

<i>ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>LIX.</i>	<i>2023.</i>	<i>pp. 17–24.</i>
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A POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: This paper attempts to interpret a gem of uncertain date and questionable origin, with Greek inscriptions and letters, and which is in the National Library of France (BNF inv.58.2220). Based on previous interpretations and the surviving impression and description of a pendant which is very similar to it in material and subject, it can be shown that the gem is original, and Christian, based on the depictions on it and the clearly legible word "XPICTOC".

Keywords: gem, pendant, inscription, Christ

There is a gem with Greek inscriptions and letters in the National Library of France (BNF inv.58.2220).¹ It was first published by Delatte and Derchain in 1964, and later referred to by Spier in 2007. In 2010, it was also mentioned in the monograph by Michel, who also referred to Delatte and Derchain, and tried to give a possible interpretation of the inscriptions and depictions on the gem. In 2014, Mastrocinque also analysed the gem in detail.

Spier, citing Delatte and Derchain, reported a double-sided gem made of schist (44.2 mm x 30.8 mm x 5.3 mm). In his description, side "A" shows a cock-headed, snake-legged deity with a sword in its right hand, with Greek letters around the figure which are difficult to read. Side "B" shows two standing and one seated figure with columns (?) in between, and above them the clearly legible Greek text "XPICTOC". The Greek letters at the bottom are difficult to read.² Nagy only cited the gem in volume of Dasen and Spieser, presented its image but did not analyse it.³ Michel noted that the marks on the gem may be Christian motifs. According to his description, side "B" shows „ACA, XPICTOC, ABCYKC", and side "A" shows a snake biting its tail, a human-headed snake-legged deity with a sword in its hand, four stars, and the text „KHCANAP ABCACK".⁴ Mastrocinque was the first one to attempt a more detailed analysis

¹ The paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (K 134319).

² Spier 2007, 113.

³ Nagy 2014, 136–138, fig. 2–3.

⁴ Michel 2004, 238.

and an interpretation of the textual and visual elements. He refined the dimensions of the gem given by Spier, measuring 44 mm x 31 mm x 4.5 mm. According to his description, side “A” shows a snake-legged deity with a human head and a sword in its right hand, four large stars in the field and in the top right corner a star with rays, surrounded by an oval bust with two curved lines branching downwards. At the top of side “A”, Spier reads „ΛΑCΑC”, and at the bottom „ΛCAN ΛNCANAP ΛΛAHCA”. Side “B” is divided into 6 fields by dashed horizontal lines. Between the 4 columns, in the middle, there are two standing and one seated figure, and below them on each side there are two seated figures with a large basket in between, and a star in front of their face. At the top of side “B”, we see the following letters: „ACA XPICTOC”, and at the bottom of the field we read: „AKCYKC AK”



Fig. 1. Magic gem (Side A and B)
Collection: The Cabinet des Médailles, National Library, Paris⁵

Scholars are divided on the originality of the gemstone. According to H. Seyrig, the gem is modern⁶, while M. Smith clearly states that it is a forgery.⁷ The data-

⁵ <http://cbd.mfab.hu/cbd/1886/?sid=14028> (accessed: 12/10/2022)

⁶ Seyrig 1965, 412.

⁷ Smith 1967, 418.

base of the National Library of Paris shows that its date and originality is dubious. It is dated to the Roman period, between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, but suspicion is expressed that the stone may be modern.

The description in the Campell Bonner database, based on the references mentioned so far, uncertainly dates the gem to the post-antique period. It follows Mastrocinque's suggestion in the interpretation of the letters and the text, but differs slightly in the interpretation of the figures. On side "A", a striped line runs around the edge, inside there is a snake-legged figure wearing a long dress, holding a sword in the right hand, and surrounded by five stars. Of these, the one at the top right is surrounded by a striped line. Below, to the right of the figure, there is an uterus-like object. The following letters are shown in the free field: „ΑΑ|CAC|ACAN|ANCANAP|ΑΑΑΗCΑ". Side "B" is divided into six parts separated by lines. In the top two parts we can read these letters: „ACA|XPICTOC". The third part shows two standing figures separated by vertical lines and a seated figure between them. The fourth field shows two seated figures with a large basket between them and a star in front of each. Below them are the letters: "AKCY [.]KC|AK".⁸

