

УДК 739.2; 7.032; 7.033.2;
ББК 85.125
DOI:10.18688/aa155-2-19

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Antiquity Reused. Antique Engraved Gems on Byzantine Rings¹

It is nowadays generally accepted that the Byzantines were familiar with the art of antiquity. This is mainly visible in the artistic activity of the so-called Byzantine “renaissances”. The display of ancient statues in public places of Byzantine cities, probably over one hundred in Constantinople during the middle Byzantine period [30, p. 58], and the reuse of spolia in buildings are well documented [6; 7; 27; 36; 8; 40]. Moreover, it is believed that antique engraved gems, namely intaglios and cameos manufactured prior to the 4th century AD, were collected in Byzantium [31, pp. 58–62]. The majority of these precious stones are now in the West where they arrived either as diplomatic gifts and purchases or as spoils of the Fourth Crusade [23, p. 113; 43, p. 2]. They were reused there by rulers, members of the aristocracy and high-ranking prelates to embellish precious liturgical objects as well as insignia and jewels [31, pp. 58–59; 52, pp. 249–270; 46, p. 1 n. 2]. It is interesting to note that no sacred objects of Byzantine origin, decorated with ancient engraved gems, have come down to us. It has, however, been argued that the Byzantines too, by engraving new inscriptions on antique cameos, altered their original meaning and attached them to religious objects like reliquaries and book covers [31, pp. 58–62; 32, p. 81]. On the other hand, extant Byzantine jewels, mostly rings, set with antique engraved gems, although significantly fewer than the Western ones, prove that the Byzantines also followed this practice.

How did the Byzantines “reuse antiquity” in relation to their rings, these precious objects of prestige or personal adornment? Which of the devices found on antique gems were selected to decorate Byzantine rings of antiquarian taste? Did these retain their original meaning or were they affected by the Christian faith? Can we speculate on the identity of the rings’ owners? These are the questions which this paper will try to address even if it may not be always possible to give any definite answer.

Five rings of probable Byzantine manufacture and a post-iconoclastic date can shed light on these topics. The first (Ill. 33), a gilt bronze ring, is an excavation find from a middle Byzantine tomb at the settlement Hagios Pavlos in Gavalochori, Western Crete, and is today on show in

¹ I would like to thank Mr. Michael Andrianakis, Honorary Director of the 28th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Chania, Crete, and Dr. George Kavvadias, Head of the Department of Vases, Minor Arts and Metalworks Collections at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, for granting me permission to publish the ring in the Byzantine and Postbyzantine Collection of Chania, Crete, and the ring inv. no. Στ 472 in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, respectively. My thanks are also due to Ms. Ruth Bowler, Photo and Digital Imaging Coordinator at the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, for kindly providing me with a digital photograph of the ring inv. no. 57. 1580 in the Walters Art Museum. Moreover, I am particularly indebted to my colleagues Dr. Ioanna Christoforaki, Athens Academy, Prof. Demetrios Plantzos, Athens University, PhD cand. Eleni Charchare, Athens University, and Dr. Demetrios Doumas for their useful remarks.

the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Collection of Chania on Crete [2, pp. 130–131, figs. 14–15, pl. 8]. Its plain hoop is decorated with two bosses, to the right and left of the bezel with an oval intaglio of cornelian, the favorite stone of the Romans [38, p. 6]. Since the gem has a flat face and a classicizing style it may be dated to the late 1st or 2nd century AD [44, p. 77]. It depicts two male figures in conversation: to the left a young satyr with a horse tail stands in front of a bearded one, to the right, who sits on a rock and holds a round shield. Similar iconography, which probably derives from scenes of Hephaistos' workshop, is seen in three Roman gems². Satyrs, Dionysos' attendants, were a popular motif of Roman gems of the late Republican and the Augustan era. In antiquity their representations on helmets, vases, gems and other artefacts had an apotropaic character since these creatures were considered as personifications of evil [22, p. 316]. Even the word "satyr" had the meaning of a salacious and lascivious man [25, p. 41] not only in antiquity but also in Byzantium. The term has, for instance, a negative meaning in the *Chronographia* of Theophanes Continuatus (4.38) who presents the companions of the emperor Michael III as satyrs³.

