Timeas's Scarab

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ONE FRIDAY AFTERNOON IN APRIL 1986, a colleague from the American Museum of Natural History came to the Metropolitan Museum to show the Greek and Roman Department a "bead" that had no place in his institution's collection of minerals. The "bead" proved to be a fine Archaic Greek gem that has since been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum (Figures 1–3). In its artistic qualities, which inform and transform the rendering of a martial motif, the gem seems an appropriate subject to offer Helmut Nickel, civilized and most unbellicose champion of arms and armor.

The gem is a chalcedony scarab[1] of a type characteristic around 500 B.C. The lower edge of the beetle's thorax is articulated with a small arc, and the ridge separating the thorax from the wing cases shows light hatching. The carination along the back where the wing cases meet is of the variety identified by John Boardman as a spine,[2] a slight projection divided by an incision. At their upper outer corners, the wing cases have small U-shaped markings.[3] The insect's legs are individually rendered without additional detail, and the plinth on which the beetle sits is also plain.

The engraved surface is framed by hatching and is provided with a ground line at the bottom. The image is that of a nude youth who bends to lift a Corinthian helmet with his left hand. At the very top of the field, as a counterpart to the small exergue below, appears his shield, which covers a bit of his upper torso and his right arm; when reversed in the impression, the shield appears on the correct, left arm.

The simplicity of the subject is deceptive, because in reality the composition is remarkable for its small scale, and the articulation of detail is extraordinary. The youth's nose, lips, and lower jaw are clearly defined, while the eye appears as a point within the bony ocular orbit. The hair is indicated by ridges, as well as by small dots around the face and at the nape of the neck. For the sake of clarity and composition, the profile head gives way to a frontal torso. The collar bones, the pectoral muscles and nipples, the abdominal muscles and iliac crests are rendered precisely yet fluidly within the bending form. The proper right leg is shown straight on, the left leg from the side, with the heel slightly raised, to allow the kneecaps, shinbones, toes, and muscles of both the thigh and calf to be clearly defined. The shoulders, left arm, and even the left hand in profile show similarly careful articulation. On the warrior's Corinthian helmet, the nosepiece, the crest with its flowing tail, and the additional attribute of two bull's ears are all distinctly delineated. Moreover, even the volume of the calotte is modeled to convey the three-dimensionality of this piece of armor, which occupies a prominent place in the representation.

The engraved surface reveals one further detail of interest, the name Timeas inscribed between the warrior's straight right leg and the hatched border. Although rare,[4] the inscriptions on Archaic gems, in their placement and execution, are usually treated as part of the whole representation. Here, by contrast, we have a graffito added, rather awkwardly, after the gem was cut—but probably soon after, as Boardman has surmised.[5] Timeas's relationship to the gem cannot be surely determined; the name of the owner would normally be written in the genitive rather than nominative case, but the apparent spontaneity of the inscription may also explain the lack of grammatical rigor. The name itself is well attested throughout Greece;[6] its most illustrious bearer was the son of Polyneices, himself one of the four ill-fated children of Oedipus and Jocasta. Nothing on the gem, however, suggests any necessary connection between the

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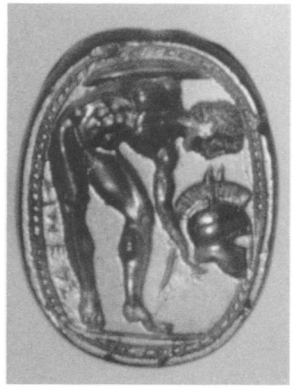
1. Chalcedony scarab, Greek, ca. 500 B.C. L. 1.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Helen H. Mertens, David L. Klein Jr. Memorial Foundation, and Mrs. Martin Fried Gifts, 1987, 1987.11.7

2. Side view of scarab in Figure 1



3. Intaglio of scarab in Figure 1: young warrior lifting helmet

4. Chalcedony scaraboid attributed to Epimenes, Greek, ca. 500 B.C.: archer testing his arrow. H. 1.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1931, 31.11.5

5. Impression of gem in Figure 4

name, the young warrior, and this mythological personage. Nor does the name Timeas link the gem to any specific part of the Greek world.

