Ants.....	119
Marine creatures.....	121
Dolphins.....	121
Seashells.....	125
Hybrids.....	126
Sphinx.....	126
Pegasus.....	133
Capricorn.....	137
Hippocamp.....	140
Gryllos (Hippalectryon).....	144
Interactions between animal depictions in various media and their depictions on gems.....	146
Associations between animal depictions and the type of gemstone and its believed qualities.....	153
Summary.....	161
Abbreviations.....	167
Bibliography.....	167
Ancient Sources.....	167
Modern Sources.....	172

List of figures

Figure 1a.	A Cow Suckling her Calf and a grasshopper, green jasper, 12x16x8.5 mm, a Classical-Phoenician scarab, first half of the 5th century BC.	40
Figure 1b.	Impression of the green jasper scarab.	41
Figure 2a.	Double sided gem: side a – a bull and a star, drawing, carnelian, 10 x 7.5 x 2.5 mm, 1st BC–AD 30.	44
Figure 2b.	Side b – head of a woman.....	44
Figure 2c.	Side b – head of a woman, drawing.....	44
Figure 3.	Grazing bull, impression of carnelian stone, 10 x 7.5 x 5.5 mm, an Etruscan ‘globolo’ style scarab, 350 BC.	45
Figure 4.	Bull and tree, carnelian, 13.5 x 11 x 2 mm, 1st century AD.	46
Figure 5a.	Cow, onyx, 14 x 9.5 mm, the second half of the 1st century BC–beginning of the 2nd century AD.	47
Figure 5b.	Impression of the onyx stone.	47
Figure 6.	A cow and a calf, carnelian, intaglio and impression, 10 x 7.5 x 2.5 mm, c. 31 BC–AD 14.	48
Figure 7a.	Herdsman driving an ox-drawn plough, red jasper, 15 x 11.5 x 2 mm, the beginning of the 2nd century AD.	49
Figure 7b.	Herdsman driving an ox-drawn plough, drawing.	49
Figure 8a.	Sitting stag, banded agate, an Archaic late 5th-century BC scarab	51
Figure 8b.	Archaic agate scarab.....	51
Figure 8c.	Impression of the agate scarab.....	51
Figure 9a.	Leaping deer, carnelian, 11 x 9 x 7 mm, an Etruscan ‘globolo’ style scarab, third century BC.	52
Figure 9b.	Impression of the scarab.....	53
Figure 10a.	Satyr petting a goat, carnelian, 17 x 15 mm, 18th century.	56
Figure 10b.	Impression of the carnelian stone.....	57
Figure 11a.	Goat browsing from a tree, red jasper, 17 x 13 x 2 mm, 2nd century AD.	58
Figure 11b.	Impression of the red jasper stone.....	58
Figure 12.	Pair of clasped hands, ear of corn and goats, impression of a granite stone, 14.5 x 14 x 2 mm, 1st century BC-AD 30.	59
Figure 13.	Two goats on either side of an amphora, impression of an amethyst stone, 14.5 x 14 x 2 mm, 1st century AD.	60
Figure 14.	Countryman milking a goat, carnelian, end of the 1st–2nd century AD. ...	61
Figure 15.	Shepherd with a dog and a nursing goat, chrome chalcedony, intaglio and impression, 1st century AD.	62
Figure 16.	Front torso of a galloping horse, garnet, intaglio and impression, 16 x 14 mm, 2nd century BC.	65
Figure 17.	Grazing horse, agate, intaglio and impression, 14 x 8 mm, 1st century AD.	67

