

A CACHE OF ROMAN INTAGLIOS FROM EASTCHEAP, CITY OF LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

A group of four Roman intaglios was discovered in December 1983 during archaeological excavations at 23–29 Eastcheap, London EC3¹. They were found together in a small pit which was among the earliest features on the site and which appears to have been dug at a time when the ground was being prepared for the first major phase of building. The overlying structures were of timber and were destroyed by a major fire which the associated finds suggest was that normally

of the buildings occurred between *c.* 50–55 and the Boudican revolt.

DESCRIPTION

The gemstones are in extremely good condition and show no sign of having previously been mounted in rings. The following descriptions are of the actual gems and are designed to accompany the photographs. 'Left' and 'Right' would, of course, be reversed in impression.

1. (58) Nicolo with pale blue upper face on a dark ground. The surface is crazed.

*Shape*² F4; an oval cut with upper and lower edges bevelled.

Dimensions Upper face excluding bevelled frame, 14.5mm by 12mm; maximum measurements 16mm by 14mm. Thickness 3mm.

Device Bust of Roma wearing an Attic helmet in profile to the left.



Fig. 1 Eastcheap Intaglios: The Intaglios (†).

attributed to the Boudican revolt of AD 60-1.

Apart from the gems, the pit contained a small group of pottery, including an almost complete Lyons ware beaker and sherds in local coarse fabrics. The pottery associated with the subsequent buildings was similar, but also included plain samian of Neronian date. Since there were no typically Claudian finds, we may thus conclude that the digging of the pit, the deposition of the gems and the occupation

Her long tresses cascade down the nape of her neck, parallel to the three long plumes of the helmet-crest.

Cornelius Vermeule (1959, 71 pl.iv.7 and 8 = Walters 1926, nos 1812, 1813) illustrates two sards in the British Museum which display the same conception of the goddess, and compares them with coins of Nero (*ibid.* 31, pl. 1.4–8)³. A nicolo from Fenny Stratford, Buckinghamshire, in the Ashmolean Museum displays a similar head, but is much more schematically engraved (Henig 1978, no. 248). The wide dissemination of the type is indicated by the presence of a close parallel to the Roma on our stone on a gem from Umm Queis (Gadara) in Jordan (Henig and Whiting 1985, no. 161).

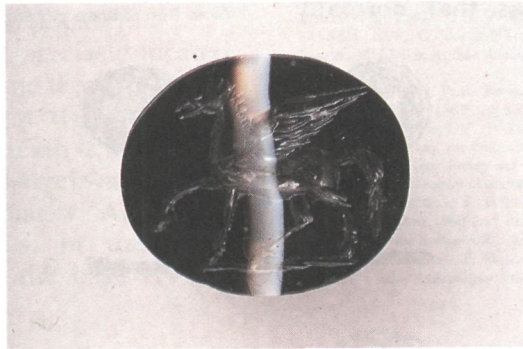


Plate. 1 Eastcheap Gems: Intaglios from Eastcheap.

2. (59) Onyx with a blue-grey upper face on a dark ground. Some crazing of the surface.

Shape F4; oval with upper and lower edges bevelled.

Dimensions Upper face excluding bevelled frame, 12mm by 11.5mm maximum measurements 14mm by 13mm. Thickness 1.5mm.

Device A pair of clasped right hands (*dextrarum iunctio*) within an olive-wreath tied with ribbons⁴. The name ALBA has been scratched (retrograde) below the hands, subsequently obliterated and again scratched, more clearly, above. This marking-out is the first stage in cutting a device on a gem (see Boardman and Scarisbrick 1977, no. 44a). The lack of a final polish within the cut areas suggests that the gem is unfinished although, as Professor Boardman points out (*pers. comm.*), the scratched name could simply be a subsequent idea for improving the gem which was never executed.

In terms of style, the best parallel to the wreath on a gem is a nicolo in the British Museum (Walters 1926, no. 2648) where it surrounds a lamp of a type which Donald Bailey (1980, 214–5 no. Q.1028) assigns to the second half of the 1st century AD.

3. (60) Banded agate, black with a transverse white band running through it. The band is edged with a translucent, yellowish border.

Shape F1; oval with bevelled edge.

Dimensions 13.5 by 11.5mm. Thickness 2mm.

Device Pegasus walks towards the left. His right foreleg is raised, the other three touch the ground line.

The type is best represented by an agate from the cache found in the House of Pinarius Cerialis at Pompeii (Pannuti 1975, 183 no. 10 fig. 15)⁵. For style, although here Pegasus is shown in the act of taking off into the air, we may compare a fired clay sealing from the public record office at Cyrene burnt down in the Jewish revolt of Trajan's reign (Maddoli 1965, 123 no. 822).

4. (61) Nicolo with pale blue upper surface on a dark ground. The surface is crazed.

Shape F4; oval with upper and lower edges bevelled.

Dimensions Upper face excluding bevelled frame, 9.5 by 9mm; maximum measurements 12mm by 11mm. Thickness 3mm.

Device A naked discus-thrower (*discobolus*) walks right, looking over his shoulder left. In his left hand he holds a discus and in his right a palm of Victory. Below his feet is a short ground line.

