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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BUDAPEST, HERDES' SQUARE

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OPEN: 08. 06. 2004 - 29. 08. 2004

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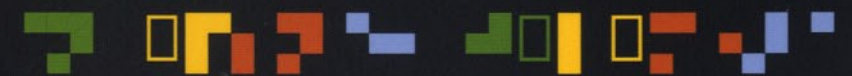
PHOTOGRAPHS - LÁSZLÓ MÁTYUS

PRINTING - MESTER NYOMDA



NEMZETI KULTURÁLIS ÖRÖKSÉG
MINISZTERIUMA

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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2004 SPRING **SUMMER** AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

TALISMANS FROM THE PERIOD OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Engraved precious stones (gems) had been produced in the cultures of the classical antiquity from the very beginning. They had three main uses: as jewellery, as seals and/or as protective amulets. Their engraving in itself does not shed light on their original function. However, at the end of the 1st century B.C. some new variants appeared, which clearly had talismanic function. Even though they displayed images that had been around for ages, like the picture of the imperial eagle with a wreath in his beak (1), new motifs appeared simultaneously with these: magic signs (2), spells written in Greek script, which had no meaning in Greek whatsoever (e.g. *ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ* (1); *ΑΒΡΑΝΑΘ*, *ΙΑΩ* (2)), 'monster' figures (3), and designs that were incomprehensible to the outsider (4). Most gems were used as ringstones, others as pendants or sewn into clothing.

The modern term for these pieces is 'magical gems'. Their appearance might not have been deemed significant in the antiquity, so they had not been given a proper name of their own. Besides, at the time of their appearance the talismans displaying the century-old, traditional iconographic types of Graeco-Roman glyptics were also in use. The fact that magical gems were gaining ground did not represent the victory of magic over religion, as it is often thought today. In the cultures of the antiquity a clear line can rarely be drawn between these two spheres.

Judging by its inscription, the red jasper gem (5) was a votive offering: a man called Ophelimus made an offering of it, following a dream sent by a god (*Ophelimus ex viso numinis posuit*). But then the engraving, an absolutely unique series of pictures, which presents the story summed up by the inscription in a form resembling that of comic strips, takes us well into the world of magic. Since this story presents a rather unique event in the life of a person who lived almost two thousand years ago, it is not possible to reconstruct more than an outline of it. Inferring from the inscription, a god appeared in the man's dream and gave him some advice. The god is represented in the middle of the gem in a size slightly bigger than that of the others below him, his right hand is raised in a gesture of greeting, in his left hand there is a burning torch. Following this advice Ophelimus (who is to be identified with the kneeling figure) appeared as a supplicant before Hecate, the magician-goddess, who was presented in her customary 'triformis' figure with three bodies,

with two whips, daggers and burning torches turned downward in each hand. Next Ophelimus offered a sacrifice at an altar. The goddess granted the supplicant's request. What this might have been is indicated by the outsize closing scene, which is quite unique in itself. Three women surround a bodyless head, which is thought to be the representation of a helping *daimón*. The engraving of the gem shows some marked resemblance with those charms surviving in magic books, by which deities (among them Hecate) grant the supplicant a protector demon.

The magical gems were designed by a magician and the design then executed by an engraver. The black stone gem, for instance, gives evidence of a fault in manufacture. The engraver must have misunderstood the design, and instead of the magic spell he carved the designer's instruction (*hós proketai*: as it is prescribed) combined with magic signs. There was a special rite by which the magician connected the engraved gem up with the network of the forces of his world, and it was this ceremony (*teleté*) that turned the mere stone into a talisman (*telesma*). These amulets were not meant to be ornaments — that is why there are engravings on the reverse and rim of stones that were to be set. Their function was performative: help conjure up deities. Their working principles are described best by the 'magic rites' (*praxeis*), that survived in the contemporary magical literature written on papyrus, the so-called 'magical papyri'. According to their evidence the magician addresses a powerful god through the images, magical spells and signs, and asks the deity to grant his request. The motifs engraved on the gems are connected purposefully — the chalcedony gem (1), for instance displays two such interrelated motifs. The magic spell *Abrasax* (the ancient source for 'abracadabra') on the reverse of the gem consists of 7 letters, the numerical value of which is 365 (in Greek all letters correspond with numbers). The obverse is decorated with an eagle (*aetos*), whose Greek name when divided into two (*a-etos*) means: 'one year'. Consequently, the image and the magic spell both address the god as the master of time.

These gems were frequently used in health care. Magical healing was one approach in ancient medicine among others, and, mostly, equal to others. The green stone gem (6), for instance, had some gynaecological function: it displays a womb turned upside down — there is a long-shafted key at the orifice clearly referring to the eternal desire for



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birth control. Another gem displays an engraving of a haloed phoenix posing on a sphere, which in turn is balanced on a column. The phoenix is surrounded by several animals: at the bottom there is a crocodile, at each side snakes, scorpions and birds, with a scarab at the top. The inscription of the gem (*pepte: digest!*) suggests that it helped overcome gastric disorders. The stones decorated with the figure of the haloed Chnoubis (7), he of the serpent body and lion head, had similar function. This Egyptian god is portrayed surrounded by beast trinities in the bronze amulet (8), which is probably a modern copy of an antique gem. Yet, the cock-headed figure on the other side with the body of a man and legs dwindling away into snakes appears on magical gems only, and can be associated with Jewish magic (see also 3). The hematite gem showing a bowed harvester was used to ward off sciatica (9).

Variety presents the most important characteristic of magical gems: in and through them the elements of various cultures got woven into

a single fabric. Greek, Roman, Jewish and Egyptian motifs found their place in a world, in which they shared a common language, common iconography, and a common way of looking at things. Magical gems indicate the process through which the magical traditions of ancient Mediterranean cultures were getting integrated into an international discipline. It made the long-accumulated knowledge of various cultures accessible for others, and thus international, and it encouraged experimentation seeking new solutions.

Even though the working principles of magical gems seem distant, at least two of their features might strike a chord even now. Their driving force was the need, the demand for knowledge that could be applied with success — as an old magician put it: 'the one that is without real knowledge is a man in name only'. Besides, the desire of people for getting ahead (the fulfilment of which was expected of these gems centuries ago) is still on the agenda of mankind.



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