

# A CORNELIAN INTAGLIO FROM MILES LANE, CITY OF LONDON

*Martin Henig and Christine Jones*

In 1979 the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology undertook the excavation of a site bounded by Miles Lane and 131-7 Upper Thames Street, in the City of London (TQ 3280 8074). The excavation revealed the remains of timber terracing and of a Roman building, including *opus signinum* floors, loose building tiles, and tile and ragstone walls. An eaves-drip gully was found alongside the building bordering a gravel path. Uncovered on the other side of the path was a timber-lined drain, of Hadrianic date, that cut through the timber terracing. The drain was infilled during the Antonine period.

From the drain fill, soil samples were extracted for environmental analysis. It was while these samples were being sieved that a small, engraved cornelian gemstone was recovered.<sup>1</sup> Given the date for the drainfill, the date for the deposition of the gemstone is, therefore, between AD 140 and 160.



*Impression of the Cornelian intaglio from Miles Lane*

The gem, which is slightly convex on both upper and lower face (Henig 1978, 35 fig 1, type A5) is very small, measuring some 8mm by 6mm by 2.5mm; there is a chip on the left side of the stone. It is cut in intaglio with the device of a stork standing to the left.<sup>2</sup> There is a ground line.

Comparison may be made with the birds

portrayed upon a red jasper found at Richborough and upon a nicolo gem from York, although in these instances the bills are slighter and the drooping tail feathers of the latter bird seem to characterise a crane rather than a stork (Henig 1978, nos 668 and 669).<sup>3</sup> Whatever the niceties of ornithological observation, it is likely that storks were intended even in these instances for such a bird is shown beside the head of Pietas on a denarius of Metellus Pius, c 82 BC (Kent 1978, 269, pl 52; Toynbee 1973, 244-5).

The connection with Pietas is explained by Aelian in his work ΠΕΡΙ ΖΩΩΝ ΙΔΙΟΤΗΣ (on the characteristics of animals) as he tells us that when the adult bird does not have nourishment to give to its chicks, it disgorges its own food.<sup>4</sup> Although it is sometimes, as on the Richborough example, shown eating lizards (which in such instances must symbolise vermin and hence evil powers) and it is not hard to imagine that in northern Europe it would have been a welcome harbinger of summer,<sup>5</sup> the primary significance of our gem is likely to have been as a symbol of one of the most important of Roman virtues, piety.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Nick Griffiths for illustrating the intaglio and Angela Wardle for providing details of the gemstone's provenance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Small finds reference ILA79 597 <88g>

<sup>2</sup> Original gem described

<sup>3</sup> A similar bird with its head down is described as a 'crane or ibis' by Zienkiewicz, 1986, 139, no. 73. See

R Peterson, G Mountfort and P A D Hollom, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, 1954, 10 and pl 3 for cranes and p11 and p14 for storks. There is no doubt that the Miles Lane gem is a stork.

<sup>4</sup> Aelian III, 23. Henig now realizes that the glass gem from Bath (Henig 1978, no. 670) shows a stork at its nest feeding its young as described.

<sup>5</sup> In Italy, of course, it was a winter visitor and summer was announced by its annual disappearance, see Petronius *Satyricon* 55.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- HENIG (1978), M Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British sites* BAR 8, 2nd edn  
KENT (1978), J P C Kent, *Roman Coins*, 1978  
TOYNBEE (1973), J M C Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*  
ZIENKIEWICZ (1986), J D Zienkiewicz, *The Legionary Fortress Baths at Caerleon: II The Finds*