

# A ROMAN SEAL-BOX LID

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The Museum of London has recently obtained several items with a London findspot from the Bardury Collection<sup>1</sup> (Museum of London Accession Number 88.3). Acquired by private treaty, the material included a complete jug of Rhineland Granular Grey Ware (MOL Acc. No. 88.3/4) of AD 43–80 (Anderson 1981, pp. 92–106), three fragments of Roman leather one-piece shoes (MOL Acc.No. 88.3/6–8) and a seal-box lid of copper alloy (MOL Acc.No. 88.3/9).

Whilst the pottery and leatherwork were labelled with their provenances, the exact findspot of the seal-box lid is not clearly recorded and has been presumed 'London'. Despite the lack of detail, however, the decoration on the seal-box lid is of such a style as to warrant discussion in its own right (pl. 1).



Plate 1. A Roman seal-box lid: the seal-box lid from the Bardury Collection. Scale 2:1. *Museum of London*

Made of a thinly cast plate of copper alloy, the lid is ovoid in shape but with a straight edge along one narrow edge to accommodate the hinge fitting. The relief

decoration is slightly worn with a loss of some of the finer details. The reverse contains several indentations. The lid measures 21.5mm by 15.5mm.

Seal-boxes were intended to protect sealings on wax made with signet-rings. This perhaps needs stating from time to time, because it is often hard to see a cultural/iconographical link between the two types of artefact. Engraved gems always reflect 'classical' art but seal-boxes from the North-West provinces at any rate are often ornamented and enamelled in the 'Celtic' taste. There are exceptions, of course, amongst them the lids from London ornamented with Imperial portraits.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless seal-box lids decorated with Graeco-Roman themes were common enough in the Empire at large.<sup>3</sup>

The theme of this seal-box is Cupid punished for mistreating Psyche by singeing her wings (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> He is bound to a



Fig. 1 A Roman seal-box lid: the copper alloy lid showing the bound Cupid before his mother Venus. Scale 2:1. Drawing by N. Griffiths.



Plate 2. A Roman seal-box lid: impression from an intaglio now in Canterbury Cathedral library showing the punishment of Cupid. Scale 3:1. Photograph: Nick Pollard, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford.

column on top of which sits the griffin of Nemesis. In front of him his mother Venus sits upon a rock. She wears a mantle over her loins and legs but the upper part of her body is naked. The goddess supports herself with her left hand and in her right hand holds a torch (?).

A number of gems show Cupid bound. Generally a torch appears in the field and there is often an accompanying inscription in Greek, ΔΙΚΑΙΩΣ, 'justly', for the mischievous boy was justly punished. Illustrated here is the impression of a bloodstone intaglio collected in the seventeenth century by Canon John Bargrave of Canterbury and now in the Cathedral library (pl. 2).<sup>5</sup> The type of Venus appears on a cornelian intaglio by the first-century BC gem cutter Aulos and on related glass copies and adaptations (Vollenweider 1966).

As Henig (forthcoming) pointed out in discussing another gem, now in Cambridge, showing Venus seated with Cupids around her, Venus as mother and herself representing love, often restrains but does not herself mete out punishment (Henig 1988). This is the task of Nemesis, often represented as on our seal-box lid by a griffin.

It remains to add that the punishment of Cupid (Eros) appealed to Hellenistic and Roman artists and poets and is the theme of several epigrams in the Planudean Appendix to the Palatine Anthology (Paton 1918).

## NOTES

1. Bardury Collection auctioned at Sotheby's, September 1987. R. P. Bircham-Bardury kindly provided details of his father's collection for the Museum of London archive. Alexandre Bhaduri was born in Kennington, London on 4th November 1908 and from an early age, he and his brother Arthur were collecting curios. During the First World War he obtained Roman items from a curio shop in Clapham and he seems to have been encouraged and helped by a "curator called Mr Lawrence" (pers. comm.). The latter would appear to be the antiquarian collector G. F. Lawrence who from 1912 to 1927 was connected with the London Museum, then based at Kensington Palace. G. F. Lawrence acquired many items of interest for the Museum, especially Roman objects, from workmen engaged on building works of all types in and around the City of London. It is possible, that under the guidance of Lawrence, the young Alexandre Bhaduri acquired the Roman seal-box lid in question.

However, Mr Bhaduri's passion for collecting was life-long. Thus the seal box lid could have been found amongst the bomb debris of the City of London following the Second World War or indeed from a stall on the Portobello Road in the 1950s, areas visited on many occasions by Mr Bhaduri. Despite not having a close provenance, it is clear that as with all the items in the collection, the lid was acquired by Mr Bhaduri because he was fascinated by it and liked it rather than because of any financial value it may have gathered.

2. H. Chapman and T. Johnson, 'Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London; 1972' *TLAMAS* 24 (1973) 48, no. 9, pl. 4 and see for this type, H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Bronzes, Greek, Roman and Etruscan in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities British Museum* (London 1899) 307, nos. 2228, 2229 and R. Nicholls *The Wellcome Gems. A Fitzwilliam Museum Catalogue* (Cambridge 1983) 26-7, nos 100, 101.

3. Apart from the portraits see Walters, *op. cit.* no. 2225 (Armed Venus) and nos 2230, 2231 (Divine Heads); Nicholls, *loc. cit.* no. 99 (Drunken Hercules and satyr).

4. For the theme see L. Curtius, 'Poenitentia', in *Festschrift für James Loeb* (Munich 1930) 53-62; P. Bruneau, 'Lampes Corinthiennes', *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* CI (1977) 252-5 no. 32 (Éros Enchaîné?). For Cupid burning the Psyche-butterfly see M. Henig *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* (BAR British Series 8 2nd ed. 1978) 75 and 201, nos 119-123.

5. M. Henig in D. Sturdy and M. Henig *The Gentle Traveller. John Bargrave, Canon of Canterbury, and his Collection* (1983) 4, pl. c. For others see B. Y. Berry, *Ancient Gems from the Collection of Burton Y. Berry* (Indiana 1969) 71 no. 130; A. Dimitrova-Milcheva, *Antique engraved gems and cameos in the National Archaeological Museum in Sofia* (Sofia 1981) 92, no. 280. All these show both torch and inscription; M. F. Boussac and P. Starakis Roscam, 'Une Collection d'intailles et de camées du Musée d'Alexandrie', *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* CVII (1983) 466-7, no. 25 fig. 24 (torch but no inscription).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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