

ART. V.—*Intaglios from Castlesteads* and the Roman fort at Kirkbride.* By MARTIN HENIG, M.A.

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MOST of the intaglios in the collection of Major-General Sir George Frederick Johnson at Castlesteads were catalogued in the 19th century.¹ Two of the gems are, however, of such exceptional interest that they deserve more detailed discussion.²

The first, found in 1817, is described as “a Gnostic seal engraved on a sardonyx”.³ It is oval (9 x 7 mm.) and slightly convex and was originally set in a ring. It became detached from its setting “and then only was it ascertained that the back of it was engraved”. The hidden device may be explained as a Bacchic herm. Its appearance as a cross, surmounted by a head facing to the left, flanked by two palm fronds arranged symmetrically, one on each side, is neatly paralleled by a coin of the Kingdom of Bosphorus (c. A.D. 40-6) and by “ghost money” from Kerch, derived from

* I am indebted to Major-General Sir George Johnson for permission to republish these items, and to Mr Robert Hogg, Curator of Tullie House, Carlisle, for taking impressions for me. Professor J. M. C. Toynbee read a preliminary draft of part of the paper and gave me much useful encouragement.

¹ JBAA xx (1864) 355-356. Illustrations appear in J. Collingwood Bruce, *Lapidarium Septentrionale* (London, 1875), 238.

² JBAA xx (1864), *op. cit.*, nos. 2 and 4. The others are: No. 1, Cornelian, *hippalectryon* (combination in the form of a Silenus mask with a crest in the form of a horse's head and neck. It stands on the legs of a cock). This device was believed to avert the Evil Eye. No. 3, Red Jasper, dancing satyr. No. 5, Sard, Mercury with caduceus and money-bag (not illustrated in *Lap. Sep.*). No. 6, Bloodstone, Sol driving his quadriga. There is also an onyx, not published but probably from Castlesteads, depicting Diomedes with the Palladium.

³ *Ibid.*, 356.

this coin.⁴ An intaglio in an American collection, which shows a herm flanked by a palm and a caduceus, and another in Berlin which exhibits a column (surmounted by a wine-chalice) with two palm-branches crossed behind it, are not without significance either.⁵

Naturally there was speculation on the possible Christian interpretation of the device, but this was discounted in favour of its identification as a "trophy of the usual form consisting of the helmet, hauberk and three bucklers".⁶ If this intaglio had been set in the normal way, it would not be necessary for us to give it further thought, but the fact that the cut face was hidden endows the stone with a secret, magical property akin to that of an amulet: Amulets are gemstones or pieces of metal, which carry figured devices and esoteric legends. Sometimes the object was secreted about the person. (e.g., sewn into clothing or hung as a charm around the neck.) In other cases part of it might be visible, perhaps as the bezel of a finger-ring, leaving a device or magical legend hidden upon the reverse of the stone. Whichever course was adopted, the clandestine element is the one to emphasise.⁷

Campbell Bonner says that "Allusions to Dionysos, whether verbal or artistic, seem to be completely absent from the amulets".⁸ However, a motif very similar

⁴ W. Wroth, *Catalogue of Greek coins in the British Museum. Pontus, Paphlagonia, Bithynia and the Kingdom of Bosphorus* (London, 1889), 45 and pl. IX, 7, attributed to Mithradates Eupator (121-63 B.C.); but in *Num. Chron.*, 7th ser., viii (1968), 5 (note 2) ascribed, more reasonably to a King Mithradates who reigned A.D. 40-6. The "ghost money", thin pieces of gold on which the designs have been reproduced by pressing out the metal over a coin, was presumably used as jewellery. (Ashmolean Museum Ac. Nos. 1888. 1533-4; 1910. 93-4.) The goldsmiths who made these objects frequently introduced variations of their own. One of the Ashmolean examples exhibits two palms instead of the single one shown on the coin.

⁵ B. Y. Berry, *Ancient Gems from the Collection of Burton Y. Berry* (Indiana, 1969), no. 212. A. Furtwängler, *Königliche Museen zu Berlin, Beschreibung der Geschnittenen Steine* (Berlin, 1896), no. 2244.

⁶ CWI iv (1878/79) 526-529.

