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THREE MAGICAL GEMS WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF CHNOUBIS FROM THE COLLECTION OF KONSTANTY SCHMIDT-CIĄŻYŃSKI

In 1886, the National Museum in Cracow enriched its holdings with an interesting collection of glyptics donated by Konstanty Schmidt-Ciążyński (1817–1889).¹ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, he was the owner of a significant collection of artworks, among which were a large number of antique gems and cameos. The collection added to the holdings of the National Museum in Cracow included, to be precise, 2,517 uncommonly valuable examples of this branch of artistic craftsmanship.² Among the antiquities should be mentioned Mesopotamian

¹ For a history and characterization of the collection, and a discussion of its creator, see J. Śliwa, „Konstanty Schmidt-Ciążyński (1817–1889). Zapomniany kolekcjoner i znawca starożytnej gliktyki”, *Meander* 43 (1988), 437–451. For basic biographical information see also *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* 35 (1994), p. 554 (J. Śliwa).

² Initially, the Schmidt-Ciążyński gem collection was kept in the Department of Numismatics, where it remained for many years. Unfortunately, however, the gems were there

cylinder seals, Egyptian scarabs, Neo-Babylonian seals, and Etruscan scarabs, as well as Greek and Roman gems, several of the so-called "magical gems," and Sasanian seals.³ In Polish holdings, which are not ample in this respect, the glyptic collection assembled by Konstanty Schmidt-Ciążyński deserves careful attention. Nevertheless, not even a fraction of it has ever been put on display, even as part of the one and only Cracow exposition of ancient art.

The collection conveyed to the Cracow museum by Konstanty Schmidt-Ciążyński also includes an interesting group of these "magical gems" (ca. 100 pieces). In the case of items of this type, also sometimes called "Gnostic gems" or simply "abraxases",⁴ there can be no doubt that nei-

removed from the cases and boxes provided for them by Schmidt-Ciążyński, and also deprived of the previous markings and numbers corresponding to the register made in 1886. Moreover, they were re-catalogued with other minor glyptic collections previously owned by Emeryk Hutten-Czapski and Leo Kostka, among others. Thus some objects are at present difficult to identify. It was in this condition that the National Museum's collection of gems and cameos were handed over in the 1950s, after their separation from numismatic items, to the Department of Artistic Handicraft at the National Museum in Cracow, where the collection resides today.

³ Only certain groups and individual artifacts have been worked up and published. See J. Śliwa, *Egyptian Scarabs and Magical Gems from the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński*, *Studia z Archeologii Śródziemnomorskiej* 11 (Warsaw and Cracow, 1989), and the reviews in *Discussion in Egyptology* 23 (1992), pp. 93–94 (J. Vodoz-Gauthier) and *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 52 (1995), col. 385–387 (B. Schlick-Nolte). By the latter author, see also „Eine unbekannte Abraxasgemme aus der Sammlung von Konstantin Schmidt-Ciążyński”, in *Nubia et Oriens Christianus*, *Bibliotheca Nubica* I (Köln, 1987); and „Gemma z przedstawieniem 'Pantheosa' z kolekcji Konstantego Schmidta-Ciążyńskiego”, *Eos* 78 (1990), pp. 163–167; „Bahram Gor and Azade: An Unknown Sasanian Gem in the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński”, *SAAC* 1 (1991), 49–52. Several Egyptian scarabs and amulets have also been included in this same author's recent publication, *Skarabeusze egipskie* (Cracow, 1995). Concerning the gem MNK IV-ZI-137, see P. O. Scholz, „Der Einzug in Jerusalem”, in *Orbis Aethiopicus II*, *Bibliotheca Nubica* 3 (Albstadt, 1992), 427–466.

