

## POWER OF MAGIC: SEVERAL NOTES ON TWO ENGRAVED GEMS FROM MURSA

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*Two engraved gems from Osijek (ancient Mursa) are to be analyzed in this paper: a green jasper engraved with Harpocrates sitting on the lotus flower and bearing the inscription KRA/TOU/ATH, and the heliotrope showing mummy of Osiris with Anubis. The Harpocrates gem can be assigned in the category of magical gems, while the other one, despite its iconography, lacks the magical inscription, which would put it in the same group. Both engraved gemstones are a part of the Archaeological Museum Osijek Roman Golden jewelry and gems collection.*

Keywords: *engraved gems, magical gems, Harpocrates, Osiris, Anubis, Mursa, Osijek, Pannonia, Archaeological Museum Osijek*

### INTRODUCTION

The Roman town of *Mursa* was built on the right bank of the Drava river, in the place of today's town of Osijek in Croatia. It was founded by the emperor Hadrian probably around 133 AD as a veteran colony of *Aelia Mursa*.<sup>1</sup> With its strategic placement, the colony played an important role in the military control of the Danube limes road in southern Pannonia (Perinić Muratović 2003; Reed & Leleković 2017: 272; Marin 2018; Leleković 2020: 82–85, 98–100).

Within the area of Osijek and its surroundings, numerous Roman monuments testify to the way of life, religion, and customs in Roman *Mursa* (Brunšmid 1900; Pinterović 1978). Among these findings engraved gems, in particular, can offer us an insight into the private life of citizens of *Mursa*, since they belong to the category of very personal objects, chosen by their owners on the grounds of their individual tastes, needs, and religious beliefs (Henig 2017: 16).

The largest collection of Roman engraved gems from the *Mursa* territory today is kept in the Archaeological Museum Osijek. These gems are now a part of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account on the date of the *Mursa* founding see Leleković 2020: 79–81. For archaeological excavations and topography of *Mursa* see Pinterović 1956; 1978; Filipović 2004; Marin 2018; Leleković 2020.

Museum Roman golden jewelry and gems collection.<sup>2</sup> Before the foundation of the Archaeological Museum Osijek in 2017, that collection was a part of the Museum of Slavonia holdings.<sup>3</sup> The whole collection numbers 64 engraved gems, which are only partially published.<sup>4</sup> In 1881, Franjo Maixner published 20 intaglios and 2 cameos, unfortunately without their photographs or drawings (Maixner 1881). After Dr. Maixner's paper, engraved gems from Osijek did not attract much research attention. The turning point came with the work of Danica Pinterović, the Museum of Slavonia curator, who was dedicated both to the field research of ancient Mursa and the analysis of Roman finds.<sup>5</sup> In 1965, she published a paper in which she analyzed in great detail 33 engraved gems found in Osijek, the majority of which came from the Museum of Slavonia collection, except for two gemstones from the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum and two more from the private collection (Pinterović 1965).<sup>6</sup> Equipped with photographs and extended abstract in English, her paper reached a wider international audience.<sup>7</sup>

When summing up the engraved gems from Osijek, we must mention three more intaglios and one glass gem, that are a part of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb glyptic collection (Kaić 2013: 184, 226, 251, 269, nos. 96, 197, 264, 314) as well as two modern cornelians in the Nemzeti Museum in Budapest (Gesztelyi 2000: 88–89, 169–170, nos. 305, 313).

## ON MAGICAL GEMS WITH THE TWO POSSIBLE EXAMPLES IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OSIJEK COLLECTION

Engraved gems, apart from being ornaments, were primarily utilized for sealing purposes, represent-

ing the owner's signature (Guiraud 1996: 12; Kaić 2021). Although a significant number of engraved gemstones could have been regarded as talismans as well, there was a special group of gems, which were used exclusively for magical purposes.<sup>8</sup> Such gems ought to reflect a specific magical practice, or more precisely, they should represent material evidence of one such practice (Nagy 2012: 77). To be classified as magical, gems should have been engraved with magical names (*voces magicae*) or magical signs (*caractères*), written in positive, often on both sides of the gem, they should have been engraved with specific iconography and mounted in finger-rings (Faraone 2012: 58, n. 3; Nagy 2012: 77). Magical gems were not used for making a seal impression. Such gems were an integral part of magical practices, which required the use of gemstones engraved with strictly defined images and texts to complete the magic ritual. Some 4000–5000 magical gems from different collections are known today (Nagy 2012: 75).<sup>9</sup>

Traces of magical practice are preserved on a dark green jasper<sup>10</sup> intaglio (Fig. 1) from Osijek, published by Danica Pinterović (1965: 36–38, 53, no. 6, Pl. 1:6). It is engraved with a nude Harpocrates facing left and sitting on a lotus flower with both knees drawn up. Under the flower, there are two lotus stalks with buds. Harpocrates is wearing a sidelock of youth and a solar disk on the top of his head, with five rays around his head. His right hand is raised to his mouth, while in his left hand he holds a flail. On the reverse, we can see that several letters are inscribed in three lines: KRA/TOU/ATH.