The CB database contains two other objects made of schist. One of them is green, dating from the late antique period, and it is not similar in subject to the one mentioned above. The other one is a pendant, of which only the imprint has remained. Bonner wrote in his article that the original pendant was part of the collection of Edward T. Newell. The collector gave it to an expert because the material of the pendant was unique, and when he tried to give it back to its owner, the pendant slipped out of his fingers, fell on a stone, and broke into pieces. Bonner, fortunately, had made an imprint of the object before this "accident", and based on its illustrations and text, he concluded that the pendant could not be earlier than 5th century and was probably Christian. Side "A" shows a boat with a seated helmsman in the stern, next to it there is a tall figure in a tunic surrounded by nimbus, praying, and there is a star on each side of his head. An indistinct figure can be seen at the front of the boat, raising his hands in prayer, and above his head is written "Jonah" in Greek. At the bow of the boat, in the "water", there lies a mummy-like figure with nimbus round its head, who is being swallowed by a giant sea monster. Behind the boat there is a tree. On the "B" side there is a serpent-legged deity with a cock-head, and next to him there are several trees. There is a sceptre opposite each of the serpent-legs, and there are several stars. At the upper left part of the image, there is a huge star surrounded by a circle.⁹

⁸ <http://cbd.mfab.hu/cbd/1886/?sid=13790> (accessed: 12/10/2022)

⁹ Bonner 1948, 31–37.



Fig. 2. Magic pendant (imprint): Jonah and the whale (A), Anguiped (B)
Former collection: American Numismatic Society, New York; Edward T. Newell¹⁰

The material of the pendant, the subject matter, the depiction, and the shapes make this object very similar to the Paris gemstone. If we start from Bonner's hypothesis that the signs, figures, and shapes on the pendant are Christian motifs, then there must be some close connection between the depicted elements on side "B": the five figures, the basket, the clearly legible word "XPICTOC", and in addition, they must be linked in some way to a biblical story. If we look at how some of the stories in the Bible were depicted, we find paintings, mosaics and carvings that also depict 5 figures, one of which is the central figure, and a basket.

The 6th century ivory throne of Maximianus, Bishop of Ravenna (499–556), shows a decorative image of five figures, one of which depicts Jesus sitting on a throne with a gloria around his head. Two baskets are depicted, one containing bread and the other fish. The story represents one of the miracles of Jesus, the multiplication of loaves and fishes.

¹⁰ <http://cbd.mfab.hu/cbd/1514/?sid=12668> (accessed: 20/10/2022)

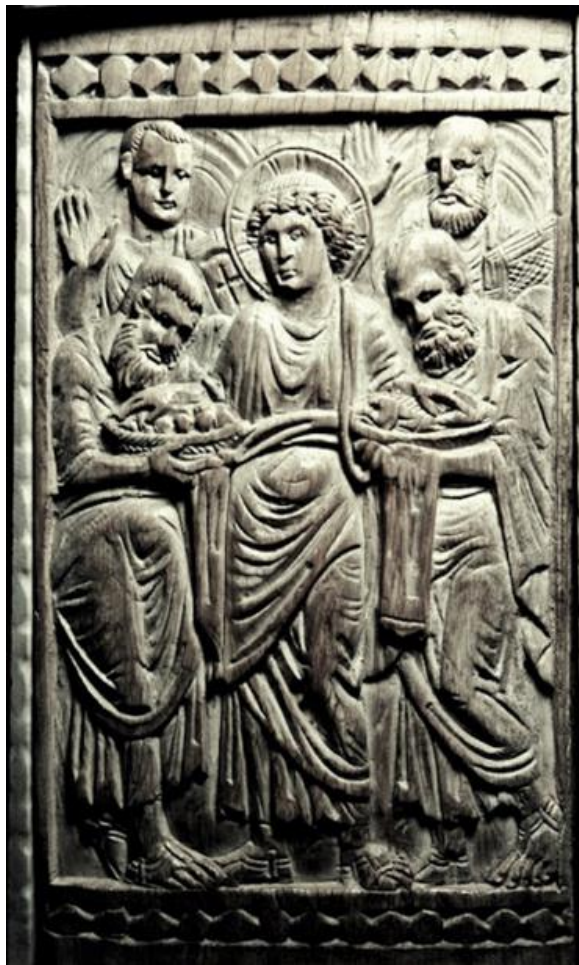


Fig. 3. Jesus, multiplication of loaves and fishes
From the Throne of Maximian (Bishop's Chair)
Ravenna, Museo Arcivescovile 6th century¹¹

A 6th century mosaic in the church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna depicts a similar scene, Jesus surrounded by four figures with loaves of bread and fish.