The major question is whether the Byzantines could identify mythological subjects. There is sufficient evidence that the upper classes in middle and late Byzantine times were acquainted with Graeco-Roman religion and mythology [51, pp. 45–46; 49; 50]. The 11th-century historian and courtier Michael Psellos, for instance, tells us in his *Chronographia* (VI, 60) that Maria Skleraina, Constantine IX Monomachos' mistress, while living in the imperial palace as *sebaste*, asked him again and again about Greek myths. Moreover, she herself here and there used to add a point that she had learnt from experts on these subjects⁴. The supposition that learned Byzantines could identify the satyrs of the Gavalochori ring stone is further reinforced by the fact that these mythological creatures appeared not only in late antique but also in post-iconoclastic art. For example, in a miniature of the 11th-century illuminated manuscript of the Pseudo-Oppian *Cynegetica*, which once belonged to Cardinal Bessarion and is now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice (cod. gr. 479), three satyrs are depicted together with a centaur [50, p. 113, fig. 123].

Our second ring (Ill. 34) [4, p. 332 no. 235] is part of the so-called "Thessalonike hoard", namely a hoard that is said to have been found in the region of Thessalonike and belongs to the Stathatos Collection at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (inv. no. Στ 472) [5; 4, pp. 48–57]. This hoard is datable to around 1200 since it contained coins of Isaac Angelos (1186–1195) and Alexios III Angelos Komnenos (1105–1204). Apart from the coins it contained 14 rings, a pair of earrings and a pair of bracelets. The ring in question is gold, set with an antique cornelian intaglio depicting a female mask in profile, with grotesque features

² On a cornelian (mid-first century BC) in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles [44, no. 183, p. 82], a sardonyx (late Republican period) from the once Currie Collection [17, p. 149 no. 34. 14, pl. XXX/34] and a cornelian (second-first century BC) in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig [41, p. 13, no. 12; pl. 3/12].

³ Σάτυροί τινες οὔτοι καὶ πρὸς πᾶσαν αἰσχροουργίαν ἀκόλαστοι [33, col. 216 A]. It is worth mentioning that a sinner with the fragmentary inscription *O [CA]TYP[O]C* is depicted among the damned in Hell in a wall painting (around 1400) of the Church of St. John in Axos, in the region of Mylopotamos, Crete [1].

⁴ Ἐμὲ γοῦν ἦρει ἐπανερωτῶσα πολλάκις μύθους ἑλληνικούς, καὶ αὐτὴ προστιθεῖσα εἴ τινος τῶν ἀκριβοῦντων περὶ ταῦτα ἀκήκοεν [20, p. 304].

and an open mouth. Such masks were presumably used by actors. In view of its style and the stone's convex shape the intaglio can be dated to the 2nd or 1st century BC⁵.

Human masks were very popular in late Byzantine art, namely in monumental painting, miniatures and icons. They usually appeared in representations of buildings and furniture as well as of the armour of military saints and Archangel Michael [34, pp. 308–313, 322–328]. They may, therefore, be interpreted in terms of their apotropaic qualities. On the other hand, the mask motif, usually depicted on wall paintings of aristocratic patronage, as for example the frescoes of the funerary chapel in the Chora monastery, Constantinople, and the Mystras churches, indicate the antiquarian taste of the Byzantine social elite. Moreover, since masks of an anti-classical appearance were very popular in the West⁶, they also illustrate one aspect of Western influence on Byzantine art [34, pp. 328–335].

Three late Byzantine gold rings with Greek inscriptions outlined with nielo, which is today lost in some spots, are set with octagonal nicolo intaglios⁷. Probably these engraved gems, dated to the 2nd–3rd century AD, were originally oval in shape, as the majority of antique Roman engraved gems, and had been cut down to fit the shape of the ring bezel [47, p. 48]. Owing to their fine workmanship the three rings have been attributed to a 14th-century workshop related to the imperial court in Constantinople and influenced by Western models [47, p. 48].

The third ring (Ill. 35), today in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, inv. no. 57.1580 [47, p. 36, cat. 20, with literature, pl. 7], has a broad, carinated hoop which is elaborately decorated with carved scrollwork and two shields with heraldic lions on the shoulders. On the bezel's gem Pan is represented bearded, goat-footed, holding his characteristic pipes. The inscription carved in relief around the edge of the bezel reads *KE COTHP MOY THNA Φ*, a quotation from Psalm 27 (*Lord is my Light and my Savior, whom shall I fear?*). Biblical verses were rarely engraved on rings, except for the *trisagion* and Psalm 90 (the latter was considered to have protective powers). According to the 6th-century hymnographer Romanos the Melode, chanting of psalms and hymns could scathe demons, who are mankind's eternal enemies⁸.