On stylistic grounds, however, the scarab can be assigned to eastern Greece which, during the Archaic period, was the creative center of gem-engraving[7] and the major source of influence—probably also of craftsmen—for the second important area of glyptic production, Etruria. During the closing decades of the sixth century B.C., two artistic personalities stand out within the eastern ambient. Both of them—Epimenes (Figures 4, 5) and the craftsman conventionally known as the Semon Master (Figures 6, 7)—are represented by works in the Metropolitan Museum. Boardman attributed the example we are now considering to the immediate circle of the Semon Master, allowing for the possibility that it was made by the artist himself. While the stylistic connection is indisputable, the new piece differs from those attributed to the Semon Master[8] in such details as the treatment of the eye and of the hair, both on the crown of the head and around the face. Given the Semon Master's particular penchant for feathers,[9] which require much the same articulation as horsehair, the crest on the new gem once again appears stylistically different. The scarab, therefore, seems best included among a number of pieces which, in Boardman's words, "closely resemble the work of Epimenes and the Semon Master."[10]

6. Ring with carnelian scaraboid attributed to the Semon Master, Greek, ca. 500 B.C.: winged youth (Eros?) carrying off girl with lyre. W. 1.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76, 74.51.4223

7. Impression of gem in Figure 6

One of these pieces is a carnelian scaraboid, formerly in the de Clercq collection, which shows a youth with a shield atop his torso bending to lift a helmet.[11] As in the Museum's new acquisition, the field is framed with hatching and subdivided at the bottom by a small ground line. Between the figure's straight leg and the border appears an inscription in the Cypriot syllabary giving the name of Akestos, the probable owner. With slight variations, the motif of a warrior lifting a helmet occurs frequently on Archaic gems, particularly in Etruria;[12] a fine example was stolen from the Metropolitan Museum in 1961 (Figure 8).[13] While the warrior, like the symposiast and the athlete, afforded Late Archaic artists in all media the opportunity of studying the body in motion, the specific motif concerning us here seems extraordinarily well suited to a gem.

Obvious as the point may be, it is worth noting first that, insofar as the function of a gem was to mark the property or identity of an individual, the device of a single figure or other symbol framed by a border is inherently more appropriate than a narrative vignette. In a remarkably direct way, the image on a gem parallels and expresses the individuality of its owner. Furthermore, since one looks to the head as the key part of a figure, the inclusion of a helmet on the Museum's scarab and on related examples allowed the artist to render the head a second time, from a different aspect: his emphasis was not on the facial features, hair, or occasionally even the expression,[14] but rather on the definition and modeling of volumes, which, as we have seen, are remarkably detailed on the Museum's new piece. In order to show the human body clearly in the diminutive scale of a gem, transitions had to be minimized. The helmet, therefore, serves as a kind of reassertion of volume. Similarly, the shield introduces the elements of depth and foreshortening to the youth's otherwise shallow stage. On a related gem in Boston (Figure 9),[15] the artist has omitted the warrior's lower legs in order to depict more fully a foreshortened shield seen slightly from below.

Before leaving the helmet and shield, we might further observe that the warrior's attributes do not include a spear. In contemporary vase paintings of subjects other than combats, spears are often held or shown propped up in the background. As strong and sharp directional indicators, spears are difficult to integrate into the oval format of a gem; their shafts also tend to cut up the pictorial surface. Indeed, in

8. Impression of a carnelian scarab, Etruscan, late 6th–early 5th century B.C.: young warrior lifting helmet. H.1.2 cm. Stolen from The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Rogers Fund, 1925, 25.78.95

Archaic Greek glyptic, they seem to occur mainly when essential to a battle or as an attribute of Athena; in Etruscan works they occur somewhat more frequently. Thus, the rounded forms of helmets and shields presented the additional advantage of being more consonant with the fields within which they were used.