⁷ On amulets, cf. Campbell Bonner, *Studies in magical amulets chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor, 1950), abbreviated SMA.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41. There is, however, an amethyst in Paris of magical character, that depicts Bacchus with his panther. A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques. Les Intailles Magiques Greco-Égyptiennes* (Paris, 1964), 214, no. 292.

to that on our gem appears to be engraved on a magical amulet in the British Museum which was published both by the Rev. C. W. King and by Bonner.⁹ The former suggested that the figure was, perhaps, an allusion to Justinus' aeon; the latter comments on the inscription, which is of the usual magical type (and contains, for example, the word 'αω),¹⁰ concluding that "it may have been designed under Christian or Gnostic influence". A bronze pendant published by Bonner is certainly Christian. It depicts a "cross pattée", with the top of the upright replaced by a human figure, crudely engraved. The bust is draped and there is a nimbus around the head. In the lower field are the *alpha* and *omega*.¹¹ However, this object is dated to the 5th century while that from Castlesteads is not likely to post-date the third.

It seems to me that we have here a gem which, although completely pagan in itself, might have been interpreted in a Christian or in a Christianising Gnostic manner.

The cross is rare in early Christian art, although it does occur very occasionally in the catacombs and on some 4th-century sarcophagi (notably the famous passion sarcophagi) in Rome. Apart from a graffito on the wall of a house on the Palatine (which appears to allude in a blasphemous manner to the event), the Crucifixion itself is not represented until the early 5th

⁹ C. W. King, *The Gnostics and their remains* (London, second edition, 1887), 436 and pl. C. Campbell Bonner, "Amulets chiefly in the British Museum", *Hesperia*, xx (1951) 337, no. 55, also note *ibid.*, 320, no. 2. Osiris wrapped as a mummy with two vulture wings, and Delatte and Derchain, *op. cit.*, 78-79, nos. 92-96, in some of which he holds two flails.

¹⁰ 'αω is "evidently an attempt to represent in Greek letters the sacred name of the Hebrew God", SMA, 126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 306, no. 318. Also note a green jasper intaglio in Cambridge which shows the Crucifixion (5th century): J. H. Middleton, *The Lewis Collection of Gems and Rings* (London, 1892), 84, no. 1. Middleton comments: "This curious gem is of exceptional interest from its affording one of the earliest known representations of the Crucifixion."

century.¹² The palms allude to Victory in a classical context, but we should bear in mind the "Eucharistic Victory" on a mosaic in the Christian basilica of Aquileia and palms shown on both Christian and Jewish gravestones and paintings in the Roman catacombs, as well as church mosaics such as the one which occupied the apse behind the altar in Old St Peter's.¹³

The second intaglio, found in 1846, is of importance for a different reason.¹⁴ It is a flat, oval red jasper (17 x 12 mm.), and apparently depicts *Bonus Eventus* standing in profile towards the left. His right leg is crossed behind the left; in his left hand he bears two bunches of grapes and in his right he holds a hunting-stick (*lagobolon*), which he supports on his shoulder. From the end of the *lagobolon* hangs a hare. The figure wears a diadem around his head (or possibly a beret), is dressed in a tunic, and a *chlamys* hangs from his shoulders.

The feature that distinguishes this gem from similar pieces found at Newstead, Roxburghshire, Ruxox, Bedfordshire, and Chesterford, Essex, is its highly distinctive and superior style.¹⁵ When I had occasion

¹² For the Cross in the Catacombs, P. Styger, *Die Römischen Katakomben* (Berlin, 1933), pl. V. Sarcophagi, A. Grabar, *The beginnings of Christian Art* (London, 1967), 265, pl. CCXCV-VI. The Palatine graffito is illustrated in M. Gough, *The Early Christians* (London, 1961), 83, fig. 9. Ivory pyxis, E. Kitzinger, *Early Medieval Art in the British Museum* (London, 1940), 21, pl. VII.

¹³ For the Palm: Victories carry palms on coins, cf. C. H. V. Sutherland and R. A. G. Carson, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vii (by P. M. Bruun) (London, 1966), 522, nos. 173-5 (Constantine, mint of Thessalonica); *ibid.*, ix (by J. W. F. Pearce) (London, 1951), 2, no. 3 (Maximus, mint of London). On a mosaic, G. Brusin and P. L. Zovatto, *Monumenti Paleocristiani di Aquileia e di Grado* (Udine, 1957), 99-100, pl. IV.