Pliny the Elder (*Nat. hist.*, XXXIII, 41) writes that gems engraved with the image of Harpocrates, along with other Egyptian gods, started to be popular in his time. However, it was less likely that

<sup>2</sup> In the Archaeological Museum Osijek inventory, Osijek is listed as the finding site of 19 gems in the collection. Several more were found presumably in Osijek (?), while for the rest of the gems in the collection, there is no record of the site they were found.

<sup>3</sup> The Museum of Slavonia was founded in 1877 as The Museum of Royal Free City of Osijek (Kovač 2015).

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Marina Kovač, Ph.D., a senior curator in the Archaeological Museum Osijek for allowing the glyptic material to be examined and for obtaining the photographs of the gems.

<sup>5</sup> Pinterović 1965; Pinterović 1971. For Danica Pinterović's outstanding contribution to Roman Provincial Archaeology in Croatia see Kovač 2018; 2019a.

<sup>6</sup> From the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum collection, Danica Pinterović published a cornelian depicting Minerva (1965: 35, nos. 4) and a blue glass gem moulded with an image of Pegasus and a bull, in her opinion (1965: 46, no. 19). The same glass gem was also published by E. Zwierlein-Diehl in 1979, with the motif been described as a griffin attacking a bovine (AGWien II, 73, no. 855, Pl. 42).

<sup>7</sup> For example, her paper was cited in Gesztelyi 2000 and Henig 2007<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> For magical gems see Bonner 1950; Mastrocinque (ed.) 2003; Michel 2004; Mastrocinque (ed.) 2007; Gordon 2012; Nagy 2012. For the difference between a magical gem and a talisman, see Nagy 2012 and Faraone 2012: 58, n. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Research on magical gems in Croatia is rather scarce. After Mirko Šeper's groundbreaking dissertation on magical gems in Yugoslavia (Šeper 1941), magical gems were only occasionally published. A significant contribution to the study of magical gems from Dalmatia was made by Bruna Nardelli (2002; 2007). Recently Ana Debogović analyzed already published magical gems from Croatia as part of her MA thesis on magical gems (Debogović 2019: 96–111).

<sup>10</sup> The Archaeological Museum Osijek; Inv. no. AMO-AA-1406; Dark green jasper; 16 x 11 mm; Finding place: Osijek; Gift of C. F. Nuber; Published in: Pinterović 1965: 36–38, 53, no. 6, Pl. 1:6; Selem 1972: 38–39, 61; Selem 1997: 144–145; Selem 2008: 130–131 and Kovač 2019b: 51, 79, no. 59, Fig. 7.



Figure 1. Harpocrates sitting on a lotus flower (obverse), inscription KRA/TOU/ATH (reverse) – Inv. no. AMO-AA-1406, green jasper; 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (photo: Marina Kovač, Archaeological Museum Osijek)

Pliny referred to magical gems with the image of Harpocrates (Mastrocinque 2003: 73). Harpocrates was often carved in the dark colored gems, such as dark green jasper, the gemstone most frequently selected for Harpocrates images, but also in haematite, which emphasized Harpocrates role of not only the sun-god but also the god linked with fertility and pregnancy (Pinterović 1965: 37; Henig 2007<sup>3</sup>; Mastrocinque 2012: 66). Harpocrates was depicted as a child-god seated on a lotus flower with his finger raised towards his mouth or his lips. Greeks and Romans interpreted that gesture of thumb-sucking as a gesture of keeping silent (El-Khachab 1971: 133–134). The lotus for Egyptians symbolized light and power of creation and birth, associated with the rising sun, thus forming the connection between Harpocrates, as sun-god, and the lotus flower (El-Khachab 1971: 138–141).