In composition and execution, the representation we have been considering reveals the artistic concerns and solutions pervasive throughout Greek art of the late Archaic period and, in all respects, is indisputably Greek. Not so, however, the beetle into which it is cut. This originally Egyptian form of seal, together with the use of semiprecious stones such as chalcedony, was introduced to the Greek world by the Phoenicians around the turn of the seventh century B.C.[16] In the context of Oriental borrowings that became assimilated into Archaic art, the scarab documents a point of some interest. Consisting as it does of two components, the beetle and the intaglio, we find that in the course of the sixth century the intaglios, i.e., the pictorial motifs, developed ever more in accordance with the contemporary Greek study of the human figure. The beetle, by contrast, undergoes

9. Impression of a carnelian scaraboid, Greek, late 6th–early 5th century B.C.: young warrior lifting helmet. H. 1.3 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 21.1195 (photo: courtesy of Cornelius C. Vermeule III and John Boardman)

no comparable incarnation. Indeed, of the many forms or types of object—from kouroi to phialai—that came to Greece from the East and were produced in some quantity, the scarab seems one of the exceptionally few that maintained its foreign identity after the others had become assimilated; it really only became hellenized when it was superseded by the scaraboid.

I should also like to suggest that the persistence of the beetle form is bound up with the fact that Archaic glyptic was very much an art of the Greek East, with strong ties to the West. In Archaic Ionia, up to the Persian Wars, Greek and Oriental elements combined more freely and frequently than on the mainland, in Athens, for example. To put it starkly, the glyptic counterpart of a Euthymides or Epiktetos was not likely to depict the Athenian *jeunesse dorée* on the belly of a beetle. Pertinent in this connection are Boardman's observations concerning the popularity of engraved metal finger rings in mainland Greece during Archaic times.[17] The preference for engraved metal rings over engraved intaglios undoubtedly depended on a variety of factors; nonetheless, even though many bezel types were ultimately of Eastern origin,[18] they had been accommodated to Greek taste, so that the form and its embellishment presented a homogeneous whole.

The ramifications of the Museum's scarab prove more extensive than its small size and well-attested typology may at first suggest. In addition to its purely technical and artistic qualities, it affords some insight into regional diversity and the assimilation of foreign influence into Archaic Greek art. If I have emphasized the disparity between the form and certain types of decoration in a scarab, the purpose was not to render a critical judgment but to pinpoint a fundamentally East Greek phenomenon. Indeed, in a remarkably telling and succinct way, the gem embodies one of the primordial achievements of the sixth century: the fusion of its Geometric legacy and orientalizing stimuli for the ever fuller elucidation of the human figure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. L. 1.4 cm., W. 1.0 cm., H. 0.8 cm. The left side of the scarab's head has broken away.

2. John Boardman, *Archaic Greek Gems* (London, 1968) pp. 14–15.

3. Rounded variants of Boardman's "V-winglets," Boardman, *Archaic Gems*, p. 13.

4. See, for example, Boardman, *Archaic Gems*, p. 234.

5. In a description of the gem to its previous owner.

6. G. Lippold, "Timeas," *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1937), VI cols. 1247–1250.

7. For a recent consideration from the standpoint of provenances, see John Boardman, "Greek Gem Engraving: Archaic to Classical," in *Greek Art: Archaic into Classical*, C. G. Boulter, ed. (Leiden, 1985) especially pp. 84–91.

8. See Boardman, "Gem Engraving," pl. 76c; John Boardman, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings* (London, 1970) p. 184 and pls. 358–366, pp. 148 and 151.

9. See, for example, New York 74.51.4223 (Boardman, *Gems and Rings*, pl. 359), Boston 23.578 (ibid., pl. 361), London 1933.10–15.1 (ibid., pl. 362), London 998 (ibid., pl. 364). See also the crest on London 1933.10–15.1 (ibid., pl. 362).

10. Ibid., p. 151.

11. Ibid., pl. 367.

12. Greek: Boston 21.1195 (Boardman, *Archaic Gems*, p. 96, no. 261); private collection (John Boardman, *Intaglios and Rings From a Private Collection* [London, 1975] p. 86, no. 19). Etruscan: see Peter Zazoff, *Die etruskische Skarabäen* (Mainz, 1968) pp. 179–180, nos. 951–959.

13. 25.78.95 (G. M.A. Richter, *Metropolitan Museum of Art: Catalogue of Engraved Gems* [Rome, 1956] no. 162; Zazoff, *Skarabäen*, p. 54, no. 59).

14. Most notably Copenhagen, Thorvaldsen 5 (Boardman, *Archaic Gems*, no. 118); see also London 468 (ibid., no. 238), London 337 (ibid., no. 337).

15. See note 12.

16. Boardman, "Gem Engraving," pp. 83–85.

17. Ibid., p. 90.

18. Boardman, *Gems and Rings*, pp. 155–156.