In Greek religion and mythology the goat-horned and legged god Pan was related to pastoral life, rural music (since he invented the pipes), divining art and sensual pleasure. Arkadia in the Peloponnese was the principal seat of his worship, but his cult had also spread in Attica since the 5th century BC because he was believed to have created panic among the Persian army at the Marathon battle [22, pp. 240–243; 21, p. 193; 42.]. Byzantine writers characterized composite creatures from pagan mythology as unrealistic and

⁵ For parallels [44, p. 92, no. 216. 17, p. 132 nos. 57, 58. 14, pl. XXVI, nos. 57, 58].

⁶ E.g.: two masks in relief in the cathedrals of Reims and Bamberg and another in a fountain from the abbey of St. Denis, today in the court of the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris [19, figs. 116, 118, 119].

⁷ A nicolo intaglio is an onyx gem engraved in such a way that the image displays a translucent bluish-grey colour. Under this thin top layer is a thicker layer of dark material.

⁸ Ψάλλειν ἐστὶ καλὸν καὶ ὑμνεῖν τὸν Θεόν
καὶ τιτρώσκειν ἐλέγχοις τοὺς δαίμονας
πολεμίους αἰεὶ γενομένους ἡμῖν...
(*It is good to sing psalms and hymns to God
And to scourge with reproaches the demons
Who are our eternal enemies...* [24, p. 275 n. 3].

absurd. Thus, negative comments on Pan are not rare in Byzantine literature [28, pp. 190–191; 13, p. 8]. A typical example is a — probably — 10th-century *encomium* of a stylite saint Alypius, by a certain Antony, monk and priest of St. Sophia's chapels [18, pp. 5, 168–169], which refers to him as “the most ludicrously laughable of the lot — a mixture of different natures and faculties”⁹. However, despite the negative connotations, which mythological composite creatures, such as tritons, centaurs, satyrs, sphinxes, bull-lions and snake-legged giants, had in Byzantine religious texts, they appeared frequently in Byzantine art, both religious and secular. The well-educated social elite, residing mainly in Constantinople, was probably attracted by pagan iconographic inventions as implied by numerous ivory boxes, tableware, sculptures and illuminated manuscripts, decorated with composite creatures [28, pp. 192 ff. 11, pp. 44–46; 13, pp. 11–28]. The reused engraved gem with the image of Pan in the Baltimore ring is related to this profane antiquarian aesthetic. Probably aware, however, of the demonic properties ascribed to Pan by Christian writers, the ring's owner explained his iconographic choice by the inscription around the pagan image: since he has gained holy protection, why should he be afraid of a curious creature? The ring had, therefore, a talismanic character. Moreover, the lion is a symbol of the victorious Christ, according to the *Revelation* (5:5)¹⁰. As symbols of strength, bravery and authority heraldic lions and lion masks decorate the armour and shield of soldier saints and Archangel Michael on late Byzantine icons and wall paintings¹¹. From the Roman period onwards, some images engraved on rings were chosen because of a special relevance to their owners [38, p. 4]. We may, therefore, suggest that this precious ring could belong to a high-ranking military officer. On the other hand, some Venetian influence in the choice of the lion motif cannot be excluded.

The fourth ring of this late Byzantine group belongs to the British Museum, London (inv. no. AF 563 [47, p. 36 no. 24, with literature, pl. 7]. Its intaglio depicts Bonus Eventus represented as a full-length male figure in profile, with one leg bent. He is nude, wearing only a chlamys, and holds a dish of fruits and a branch. His iconographic type (the so-called second type of Bonus Eventus) was very popular in the Imperial period¹². Around the edge of the bezel runs a carved inscription beginning with a cross: *KIPHOC ΦΩΤΙCΜΟC ΜΟΥ ΚΕ CΟΤΗΡ ΜΟΥ ΤΙΝΑ Φ* (*Lord is my Light and my Savior, whom shall I fear?* Psalm 27:1). The hoop is decorated with spiral engraving.

⁹ ... οὐδὲ πολλοῦ γε καὶ δεῖ Πάνα τὸν τῶν προειρημένων εἰς γέλωτος ἀφορμὴν γελοιώτατον, μίγμα διαφόρων φύσεων καὶ δυνάμεων [18, p. 191. 28, p. 192].