In the catacombs, F. van der Meer and C. Mohrmann, *Atlas of the Early Christian World* (London, 1958), pl. DLXVI, and H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), figs. 14 and 38, palm tree on fig. 40.

Fruiting palms appeared on the apse behind the altar of Old St Peter's, Rome, W. Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome* (London, 1967), 67 and pl. XXIX.

cf. Venantius Fortunatus, *Hymns* 2, 1 on the Cross as a tree. A suggestion of this could be read into the arrangement of the boughs on the Castlesteads gem.

¹⁴ JBAA xx (1864) 356, no. 4.

¹⁵ The first two of these are not published. For the third, cf. H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of engraved gems, Greek, Roman and Etruscan in the British Museum* (London, 1926), no. 2119.

to mention the gem in my discussion of the *Silvanus-Cocidius* red jasper from South Shields, I had not seen an impression. However, it is now abundantly clear that the Castlesteads intaglio has enough features in common with this masterpiece of glyptic art, to enable us to ascribe it, with fair confidence, to the same North British workshop, which was in operation around the last years of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century.¹⁶

The modelling of the face is strong and distinctive, with long nose, prominent eye-brows, and heavy sideburns. *Silvanus-Cocidius*'s putative beret, with its oblique striations and wide brim is matched on our stone, although here it looks more like natural hair bound with a fillet or diadem. The striated tunic, with a pronounced hem above the knees and corded belt at the waist, is virtually identical to that worn by the hunter-god. Both figures carry patterned *lagobola*; the hare which hangs on a stick in our intaglio, is carefully modelled like the animal held by the South Shields huntsman. Finally, we may compare the bunches of fruit carried by *Bonus Eventus* on the Castlesteads stone, with the fruit hanging upon the tree on the gem from South Shields.

The *chlamys* with its fold at the back and distinctive, drop-like projection at the bottom, is the same as that worn by the satyr on a red jasper from Corbridge, which we have assigned to the same workshop: incidentally this satyr holds a patterned *lagobolon*.¹⁷

The significance of the stone, apart, of course, from adding a new work to the short list of productions emanating from the only identifiable gem-studio in northern Britain, is to enlarge the area of distribution to include Cumberland. It is by no means unlikely

¹⁶ *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., xlix (1971), 215-230.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* and D. Charlesworth in *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., xxxix (1961), 33 no. 23 and pl. IX, 8.

that the workshop was situated towards the west of the Wall, for the choice of *Silvanus-Cocidius* as a subject would make more sense here than at South Shields or Corbridge.¹⁸ Although there is no reason on iconographic grounds, to throw the identification of the Castlesteads stone in doubt, it is surely more than likely that *Bonus Eventus* (a thoroughly classical concept) was interpreted by the owner of the intaglio as *Silvanus-Cocidius*, whose local importance was overwhelming?

The intaglio from Kirkbride is a dark navy blue



Drawing of an impression of Kirkbride intaglio, 1964.
(Size X7).

¹⁸ A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 372 and map IX.

vitreous paste.¹⁹ It is flat, with a bevelled edge and measures 13 x 11 mm. It is 2.5 mm. thick. It was found in 1964 during the excavation of the Roman fort site at Kirkbride, Cumberland, by Mr R. L. Bellhouse, in a level dated A.D. 80-120. The intaglio has now been given to Carlisle Museum (Accession no. 79-1965, 4).

On the upper surface we see a dramatist (or possibly an actor), seated to the right upon a chair with a high back. The lower part of his body is draped in a himation; in his left hand he holds a tragic mask with long locks and in his right hand he bears a curved staff (pedum). At his feet, in front of him is an object of uncertain identity, perhaps an altar or another mask.²⁰

Margaret Bieber writes that "actors are sometimes represented studying the mask, which had to express the outstanding features of the personality represented".²¹ However, playwrights are also shown looking at masks, and the fact that the figure is dressed in a somewhat aristocratic himation rather than in an actor's tunic favours identification of the personage as a dramatic poet. Marble reliefs in Princeton and Rome which show Menander holding a mask, are extremely close to the type of the Kirkbride gem.²²

There are almost identical intaglios in the Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, and similar stones in the collections at Berlin, Munich and Xanten.²³ It is

¹⁹ I would like to thank Mr R. Hogg for describing the material of which the intaglio is made and for sending me an impression.