Figure 18. Horse with a palm-branch, impression of a carnelian stone, 12 x 9 x 6 mm, an Etruscan 'globolo' style scarab, 300 BC.....	67
Figure 19a. Horse in profile, carnelian, 3 x 9 x 11 mm, 2nd century AD.....	68
Figure 19b. Horse in profile, drawing.....	68
Figure 20. Nike/Victory riding a quadriga, heliotrope, 2.5 x 10.5 x 13 mm, 2nd century AD.	69
Figure 21a. Helios/Sol riding a quadriga, carnelian, 2nd century AD.....	70
Figure 21b. Helios/Sol riding a quadriga, drawing.....	70
Figure 22a. Athena driving a biga, carnelian, 18 x 14 mm, 18th century.	71
Figure 22b. Impression of the carnelian stone.....	71
Figure 23a. Achilles, Penthesilea, and her horse, carnelian, 20 x 18 mm, the end of the 1st century BC.....	73
Figure 23b. Impression of the carnelian stone.....	73
Figure 24a. Pair of horses in front of a pillar, carnelian, 11.5 x 8 x 2.5 mm, Late 1st century AD.	76
Figure 24b. Impression of the carnelian stone.....	76
Figure 25a. horseman on a galloping horse, carnelian, 16 x 12 mm, end of the 1st-2nd century AD.	77
Figure 25b. Impression of the carnelian stone.....	77
Figure 26. Rider on a galloping horse, impression of carnelian stone, 15 x 12 x 4 mm, end of the 1st-2nd century AD.	78
Figure 27. Rider with his chlamys fluttering, carnelian, intaglio and impression, 14 x 10 mm, 240-228 BC.	79
Figure 28. A Celtic/Gaulish horseman, impression of carnelian stone, 11 x 12 mm, the first half of the 1st century BC.....	83
Figure 29a. Sow, carnelian, 16.5 x 12 x 9.5 mm, a Classical-Phoenician scarab, mid 5th century BC.....	85
Figure 29b. Impression of the carnelian scarab.....	85
Figure 30. Female panther with a thyrsus, nicolo, 12 x 10 x 3 mm, the end of the 2nd - beginning of the 3rd century AD.....	88
Figure 31. Seated lion, impression of green jasper stone, 13.5 x 9.5 x 6 mm, a Classical-Phoenician scarab, 400 BC.	90
Figure 32. Lion treading on a supine human, agate, intaglio and impression, 12 x 9 mm, the second half of the 1st century - beginning of the 2nd century AD.	93
Figure 33a. Lion attacking a deer, yellow jasper, 12.5 x 10.5 x 2.5 mm, 2nd century AD. ..	95
Figure 33b. Impression of the yellow jasper stone.....	95
Figure 34a. Lion attacking a goat, yellow jasper, 15 x 11.5 x 3 mm, 2nd-3rd century AD..	96
Figure 34b. Lion attacking a goat, drawing.	96
Figure 35. Heracles battling the Nemean lion, red jasper, 21 x 15 mm, 2nd-3rd century AD.	99
Figure 36a. Eros galloping on a lion, red jasper, 14 x 11 x 3 mm, 2nd-3rd century AD..	102
Figure 36b. Eros galloping on a lion, drawing.	102
Figure 37. Eagle standing on a pedestal between two military standards (<i>vexilla</i>), drawing of yellow jasper stone, 2 x 9.5 x 1.51 mm, 2nd century AD.	105
Figure 38. Eagle standing on a pedestal between two military standards (<i>vexilla</i>), drawing of carnelian stone, 12.5 x 10.5 x 2.5 mm, 1st century AD.....	105

Figure 39. Eagle standing on a pedestal and holding a wreath, drawing of nicolo stone, 12 x 10 x 3.5 mm, 2nd century AD.	105
Figure 40a. Eros riding a chariot harnessed to two parrots, impression of red jasper stone, 13 x 11 x 2.5 mm, 2nd century AD.	108
Figure 40b. Eros riding a chariot harnessed to two parrots, drawing.	108
Figure 41. Rooster, impression of carnelian stone, 12 x 8 x 6.5 mm, 100 BC.	110
Figure 42. Pair of roosters engaged in a cockfight, impression of quartz stone, 20 x 11 x 5 mm, 1st century BC–AD 30.	111
Figure 43. Rooster and a scorpion, impression of carnelian stone, 3rd century AD.	113
Figure 44a. Rooster preying upon a mouse, red jasper, 13 x 9.5 x 3 mm, 2nd century AD.	114
Figure 44b. Rooster preying upon a mouse, drawing.	114
Figure 45. Mouse riding on a rooster, carnelian, 12.5 x 10 x 3.5 mm, 3rd century AD.	114
Figure 46a. Juno and a goose, carnelian, 13 x 15 mm, 18th century.	116
Figure 46b. Impression of the carnelian stone.	116
Figure 46. Juno and a goose, carnelian, 13 x 15 mm, 18th century.	116
Figure 47. Leda and the swan, chrome chalcedony, 13 x 15 mm, 1st century AD.	117
Figure 48. Ceres holding ears of corn, with an ant below, impression of carnelian stone, 2nd century AD.	119
Figure 49a. Ant with a grain of wheat, agate, 11.5 x 11 x 3.5 mm, 1st–2nd century AD.	120
Figure 49b. Impression of the agate stone.	120
Figure 50. Eros riding a dolphin, carnelian, intaglio and impression, 11.5 x 10 x 2 mm, 1st century AD.	122
Figure 51. Elephant emerging from a sea-shell, nicolo, 2nd century AD.	126
Figure 52a. Winged sphinx seated in profile, agate, 15X10 mm, 2nd – 1st century BC. .	127
Figure 52b. Impression of the agate stone.	127
Figure 53a. Winged sphinx seated in profile, agate, 1st century BC.	128
Figure 53b. Impression of the agate stone.	128
Figure 54a. Winged sphinx seated in profile, carnelian, 1st century BC.	129
Figure 54b. Impression of the carnelian stone.	129
Figure 55a. Sphinx attacking a warrior, impression, late 2nd–3rd century AD.	130
Figure 55b. Sphinx attacking a warrior, drawing.	130
Figure 56a. Bellerophon riding Pegasus, amethyst, 17 x 14 x 5 mm, 1st century BC – 1st century AD.	134
Figure 56b. Impression of the amethyst stone.	134
Figure 57a. Pegasus, carnelian, 13 x 9 x 4 mm, 1st century BC.	136
Figure 57b. Impression of the carnelian stone.	136
Figure 58. Capricorn and a crab, impression of a carnelian stone, 14 x 10 mm, 2nd–3rd century AD.	138
Figure 60a. Eros on a hippocamp, red jasper, 11 x 8 x 1.5 mm, 2nd century AD.	141
Figure 60b. Eros on a hippocamp, drawing.	141
Figure 61. Eros on a hippocamp, carnelian, intaglio and impression, 15 x 11 x 2 mm, 2nd century AD.	141
Figure 62a. Poseidon with two hippocamps, carnelian, 18th century.	143
Figure 62b. Impression of the carnelian stone.	143
Figure 63. Combination gem (gryllos), carnelian, 2nd century AD.	144