¹⁰ Ἴδου ἐνίκησεν ὁ λέων, ὁ ὦν ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς Ἰούδα, ἡ ρίζα Δαβίδ, ...

¹¹ A heraldic lion appears on the shield of St. Demetrios on a mosaic icon (early 14th century) of the Museo Civico, Sassoferato [7, p. 232 no. 139] and a lion's head is depicted on the shield of St. Demetrios in the frescoes of the Perivleptos church, Mystras (1360–1380) [34, pp. 310–311]. Lion masks appear on the armours of St. George and Archangel Michael in the wall paintings (late 13th century) of the Metropolis at Mystras [34, p. 309] as well as of St. George, St. Demetrios and Archangel Michael in the frescoes of the Perivleptos in Mystras [34, pp. 310–311].

¹² Cf. a nicolo intaglio (2nd–3rd century AD) in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig [41, p. 23 no. 51 with literature; pl. 7/51], a plasma ring stone (1st century BC – 3rd century AD) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [39, p. 85 no. 374, pl. XLVII], a red jasper (2nd century AD) in the Archäologisches Institut der Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen [41, p. 88 no. 99; pl. 37/99], and a jasper (2nd century AD) in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn [34, p. 99, pl. 26/95].

Bonus Eventus, the Roman genius of Good Fortune (“Good Outcome”), was very frequently depicted on gems, medals and coins¹³. We may therefore suggest that the owner of the London ring, probably an erudite aristocrat, was aware of the male figure’s identity. Although the official Byzantine view condemned nude in art [28, p. 200; 12, pp. 1500–1501; 13, pp. 97, 106–109], he nevertheless selected this pagan image for his ring’s decoration, thus combining his wish for good fortune with his hope of holy protection, as expressed by the inscription.

The last ring of the group belongs to the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, inv. no. Luynes 36 [47, p. 36 no. 22, with literature, pl. 8]. Its flat hoop is engraved on one side, beginning with a cross, with the epigram *XPICOC KOCMEI ΔAXTIAON THN ΔAI ΨΥXHN ΛOΓΩC* (*Gold ornaments the finger and the logos ornaments the soul*). The inscription on the other side *ΔOTE TO ΚΩCΜΟ ΚΕΡΑ* is part of the epigram *As soon as we gain the world, we are buried in the tomb*, which paraphrases a verse from the eighth stanza of the *kontakion* “On Life in the Monastery” by Romanos the Melode [26, no. 55, p. 475; 45, p. 40]. Romanos’ literary production was indebted to Greek patristic tradition and acquired therefore a moralizing character [29]. This epigram, encountered in three more rings of the late Byzantine period [47, p. 40], as well as the whole stanza¹⁴, refers to the futility of worldly things.

The stone of the bezel is flat and engraved with a muse. She stands on a ground line, with her right foot on a podium, and holds a mask and a pedum (a shepherd’s staff). Therefore she can be identified with Thalia, the muse of comedy and merry or idyllic poetry¹⁵. A 6th-century gold ring, from Syracuse, probably of local manufacture, is also set with a cornelian intaglio depicting a muse with a mask, probably Thalia [35, pp. 160–161]. An inscription incised around the stone reads: *Κ(ύριε) βοήθει Λέοντος νοταρίου* (*Lord, help Leo the notarios*). In this case we know that the wearer of the ring, a *notarios* (notary), had been a cultivated person of the Byzantine society.

If the Byzantine owner of the Paris ring had also been a cultivated person, he might have identified the depicted woman as a muse related to the theater. Sculptures, paintings and gems depicting the nine muses were numerous in Hellenistic and Roman art. The two muses — protectors of the theater are shown with a mask. Melpomene, muse of Tragedy, holds a tragic mask, while Thalia is shown with a comic one and sometimes also with a pedum. According to the didactic content of the inscriptions engraved on the ring, the gem should depict Melpomene and not Thalia. Either such a gem was not available or the gem with the image of Thalia was incorrectly selected for the Paris ring instead of a gem with a representation of Melpomene.

¹³ E.g.: in a jeweller’s hoard from Snettisham, in Roman Britain, Bonus Eventus is depicted in the majority of the intaglios (25%) [10, p. 296].