²⁰ Description is of impression, rather than of actual intaglio.

²¹ M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton, 1961), 82.

²² *Ibid.*, 89, figs. 316, 317.

²³ P. Fossing, *The Thorvaldsen Museum. Catalogue of the Antique Engraved Gems and Cameos* (Copenhagen, 1929), nos. 1009, 1010.

A. Furtwängler, *Königliche Museen zu Berlin. Beschreibung der Geschlittenen Steine im Antiquarium* (Berlin, 1896), nos. 1256-7, 7681-2.

E. Schmidt, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen, vol. I pt. 2* (Munich, 1970), nos. 1823-4.

P. Steiner, *Xanten Sammlung des Niederrheinischen Altertums-Vereins* (Frankfurt a.M., 1911), 131 and pl. XIV no. 132 (from Vetera I); also no. 133.

a remarkable fact that gems with theatrical themes are especially prevalent on military sites, at least in Britain.²⁴ We should note a burnt cornelian from Richborough, Kent, that portrays a scene from a comedy;²⁵ a cornelian found at Brecon with a dramatic muse wearing a comic mask and holding a tragic one;²⁶ a paste from the fort at Waddon Hill, Dorset, with a facing tragic mask, just like that held by the playwright on the Kirkbride gem;²⁷ a magnificent garnet excavated in the latrine drain of the Commandant's house, Housesteads, which has the device of a mask in profile;²⁸ a red jasper from South Shields cut with two confronted masks,²⁹ and two red jaspers from Corbridge and Caerleon respectively, each showing a satyr with *lagobolon* (or *pedum*) and mask.³⁰ If the fact that the Backworth treasure was found in North Britain can be taken as a hint that at least some of the items might have belonged at one time to a high ranking officer, we can add a nicolo in a gold ring, usually said to depict a cupid but in actual fact showing an actor wearing a mask and baggy trousers.³¹ All these are gems of a quality much above the average for the province and bear witness to the sophisticated interests of some of the officers (? and men) serving in the Imperial army. The selection of a dramatic theme for a seal may have had something to do with the strong connection between Bacchus and the

²⁴ Also note an ivory tragic mask from Caerleon, J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford, 1964), 359 and pl. LXXXII, a.

²⁵ J. P. Bushe Fox, *Richborough IV*, 150 and pl. LV, no. 262.

²⁶ R. E. M. Wheeler, *The Roman Fort near Brecon* (London, 1926), 121, fig. 64, 4.

²⁷ Information. Dr G. Webster.

²⁸ D. Charlesworth, "A gold signet ring from Housesteads", *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., xlvii (1969), 39-42. On 41-42, she notes a number of theatrical gems, although the combinations ("grylloi") which she cites are not really relevant.

²⁹ D. Charlesworth, "Roman jewellery found in Northumberland and Durham", *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., xxxix (1961) 33, no. 32. The stone is now in the possession of Dr J. H. Batchellor.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33, no. 23 and pl. IX, 8, and information, Mr G. C. Boon.

³¹ Charlesworth in *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., xxxix (1961) 28, no. 61.

theatre, but it could also reflect the fact that the Roman soldier thought about his mission in essentially dramatic terms as a successor to the heroes of legend.³² The deeds of these men and demi-gods were precisely the material from which the plots of tragedy were taken. Indeed, the existence of parade-masks worn by members of the auxiliary cavalry shows that drama of a sort actually played a part in military training.³³

³² Cf. Martin Henig. "The Veneration of Heroes in the Roman Army", *Britannia*, I (1970) 249-265. Of course, this explanation does not account for scenes of comedy.

³³ Cf. H. von Petrikovits in *Egger Festschrift*, I (1952) 126 ff. J. Keim and H. Klimbach, *Der Römische Schatzfund von Straubing* (Munich, 1951).