The theme reappears on a cornelian from Bath (Henig 1978, no. 520 = Henig in Cunliffe 1969, 82, no. 14 pl.xii) where the athlete is about to throw the discus, and his prize, a palm, stands in a vase in front of him. The gem is an interesting reflection of the growing Hellenisation of the upper classes of Roman society in the middle of the 1st century AD. Discus-throwing and athletics, with their obligatory sacred nudity, were traditionally part of the Greek, not Roman, games, and their introduction to the West did not meet with the approval of some conservatives. The Younger Pliny, for example, writing at about the same time as the deposition of the Eastcheap gems, observed that 'the games had corrupted the morals of Vienne, as they corrupt everyone in Rome. But the vices of Vienne remain within their own walls; ours spread abroad. In the Empire as in the human body, the

worst disease is that which starts from the head' (*Epistles* iv. 22). Tacitus tells us that the games which Nero instituted in Rome in AD 60 were frowned upon as an encouragement to the youth of the City to indulge in homosexual practices: 'They would be compelled to strip naked, put on boxing-gloves and practise that form of exercise instead of war and arms' (*Annals* xiv. 20).

DISCUSSION

The four gems display very different subjects and hardly at first sight invite close stylistic comparison. Nevertheless, they seem to me to belong together in the same way as the much larger, but more or less contemporary, cache from the House of Pinarius Cerialis (Pannuti 1975): the product of the same studio or of neighbouring studios. They thus allow us to advance the hypothesis that a merchant in gems operated from a shop or stall on this site, and that the stones may actually have been engraved there by *gemmarii* resident in London. The following reasons may be adduced for this statement.

- (a) All the stones are very fresh, without any sign of scratching; the nicolos and the onyx show some crazing, but this is not the result of use. The choice of a similar material for three of them may be significant.
- (b) No. 2 is not fully polished, and the owner's name was only sketched out, not executed. This gem might be regarded as unfinished.
- (c) Some small points of stylistic comparison may be made: for instance, the execution of Pegasus's hocks with that of the *discobolus*'s ankle, or the outlining of the discus with that of the leaves of the wreath and the guard on Roma's helmet. Nevertheless, the markedly linear treatment employed above all for Pegasus (Classicising Style) contrasts with the ready use of pelleting on the clasped hands (knuckles and

ends of fingers) and on the olives and ribbons of the surrounding wreath. More than one hand was surely at work on these gems.

The best parallel to the cache so far published from Britain is that from Bath (Henig in Cunliffe 1969), although the likeness may not now be as obvious as the published report, based on my earliest research in glyptics, suggests. Recent re-examination of the Bath gems by David Zienckiewicz and George Boon shows more wear than we should really expect from 'mint' gemstones, and it is more likely that the stones were lost from the rings of bathers and were carried down the waste-pipe from the baths into the main outfall drain leading from the Spring. Nevertheless, the stylistic resemblances between many of the gems described in the report (*ibid.*, 72–5; cf. *Britannia* 7 (1976) 284–5) seem valid and there is a very good chance that a high proportion came from a common source, perhaps a *gemmarius* working at Bath. The date, Flavian or even Neronian, also holds. We may note the presence of similar studies of an athlete at Bath and Eastcheap, and also compare the treatment of the head of a Maenad on a Bath nicolo (Henig in Cunliffe 1969, 83 no. 16) with the Eastcheap Roma, but the London intaglios, especially Nos 1–3, are of superior quality, as we might expect.

In the context of 1st-century London it may be pointed out that in early Flavian times there was a goldsmith operating in the Cannon Street area, on a site which was later to be the East wing of the Palace (Marsden 1975, 100–1 fig. 46). It is not hard to envisage an area south of the nucleus of early Roman London, towards the river, thronged with craftsmen including workers in luxury products, rather like the *Via Sacra* area in Rome, or the *Via dell'Abbondanza* in Pompeii (cf. I. Calabi Limetani, *s.v. Gemmarius* in *Enciclopedia*

dell'Arte Antica iii (Rome 1960), 808–9). Tacitus's famous description of London before it was overwhelmed by disaster as a place frequented by merchants (*Annals* xiv. 33) certainly does not exclude such a possibility. On rather more slender evidence I have suggested the possible presence of a gem-workshop in 2nd-century London at Southwark (Henig in Dennis 1978, 402–3 nos 167–8), but the gems from St Thomas Street belong to a period when Roman glyptic art was in decline. The Eastcheap intaglios date from its apogee and comprise the most important find of gems from the metropolis.

NOTES

1. By the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London, supervised by Sue Riviere. The initial recording of the finds was undertaken by Jo Groves and Angela Simic. The drawings are by Emma Rigby, the photographs by John Bailey. Thanks are also due to Dr Paul Tyers for information about the date of the associated pottery, to Dr R. Harding and Mr E. A. Jobbins of the Geological Survey for comments on the petrology, and to Francis Grew for general comments. Finds catalogues and archive reports on the structures and finds are held in the Museum of London and may be consulted on request. The gems themselves are also stored in the Museum under the site code EST 83, for ease of reference the individual accession numbers (59–62) have here been added in parentheses before each description.
2. The form-types are those illustrated in Henig 1978, fig. 1.
3. Also note a sard in Paris (Vermeule 1959, pl. viii.2) and a plasma in Vienna (Zwierlein-Diehl 19/9, no. 1071), both with much fuller busts, the latter dated by Dr Zwierlein-Diehl to the end of the 1st century BC.
4. For the *dextrarum iunctio* on gems see Zazoff 1975, nos. 1332–3, and for an olive wreath surrounding clasped hands (and a parrot above), Furtwängler 1896, no. 8056. Note also Berry 1969 no. 90, with cockerels, cantharus, cornucopiae and *dextrarum iunctio* within wreath.
5. Also note Zwierlein-Diehl 1979, no. 1130, a cornelian dated to the 1st century BC, and Henig and Whiting 1985, no. 161 a gem from Gadara, Jordan.

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