¹⁴ Ἴνα δὲ συνελὼν εἶπω, ἅπαντα
τὰ ἐν κόσμῳ σὺν κόσμῳ παρέρχεται·
ὅτε πάντα γὰρ βίον κερδίσωμεν,
τότε ὄντως τὸν τάφον οἰκήσομεν·
καλῶς οὖν ἐφησεν ὁ πάνσοφος·
«Ματαιότης ματαιοτήτων τὰ πάντα»·
εἰ γὰρ ἔστι θανεῖν, διὰ τι καὶ πλουτεῖν;
Ἄγαθὸν οὖν ἡσύχως τὸ ψάλλειν Χριστῷ [26, p. 475].

¹⁵ <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Mousai.html> (accessed April 12, 2015). These are the attributes of Thalia in a mosaic dated to the 3rd–4th century AD in Trier (found in the Neustraße) with half-length images of the nine muses [<http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/Z20.3.html> (accessed April 12, 2015)].

It is generally accepted that engraved gems were not often used as seals in Byzantium [9, p. 133], therefore the five rings of our group were probably not signet rings. Their stones originate from the Roman period, when gem production was prolific. The motifs selected for their decoration were mostly mythological. Some of them, namely those of the two satyrs, the mask and the god Pan, had apotropaic connotations and of course all images of the examined ring stones have been probably considered as sources of danger, since they derived from the pagan world. Given the mediaeval prevalent belief in the stones' healing powers [31, p. 62], it can be assumed that these rings were seen as amulets — the wish for protection being far more pronounced in the Baltimore and the London rings because of their inscriptions.

Only one of our rings has an archaeological context, that from Gavalochori. The island of Crete, recaptured by the Byzantine general and future emperor Nikephoros Phokas after a long period of Arabic occupation (827–961), had strong ties to Constantinople during the middle Byzantine period. Thus, the Gavalochori ring might have been an official gift to its owner, who was perhaps a dignitary or a military officer¹⁶. Since the Thessalonike hoard, to which our second ring belonged, is a heterogeneous ensemble, consisting of Byzantine and Latin jewels, it seems likely that it was a dealer's accumulated stock or the property of a money lender [47, p. 18]. The owners of the three late Byzantine rings attributed to the court workshop were probably members of a well-educated social elite related to Constantinople. The pagan images of these ring stones were "Christianized" through the inscriptions just like the figures from the antique iconographic repertoire (personifications of melody, the night and the like), incorporated in religious miniatures of the Macedonian Renaissance — and their Palaeologan replicas — acquired a Christian content.

Although the art of gem carving was revived in Byzantium after Iconoclasm, the owners of the rings in question chose antique intaglios to decorate them. This is because they probably appreciated the art of Graeco-Roman antiquity — their own past — and believed, as also the Nicaean emperor and philosopher Theodore II Laskaris (1222–1258) did, that "the works of the dead are more beautiful than those of the living"¹⁷.

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Abstract. It is nowadays generally accepted that the Byzantines were familiar with the art of the antiquity. In this context antique gemstones, cameos and intaglios, were incorporated in mediaeval jewellery, especially in rings. How did the Byzantines "reuse antiquity" in relation to their rings, these precious objects of prestige or personal adornment? Did they keep their original meaning or were they affected by Christian faith? Can we speculate on the identity of these rings' owners? These are the questions which the author of the paper tries to deal with.

Keywords: Reuse; antiquity; Roman intaglios; Byzantine rings; inscriptions; mythological motifs; piety; amulets; West-ern influence.

Название статьи. Возвращенная античность. Византийские перстни с античными резными камнями.

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¹⁶ A well-known practice from the early Byzantine period onwards [45, p. 18].

¹⁷ In a letter to Georgios Akropolites, describing the deserted city of Pergamon (ὠραιότερα γὰρ εἰσι τὰ πρόποδα τῆς κορυφῆς καὶ τὰ τῶν θεωνέωτων τῶν ζώντων) [15, p. 108. 30, p. 69. On this letter, see 3].

Аннотация. Сегодня общепризнано, что наследие античности было хорошо известно в Византии. Статья посвящена вторичному использованию античных резных камней — инталий и камей, в Средние века вправленных в ювелирные изделия, особенно в перстни. Автор задается вопросом: как в Византии относились к перстням с античными вставками — как к знакам престижа или как к украшениям? Сохранился ли прежний смысл этих предметов или христианство внесло в него изменения? Можем ли мы по перстню судить о личности владельца?

Ключевые слова: античность; вторичное использование; римские инталии; византийские перстни; надписи; мифологические темы; почитание; амулеты; западные влияния.

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