Figure 64. Eagle, goat, and an unidentified animal standing on rocks, drawing, heliotrope, 13.5 x 11 x 3 mm, 2nd–3rd century AD.	149
Figure 65. Boar confronting a snake with a radiated head, impression of a carnelian stone, 12 x 8 x 7 mm, an Etruscan ‘globolo’ style scarab, late 3rd century BC.....	150
Figure 66a. Eagle flying above a bull and a conical rock, heliotrope, intaglio and impression, 17 x 13 x 9 mm, a Phoenician scarab, 5th century BC.	158
Figure 66b. Eagle flying above a bull and a conical rock, drawing.....	158

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Introduction

Engraved gems are precious stones, usually semi-precious, that were processed and polished so that the top surface of the stone featured the design or motif desired by the artist. Gem engraving is a miniature art form whose charm combines the grace of colourful stones and their brilliance with the beauty of the image depicted on them. Engraved gems are divided into two main types: intaglio refers to carving with the design cut into the flat background of the stone; while cameo refers to relief carvings, with the design projecting out from the background, usually using two different colour layers of the same stone. Most of the gems are small in dimension, ranging from several millimetres to a few centimetres. It should be noted however, that there are unique examples, most of them cameos, which are of considerable size, such as the 'Gemma Augustea' kept in Vienna, or the 'Great Cameo of France' (Le Grand Camée de France) kept in the Cabinet des médailles, Paris.¹ The origin of this art lies in the carving of cylinder seals that were common in Mesopotamia from as early as the 4th millennium BC and which spread throughout the Middle and Near East. Minoan and Mycenaean artists learned the intricate technique of engraving gemstones from Eastern artists and produced seal stones until the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, around 1100 BC. The revival of the art of carving gems and seals occurred in Greece only at the end of the 8th century BC. The artists there were inspired by Egypt and the Near East and borrowed several forms (from Egypt the Greek artists borrowed the scarab form) and materials, but the themes and styles were adapted to the tastes and preferences of Greece. Greek designs were varied, and instead of rulers and representations of mythical beasts, so common in Eastern carving, gods and heroes were now selected, as well as mythological and everyday scenes. Greek artists explored the natural world, thus gradually freeing themselves from earlier conventions (Richter 1968: I). On the gems were engraved various images that included not only deities and

¹ 'The Gemma Augustea' – h: 19cm, w: 23cm; 'The Great Cameo of France' – h: 31cm, w: 26.5cm.

mythological themes, but also animals, famous sculptures, astrological signs, portraits and various objects. The art of carving gems reached its peak in the era between the end of Archaic and the end of Hellenistic times. With the rise of Rome, Greek engravers migrated there and during the end of the Republic and the early Empire periods they excelled in carving portraits and symbolic mythological scenes. From the time of Augustus onwards, gemstones, which were once exclusive to the wealthy and affluent ruling classes, became more widely available, and, as a result, the art of gem engraving lost the previous high quality that typified it (Richter 1956: XV–XVI).