The manner of employing the gems engraved with the image of Harpocrates in the magical practices is revealed to us in the Greek Magical Papyri. The papyrus (PGM LXI, 32) gives the following recipe: one should mix olive oil, beet plant, and seven olive branches, grind them together, put the mixture in the jar, and face the moon saying the special spell that invokes goddess Isis together with gods Helios, Osiris, and the *daimon* to bind the desired woman (Betz 1986: 290–291). To ensure the efficacy of a magical spell, the whole ritual should be performed while wearing an iron ring with the gem engraved with Harpocrates seated on a lotus as well with the magical name of *Abraxas* (Betz 1986: 291). A dark

green jasper from the Fitzwilliam Museum faithfully follows the described magical *praxis* (Henig 1994: 223, no. 495; Michel 2004: 269, no. 19.1.a-9).

Although the name inscribed on our green jasper differs from the name of Abraxas, recommended in the Greek Magical Papyrus, it was probably used for implementation of similar magical practices. Danica Pinterović correctly attributed this gem to a group of amulets used for magical purposes, based on the gemstone material and the device engraved on it. Furthermore, Danica Pinterović read the letters of the inscription as KRATOU ATH (Pinterović 1965: 36–37). She interpreted the inscription as “Krates the Athenian”, believing that the name of the owner was inscribed in the gem as well as his birthplace, Athens. She assumed it was a personal name of a certain man Krates from Athens, who came to live in Mursa. She probably based her opinion on the large number of engraved gems bearing the personal names. But, extensive research on magical gems, names, and inscriptions on them, showed that this inscription should be read as “Kratouath”, a name which refers to Harpocrates, and stands for “das einzigartige Kind” (Michel 2004: 485, 510). Therefore, it is not a personal name of the gem owner, but the name for Harpocrates, which can be found on some magical gems engraved with the image of Harpocrates.<sup>11</sup>

Although in the end, we do not know the name of the Mursa citizen, who commissioned this gem, nor his origin, we can only assume this person tried to solve certain life issues, perhaps in love, by resorting to magic.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the lapis lazuli from the British Museum showing Harpocrates seated on a lotus flower and holding a cornucopia, with the inscription in two lines KRAT/OUATH (Michel 2001: 68, no. 104). For the magical name of “Kratouath” and its variants see Michel 2004: 485.

Next follows the heliotrope<sup>12</sup> intaglio (Fig. 2), showing the mummy of Osiris in a bandage to left, lying on the back of a lion, who is striding left. Behind them, Anubis stands to left, with his right arm raised, and holds an ointment jar in his left hand. To the left of the lion, there is a star. This heliotrope was published by Franjo Maixner in 1881, who identified it as an amulet (Maixner 1881: 38, no. 17).



Figure 2. Anubis embalming the body of Osiris on the lion, Inv. no. AMO-AA-1397, heliotrope, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (photo: Marina Kovač, Archaeological Museum Osijek)

Osiris is most frequently shown on the magical gems as a mummy, with crossed arms and a scepter. On our heliotrope, we can see a less common motive of Anubis embalming Osiris, with Osiris-mummy placed on the lion's back.<sup>13</sup>

Anubis, the god with a jackal head, was associated with embalming, mummification, and the afterlife

in Egyptian religion; he was also an embalmer himself.<sup>14</sup> According to Greek Magical Papyri Anubis guided souls to the other world (PGM IV, 340). The iconographic motive found on our heliotrope, as well as on several other gems, furthermore confirms the role of Anubis as *psychopompos* (Michel 2001: 26; 2004: 48; West 2011: 140, 158, Fig. 8). The closest parallels for our motive can be found in the magical gem from the University College London (West 2011: 140, 158, Fig. 8: a). We can also mention the green jasper from The Getty Museum (Michel 2004: 314, 39.5.a, Pl. 4:1), showing Anubis in act of mummifying the body of Osiris, placed on top of the bier in the form of a lion.

Despite the specific iconography, our heliotrope lacks other elements necessary for determining its magical properties, such as magical names or magical signs.

## CONCLUSION

The green jasper with Harpocrates image can be placed with certainty in the group of magical gems, given the magical name of *Kratouath* on it. The heliotrope with Anubis embalming the body of Osiris should be approached with caution in terms of its belonging to the magical gems. Nevertheless, both gems point to the fact that *Mursa* was inhabited by certain individuals, who were well acquainted with magical practices. We can conclude that these two engraved gems from the Archaeological Museum Osijek collection expand our knowledge of magic in private lives of people in Roman *Mursa*.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Archaeological Museum Osijek; Inv. no. AMO-AA-1397; heliotrope; 15 x 20 mm; Finding place: Osijek (?); Published in Maixner 1881: 38, no. 17.

<sup>13</sup> For Osiris on magical gems see Sfameni 2003b.

<sup>14</sup> For Anubis on magical gems see Sfameni 2003a.

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