

AN ENGRAVED CARNELIAN GEM FROM NYSA-SCYTHOPOLIS (BET SHE'AN)

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The western *therma*, located on a wide plateau in the western part of the Roman civic center of Nysa-Scythopolis (Bet She'an), was concealed by a thick, unstratified accumulation of earth and debris. The fill, presumably washed down from the adjacent western hill, had gradually covered the floors of the complex after its destruction in the earthquake of 749 CE. An intact carnelian gemstone was revealed within the fill, along with an assortment of pottery and coins from the Roman and Byzantine periods. The gem, originally set in a ring, depicts Heracles in a scene of one of his labors: the overcoming of the Nemean lion.

DESCRIPTION

L101161; B101 × 1407 (elevation -148.44 m)
Oval (12 × 9 mm, Th 2.5 mm; Fig. 1);¹ upper surface slightly concave; lower surface flat, its edge beveled inward to be held by the ring-setting.



Fig 1. The gem.

Red carnelian.

Design engraved (intaglio), excellent workmanship.

Perfectly preserved, except for a minor chip on upper left edge.

Obverse: A nude male figure stands above a thick horizontal ground line, facing right, left leg bent forward while the right one is straight, leaning slightly forward. Both hands are raised, gripping the neck of a lion in an attempt to strangle it. The man's head, supported by a thick neck, faces right; his facial features are blurred, although he seems to be bearded with long, curly hair. The figure is heavy, extremely muscular, and depicted in a sturdy posture, its legs forming a balanced triangle. Engaged in a combat stance, a rearing, rampant lion attacks him, facing left. The lion's heavy, well-balanced body leans over its rear right paw placed on the ground, while the rear left leg is forced over the man's right knee. Both front paws (only the left is visible) are gripping the male figure at his waist. The long tail winds between the lower limbs of both confronting figures. The lion's muscular body, marked by diagonal stripes of curly hair, is depicted in an arch leading to its massive head with a curling mane. It is attempting to bite the male figure's left shoulder. Behind the man, a heavy club stands upright on the ground line. The background is clean and polished.

The gem's engraving—a debased version of the 'wheel style' (Henig and Whiting 1987:2)—is excellent, deeply incised and polished, and precise in all the anatomical details of both male figure and beast. The scene

is well-balanced, perfectly depicting the two muscular figures engaged in a powerful, tense, barehanded struggle.

DISCUSSION

Although ring gems were common among the upper class during the Roman period, they are rarely found in archaeological excavations. They occasionally appear in datable tombs, as well as in other non-datable contexts, but most of them, exhibited in museums or private collections, have no clear provenance. Their dating, when mentioned, is typically based on iconography, style, workmanship and material (some of which came into use or went out of fashion in known periods). Occasionally, motifs on the reverse of coins—assumed to be engraved by the same artists—might serve as dating parallels (Roszbach 1912:1088; Walters 1926:li; Bonner 1950:244; Richter 1956:xxi).

The combat scene depicts Heracles with his familiar attribute (a club) fighting the Nemean lion, the first of his twelve labors. The Nemean lion was a monster, an offspring of Echidna and Orthus (or Typhon). The beast was suckled by the moon-goddess, Selene, or nursed by Hera. Heracles killed the lion and thereafter wore its pelt.

A similar scene of Heracles fighting the Nemean lion, engraved on a carnelian gem from the Clark collection in the Israel Museum (IMJ 90.24.403), matches our gem in almost every detail. It seems to be a Roman copy of a Hellenistic gem from c. 200 BCE. Ovadiah and Mucznik (2009:116–117, Figs. 199–201) present three gems portraying a standing figure of Heracles—one from 'Akko/Ptolemais (Rahmani 1981), one from Caesarea Maritima (see below) and an unprovenanced gem, possibly from Jerusalem/Aelia Capitolina (Manns 1978:153–158, Fig. 29).² The last, exhibited in the Church of the Flagellation Museum in Jerusalem also depicts Heracles struggling with the Nemean lion. Manns' comparisons for the Jerusalem gem include second-century CE coins depicting the same

scene from Gaza, Ashqelon (Hill 1914:130, 150, 156, 160, 166) and Alexandria (Poole 1892:48). Several private collections (all in all, 165 gems), presumably originating in the dunes that covered Caesarea Maritima, were published by Hamburger (1968) and dated to the first century CE. They include three gems showing Heracles: two of red jasper (Nos. 55, 56) and one of onyx (No. 57). In the first (Hamburger 1968: Pl. III:55), a beardless and nude Heracles stands in a frontal pose looking left, with a lion-skin over his right arm and a club in his left. The second (Hamburger 1968: No. 56, not illustrated) depicts Heracles in the nude throttling the lion, club to the right, while the third (Hamburger 1968: Pl. III:57) portrays the bust of Heracles looking left with a lion-skin knotted around his neck. The Sa'd collection of 488 engraved gems from Gadara contains three gems depicting Heracles struggling with the Nemean lion that are similar to our gem in motif, style and workmanship (Henig and Whiting 1987:27, Figs. 257–259). According to Henig and Whiting, the first two, of red jasper and dated to the first century CE, are comparable with gems found in the western part of the empire and with seal impressions recovered from the public archive of Cyrene in the east, burnt down in the Jewish revolt of 115–117 CE (Maddoli 1963–4:76–83). The third gem, of carnelian, dates to the third century CE.