Gems ceased to be prevalent in the middle of the 3rd century AD, or slightly later, at the beginning of the 4th century AD. The reasons for the decline of the art of gem engraving are not clear. A certain continuation of the tradition of seal rings can be seen in the Sassanian seals that continued to be manufactured until the Arab conquest (Henig 1997: 93).

In their own time, the depictions on gems were both meaningful and also often symbolic. Many of the images are no longer familiar to us, and research, based on ancient literary sources, is required in order to interpret their meanings (Plantzos 1999: 98). The images depicted on seal rings bore a magical meaning of threat and warning. Anyone who dared to break the seal knew that he risked a terrible punishment for this crime, so the effectiveness of the seal was based on the fear of what might befall with the subsequently discovery (Plantzos 1999: 22). When analyzing the symbols that appear on gems, we find elements borrowed from ancient mythologies, such as Babylonian (Chaldean) and, especially, Egyptian, including cults relating to Serapis-Asclepius, Isis, Harpokrates, Mithras and elements taken from the books of Zarathustra, the Bible and Kabbalistic writings (Babelon, s.v. 'Gemmae', Daremberg and Saglio (eds), *DAGR*, t. 2.2: 1481). According to ancient writers, the devices shown on the seal rings were meaningful for the wearer (Richter 1971: vol.1, 4). For example, it is known that Pompeius chose a depiction of a lion holding a sword (Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. v, *Pompey* LXXX: 5); Julius Caesar chose that of an armed Aphrodite, seeing himself as a descendant of the goddess through Aeneas (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, vol. iv, XLIII: 43), while Augustus had three rings: the first featured a sphinx (Pliny, *Natural History*: XXXVII.Iv.10); the second a portrait of Alexander; and the third his own portrait made by Dioskourides (Pliny, *Natural History*: XXXVII.Iv.10; Suetonius, *De vita caesarum, Augustus/Octavian*, L: 4; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, vol. vi, LI: 3, 4 ff). According to Martin Henig, Vollenweider also assigns meanings to animal representations on gems, based on *Anthologia Graeca* epigrams depicting engraved gems, as well as a fragment from Heliiodorus' *Aethiopica* (Henig 1997: 45; *Anthologia Graeca* IX: 746–747, 750, 752; Héliodore, *Les Éthiopiennes*, t. 2, livre V: 13–14).

The subject of this study, based on my thesis, is animal representations and their meanings on Greek and Roman engraved gems. Animal depictions on gems have not been studied iconographically and stylistically and technically as one division. In addition, no comparison has been made between animal depictions on gemstones and their representations in other media. No research has examined to what extent gemstone artists based their work on artistic models depicting animals which developed in a particular region or were common in the Greco-Roman world from a given time onwards, and/or the degree of their independence. In addition, the beliefs expressed in animal depictions on gems have not been sufficiently examined by analogy with the beliefs associated with the subject as reflected in ancient texts.

Until the second half of the 19th century, interest in engraved gems, including scarabs, scarabaeus, intaglios and cameos, was essentially, to use the words of Henig, 'a recreation practiced by dilettanti' (Henig 1978: xxxi). The gems bearing animal depictions that were published at the time were treated in the same way as other carved stones: they were documented by etching or drawing with minimal text, which in most cases was inaccurate. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, scientific research methods began to be practised in the field of Greco-Roman engraved gems. The most important and comprehensive work among these publications is the monumental three-volume work by Furtwängler (Furtwängler 1900). In this study, and in most of the other catalogues in this literary-research category, the gems are photographed and these comprise a good basis for research. Furtwängler placed the stones in their historical context, i.e. in dating them to centuries and half-centuries, and by assigning them to the different regions and production centres in the Greco-Roman world. He analyzed the gems stylistically and tried to determine the interactions between carving styles and production areas, and also to understand their meanings. His work serves as a foundation and infrastructure for contemporary scholars of ancient gems. However research has progressed greatly over the past century and his conclusions must be re-examined, regarding both the delineation of engraving styles in time and space and his iconographic interpretations.

Furtwängler's research, and most of the other catalogues published in the last thirty years of the 19th and early 20th centuries, do not include technical details, i.e. the dimensions of the stone, and there is almost no reference to the variety of carving techniques, types of drills, etc. The dimensions of the stones in the photographs are small, so it is difficult to understand the details of the carving techniques of each gem. Therefore the conclusions regarding style, technique, and dating (when given) are sometimes erroneous, or unspecified, as is currently accepted for the study of gems. In the catalogues of Furtwängler and others –

such as those of Babelon (1897), Middleton (1891) and Walters (1926) – there are a great many gems bearing animal depictions. These gems do not appear in these publications as a separate division. In most of them the descriptions of the animals are minimal and not accompanied by stylistic or technical analyses, some of which include very general dating (for example ‘Hellenistic’, ‘Roman’, ‘Etruscan’, etc.), while in others the dating is more specific (i.e. ‘1st–2nd century AD’). In most of these catalogues, no systematic comparison was made to other media depicting animals.