⁴ The basic works on this category of artifacts are as follows: C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Roman*, University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 49 (Ann Arbor and London, 1950); A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Medailles et Antiques (Paris, 1964); P. Zazoff, „'Gnostische' Gemmen”, in *Die Antike Gemmen*, Handbuch der Archäologie (Munich, 1983), pp. 349–362, pls. 112–119; H. Philipp, *Mira et Magica. Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin Charlottenburg* (Mainz am Rhein, 1986). Mention should also be made of a pioneering work, undeservedly forgotten, by J. Matter, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne* (Paris, 1828), the third volume of which was conceived as a sort of *corpus* of the artifacts, accompanied by an extensive commentary.

ther the artistic quality nor the type of stone used (most often the quite popular semi-precious stones) were of paramount interest.⁵ Sometimes the engraved scene is quite simply poorly executed, since the power of its magical effect is concentrated on the collocation of the appropriate constituent elements, and in the accompanying texts engraved in the decorative field on the front face and on the rear surface of the gem. In recent years, a good deal of attention has been paid to the significance of magic gems as sources for research, on a par with magical papyri, into the shaping of religious beliefs in the first centuries of our era.⁶ Attention should also be drawn to the connection of magic stones with Egypt. The impact of Egyptian beliefs and Egyptian iconography is in many cases perfectly obvious, and recently Alexandria has come to loom ever larger in discussions aimed at locating the center from which these gems originated.⁷

The group under discussion also includes several artifacts of medical significance, including three gems meant to facilitate digestion and prevent stomach problems, with the representation of a lion-headed serpent with rays. His name appears to be Chnoubis or Chnoumis, one of the decans of the signs Leo or Cancer.⁸ Such objects were typically made of chalcedony or other translucent green stones. In the representations of Chnoubis/Chnoumis, a solar aspect can be distinguished (lion in radiant crown) in association with a chthonic element (serpentine body/Agathodaimon, probably symbolizing simultaneously both the Nile and its inundation). The so-called "characters" incised on the reverse can be interpreted as follows:

⁵ This is doubtless a factor of the corresponding broad spectrum of customers, recruited from the lower social levels; cf. Zazoff, p. 361, and Philipp, p. 26.

⁶ See M. Smith, *„Relations between magical papyri and magical gems”*, *Papyrologica Bruxelensia* 18 (1979), 129–136, and J. Schwartz, *„Papyri magicae graecae und magische Gemmen”*, in *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich* (Leiden, 1981), 485–509.

⁷ E.g. Philipp, pp. 11–12. Alexandria could serve as an ideal center, since at that time the influence of classical culture could commingle there with Egyptian and other Near Eastern civilizations (Judaeo-Aramaic, Syrian, Mesopotamian, Iranian, etc.).

⁸ On this subject see the fuller discussion, with examples of artifacts, in Matter, vol. 3, pl. IIA; Bonner, nos. 81–97, pp. 54–60; Delatte and Derchain, nos. 52–81, pp. 54–72; *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen*, Vol. III (Wiesbaden, 1970) nos. 162–171 (Kassel); D. Wortmann, *„Kosmogonie und Nilflut”*, *BjB* 166 (1966), pp. 85–92; Philipp, nos. 126–135; Z. Kiss, *„Chnubis”*, in *LIMC* III.1 (1986), pp. 272–273.



– a symbol of Zeus;



– an Old Babylonian symbol of God;



– frequently referred to as the “Chnoubis sign”;

the last of these signs is derived from Semitic epigraphy, in which it is used as a mark for denoting God (in Greek, Old Babylonian, and Judeo-Aramaic regions).⁹ But the origin of the Chnoubis sign can also be traced back to Egyptian images of decans, denoting three rearing snakes crossed by another lying horizontally.¹⁰

The Cracow artifacts described below constitute interesting and important materials for research on the entire group; on the basis of comparisons with artifacts from other collections, they can be dated only in very broad terms, to the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.

1. Inv. No. MNK IV-ZI-1869



Chalcedony. Oval shape, both faces flat, edge cut at an angle. Dimensions 18.2 x 13.5 x 3.5 mm. State of preservation: good, slight damage on the edge. Workmanship fairly careful.