Outside of the region, the motif has numerous published examples covering a long time span. Among them, a sard stone in a gold ring found near Catania, Sicily, depicts Heracles strangling the Nemean lion (Richter 1942:35). The delicate, finely finished design, dated to c. 400 BCE, is identical to the scene depicted on coins of Syracuse by the artists Euainetos and Kimon, suggested by Evans (1908:117, Pl. V, No. 5) as the artists' official seal. A gem depicting an almost identical scene to that on the Nysa-Scythopolis gem (although far better engraved) is, according to Richter (1956:92, No. 412, Pl. LI:412), a Late Hellenistic type contemporary with the Pergamene dedication (see also a red

jasper ring stone with the same scene, Richter 1920: Pl. 79:386). Richter (1920:183) suggested that the motif goes back to archaic Greek times and was used throughout the Greek and Roman periods. A carnelian intaglio in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, in which the nude Heracles is standing in three-quarter back view looking at the dying lion at his feet, was dated by Richter (1971:271) to the Roman period. Heracles strangling the Nemean lion was also depicted on a gem in the Göttingen collection dated to the early first century CE (Zazof 1970:116, Pl. 53:280). Three gems depicting the same scene from a Roman-period site at Caerleon, Britain are dated by Henig (1978:239–240, Figs. 431–433) to the third century CE. Henig states that while the other labors of Heracles were less frequently represented after the first century CE, this labor retained its popularity. Finally, a red jasper intaglio in the Ashmolean Museum, presumably from Syria, carries the same scene, although of a lesser quality engraving. The scene, surrounded by the inscription MAPAINOY, presumably the owner's name, was also dated by Henig and MacGregor (2004:105, Fig. 10:30) to the third century CE.

Similar engravings of the motif further attest to its validity during the Roman period (second to third centuries CE) in the region: a coin from the reign of Caracalla (201–202 CE) and one from the reign of Elagabal (218–219 CE), both minted at Abila (Spijkerman 1978:54–55, Pl. 8:20; 56–57, Pl. 9:31), as well as two other coins, one of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE) and the other of Elagabal, both of which were minted at Philadelphia (Spijkerman 1978:248–249, Pl. 55:19; 256–257, Pl. 57:44). Since the same artists may well have worked on both gems and coins, it is not unreasonable to assume that our gem was engraved in the region, presumably in one of these neighboring cities or any other city of the *Decapolis*.

Among the negligible number of gems found in archaeological contexts in the region, one should point out a few gems of similar type and workmanship that, although depicting various other mythological scenes, might assist in

dating. Among the finds revealed within a burial cave near Giv'at Yasaf was a red carnelian gem with intaglio engraving, depicting a winged Victory crowning a trophy. It was dated to the late second or early third century CE, i.e., the Severan period and, as in our case, is of excellent workmanship (Abu Uqsa 1997:40, Fig. 2). The excavations of Horbat Qastra, at the foot of Mount Carmel, yielded a red carnelian gem with intaglio engraving of similar quality, set in a gold ring. It depicts Tyche and is dated between the first and third centuries CE (Zemer 1999:43). Finally, a burial cave of the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods at Ha-Gosherim yielded several agate gems. One of them, depicting Athena Parthenos carrying Nike in her outstretched hand, reflects the same workmanship and engraving style as our gem. The burial cave was dated to the late first century CE, i.e., the Flavian period, thereby providing a *terminus ante quem* for dating its contents (Ovadia 1999:41*, 43*–44*).

Hamburger (1968:1–5) argued that high-quality gem engraving characterized the artists of the Hellenistic period rather than those of the Roman period when, she assumed, the craftsmanship tended to deteriorate. Yet, the various finds in the region and throughout the Roman world seem to indicate otherwise. Her other assumption, that during the Roman period the gems lost their function as finger rings and in the process acted as amulets while acquiring magical meanings, also does not seem to be positively based and should be reconsidered.

Furtwaengler (1900:274, No. 20, Pl. LXI:20 and cf. Pl. XVII:56, 57), in referring to a similar carnelian gem, assumed that it reflected a late Etruscan work of the fifth to fourth centuries BCE. In another example (Furtwaengler 1900 II:85, Pl. XV:56), he discerned an Archaic Greek motif also reflected in the well-engraved Greek coins of the fifth century BCE. Richter (1968, I:279–286), on the other hand, states that the Roman Renaissance of Greek mythological motifs on gems reflects Roman interest in Greek culture. Furthermore, copies of Greek or Hellenistic gems by Roman engravers

were, in her opinion, sometimes appropriated as their own without acknowledging their source. As for the origin of the motif, she states (Richter 1920: No. 21) that it is quite frequent on various contemporary Greek black-figured and early red-figured vases, as it is on gems. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, it most probably has its origins in Hellenistic culture, both in the style of workmanship and in the preference for mythological scenes as motifs.

SUMMARY

The gem from Nysa-Scythopolis bears a mythological scene that is known from examples ranging in date from the fifth century BCE to the third century CE. The high quality of workmanship and the style of the engraving best match various similar examples from

the Roman period, both from this region and beyond it, all of which were dated between the first to third centuries CE. Its findspot—the Roman civic center—also indicates that, in all probability, the gem should be dated to the Roman period (first to third centuries CE). Roman Nysa-Scythopolis was established south of Naḥal Ḥarod in the first century CE by Gabinius (57–55 BCE), reached its monumental peak during the second century CE, and was completed in the early third century CE. By contrast, the civic center of Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis was a considerable distance away, on Tel Iẓṭabba, a spacious hill north of Naḥal Ḥarod. Taking into account all the evidence, it seems most likely that the dating of the gem, as attested to by its workmanship, style and provenience, can be narrowed down to the second century CE.

NOTES

¹ Photographed by Clara Amit; carnelian identification by Natalya Katsnelson.

² Its precise origin and dating are unknown, but it was presumably purchased from an antiquity dealer

in Jerusalem; Manns, therefore, assumed it came from Aelia Capitolina.

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