The artistic and aesthetic value of the engraved gems and their technical and stylistic aspects began to be discussed in a more profound and comprehensive manner from the 1950s. In catalogues and articles dealing with engraved gems there is also an attempt to compare them with other media of Greco-Roman art, and to use these comparisons both for dating and to establish the time-span of characteristic styles. This attempt was especially applied to large cameos and the highest quality gems, to the few gemstones on which the artist’s name is engraved, and to those types that could be compared to famous statues and common types appearing also on coins. The studies of both Richter (1956) and Vermeule (1957) are among the most prominent in this research direction.

Only in recent decades have studies been published dealing with sorting and classification according to engraving styles, types of gemstones and iconographic analyses. These studies have promoted the research of gems, and as a result it is now possible to associate a large number of the gems which were not included in this literature to stylistic divisions defined and limited in time. The most important contribution lies in the researches of Henig (1978; 1994; 2004), Boardman (1970; 2003), Boardman and Vollenweider (1978), Maaskant-Kleibrink (1978), Zazoff (1983), and Zwierlein-Diehl (1969; 1973) and many more.

While Henig concentrated on the meaning of animal images on Greek and Roman gems as a whole, and suggested a range of likely explanations (1997: 45–53), few studies have otherwise dealt specifically with animal representations. Other articles published on the subject of animal depictions on gems deal with a specific theme, but not as a group, such as Maaskant-Kleibrink’s article (1999: 19–27) dealing with ‘Leda’ on ancient gems, Nagy’s paper dealing with the image of an eagle on a specific Imperial gem (1992: 99–108), Ward’s study investigating the cow suckling a calf motif on scarabs (1992: 67–81), and Henig’s research on animals emerging from a sea-shell as represented on gems (1984: 243–247).

This present research focuses on a group of about 70 gems (intaglios only) kept in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and which has not yet been published. This

group will serve as a test group for the broader subject of animal representations on Greek and Roman gems. The group in question is of a very high quality, which allows us to explore and study them closely, with close-up photography to see all the details, and conduct stylistic research in an unmediated manner. John Boardman found that the theme of animal depictions is the most common on the Archaic, Classical and Greco-Persian gems (1980: 104, 108, 109), yet there is still no complete corpus that encompasses all the scarabs, scarabaeus, and Greco-Roman gems depicting animal images. Gisela Richter indicates that the images engraved on gems possessed special meanings for their owners, based on ancient literary sources (1971: 4–5). However not all scholars agree that animal portrayals on gems possess symbolic value. Boardman himself believes that most of the gems were used as jewellery rather than as seals, and bases his argument on the almost total absence of recording the name of the wearer, the repetition of nearly identical themes, and the almost total absence of personal subjects. However he does admit that we know from ancient sources that there was such use, and therefore he believes that such use was reserved exclusively for metal rings.

This research seeks to study those gems with images of animals from the Israel Museum, and for this purpose comparison will be made with other gems kept in international collections. The characteristics and meanings of animal depictions in the ancient world will be examined within various media, such as sculpture, mosaics and vases, in order to examine the changes in their representations on a miniature medium – gemstones. In this study I will discuss whether the miniature medium allowed for the selection of symbols that did not appear in the larger media, and if so what are the reasons for this, for example whether the changes were due to the fact that the gems were intended for a particular population. The question of what happened when the depictions of animals were transferred to other media and whether the gems convey other meanings is a weighty methodological question. The study seeks to examine what was the uniqueness of animal imagery on ancient gems compared to other media, and what is the significance of this distinction.

The engraved gems presented here for the first time will be depicted in detail while learning the motifs and studying the iconographic and stylistic sources of animal images on gems. The meanings of specific animal representations that appear on the gems will be examined while attempting to provide interpretation. In addition, an attempt will be made to address the question of whether there is a connection between the choice of a certain gemstone and the image portrayed on it.

Of particular importance is the attempt to date the gems, bearing in mind always that their archaeological context is unknown. Therefore dating is based on the carving style and engraving technique, the material and the shape of the gemstones, as well as the choice of subjects. In addition, there was a need to identify the material from which each gem is made, using the relevant literature and with the co-operation of a gemmologist. And, finally, the research includes identification of the historical, cultural and religious concepts behind the themes depicted on the engraved gems.