Side A: in the center of the field, Chnoubis as a serpent with leonine head, aureole of ten rays, head facing left. Inscription beneath the serpent's coil: CEMECIAAM (Hebr. “Eternal sun”).¹¹ On left and right: ANOX XNOYMIC (ANOX = “I” and “I am” in Coptic).¹²

⁹ A. Barb, review of Delatte and Derchain, *Gnomon* 41 (1969), 302.

¹⁰ See L. Kakosy, “Decans in Late Egyptian Religion”, *Oikumene* 3 (1982), 163–191.

¹¹ PGM IV.591; VII.403, 646, and *passim*; Bonner, pp. 58–59.

¹² Bonner, p. 59; A. Barb, “Abraxas-Studien”, in *Hommages W. Deonna*, Coll. Latomus 28 (Brussels, 1957), 73–76.

Side B: magical characters repeated three times:¹³ 

Edge: on the narrow oblique surface, ΒΑΡΟΦΙΤΑ ("Crusher of serpents")¹⁴ and ΠΙΓΑΝΤΟΡΗΚΚΤΑ ("Breaker of giants").¹⁵

Text as a whole: "I am Chnoumis, the eternal sun, crusher of serpents, breaker of giants."

2. Inv. No. MNK IV-Z1-1790



Dark plasma. Oval shape, both faces convex, edge straight. Dimensions: 17.6 x 14.1 x 5.7 mm. State of preservation: good. Workmanship typical, rather careful.

Side A: engraved representation of a lion-headed demon with serpentine body, facing left; aureole with seven rays. Inscription, intersected by the body of the snake: XNOY MIC.

Side B: in the center of the decoration field, the so-called "Chnoubis sign": 

Around the margin, the following text: ΒΑΡΡΩΦΙΤΑ ("Crusher of serpents")¹⁶ and ΠΙΓΑΤΩΠΛΗΤΑ ("Breaker of giants"),¹⁷ i.e. βαροφίτα γιγα[v]τοπλη[κ]τα.

¹³ Regarding these characters, see Bonner, pp. 25, 53, and 59; Barb (review of Delatte-Derchain), p. 302.

¹⁴ Bonner, pp. 57 and 168f. The interpretation "Crusher of serpents" is very dubious; according to Morton Smith (in a private letter from New York, dated May 23, 1988), a more likely reading is "Son of (the) Serpent," supposing the Aramaic *bar*.

¹⁵ Bonner, p. 168; Barb (review article), p. 302, and „Abraxas-Studien“, p. 75.

¹⁶ Cf. note 14 above.

¹⁷ Delatte and Derchain, nos. 72–74, 81.

3. Inv. No. MNK IV-ZI-907



Plasma. Oval shape, lensate, rear surface more convex. Dimensions: 14.7 x 10.2 x 6.3 mm. State of preservation: good. Workmanship typical, fairly careful.

Side A: deeply engraved representation of a demon with serpent's body and lion's head, facing left; aureole of seven rays. On the margin, inscription, intersected by the body of the snake: XNOY BIN.¹⁸

Side B: in the center of the decoration field, the so-called "Chnoubis sign".¹⁹



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Trzy gemmy magiczne z przedstawieniem Chnubisa z kolekcji Konstantego Schmidta-Ciążyńskiego

Przedmiotem opracowania są trzy gemmy magiczne/gnostyczne z przedstawieniem Chnubisa na awersie i magicznymi znakami na rewersie. Gemmy tego typu należą do kategorii amuletów medycznych (w tym konkretnym przypadku ułatwiać miały trawienie i zapobiegać kłopotom żołądkowym). Datowane są na okres II–III w.; pochodzą z kolekcji Konstantego Schmidta-Ciążyńskiego (1817–1889), przekazanej do zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie w r. 1886.

¹⁸ The final N is very rare, and may here result from misreading of a Latin S; caution is in order.

¹⁹ See notes 9 and 10.