¹¹ <http://imagineidei.blogspot.com/2020/08/illustrating-miracles-multiplication-of.html>
(accessed: 20/10/2022)

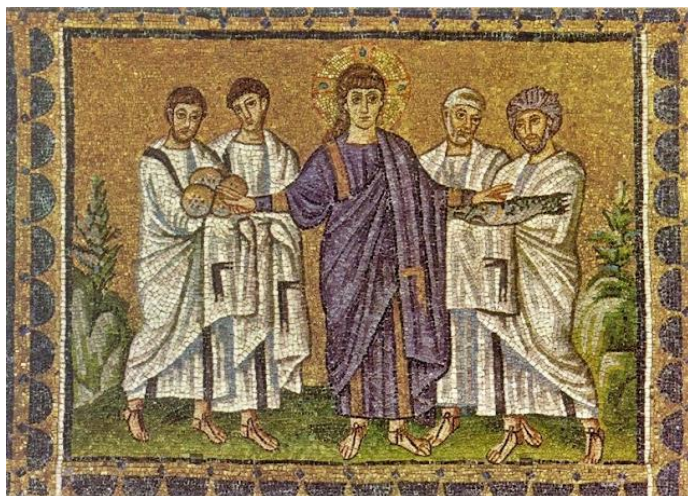


Fig. 4. Jesus, multiplication of loaves and fishes
Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, 6th century¹²

Similar depictions are known from later centuries. In Hungary, the 19th century painter Károly Lotz painted a similar theme.



Fig. 5. Károly Lotz: *The wonderful multiplication of bread*
North wall of the Corpus Christi chapel of Pécs Cathedral¹³

¹² https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zearly/1/4mosaics/2ravenna/4nuovo/index.html
(accessed: 20/10/2022/)

¹³ <https://pecsiegyhazmegye.hu/hirarchivum/82-lectio-divina-eucharistica/3302-a-csodalatos-kenyer-es-halszaporitas> (accessed: 20/10/2022)

Comparing the three examples, we can see that Jesus is always accompanied by four other figures and one or more baskets. It is true that the basket is missing from the fresco in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, but this does not complicate the interpretation of the gem we are examining. Comparing the pendant and the gem, we can conclude the following. On side "A" of the gem, like side "B" of Bonner's pendant, there is an Anguipes. On the gem, the snake-legged deity has a human face, rays protruding from its head, a sword in its right hand and a shield in its left. The pendant, on the other hand, shows a classic Anguipes with snake-legs and a cock-head. However, if you look closely at the imprint, we can see that it has its right arm raised, holding something (usually a whip), and his left hand hold a shield. Bonner did not notice these. There are at least two trees around the cock-headed god, the one on the right being more prominent. In the top left corner, as on the gem, there is a large star surrounded by a circle. The imprint of the pendant does not show exactly the item under the star, but it is apparently oval. On the gem, the item below the surrounded star, as some scholars believe, is a womb, though it does not resemble any known uterus shapes, and it even has legs.

The figures on side "B" of the gem, if we apply Bonner's approach, and assume that this is a Christian representation, could be: the figure on the throne is Jesus, the two figures standing on either side and the two figures sitting under the throne are probably standing for the four evangelists. The large basket between the seated figures may refer to one of Jesus' miracles, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The identification of the figure sitting on the "throne" is reinforced by the phrase "XPICTOC" above it.

If we accept Bonner's dating that the pendant cannot be earlier than the 5th century, then we can immediately dismiss the uncertainty that the gem may be modern. There is no reason to doubt its originality, especially because there is a very similar pendant, albeit now only an imprint of it. However, Bonner did not find the depiction on the medal surprising, as the use of pagan magic was not alien to some Christians of the time, even though their faith condemned it.¹⁴ Based on Bonner's arguments, there is no reason not to accept that the gem is original, either. The Christian imagery of the pendant corroborates the assumption that the shapes and forms on the gem are also Christian motifs. If we accept this, it is a possible representation of Jesus' miraculous story of multiplying bread and fish.

¹⁴ Bonner 1948, 37.

Figures:

1. Magic gem (Side A and B): Downloaded: 12/10/2022 <http://cbd.mfab.hu/cbd/1886/?sid=14028>
2. Magic pendant (imprint): Jonah and the whale (A), Anguiped (B): Downloaded: 12/10/2022 <http://cbd.mfab.hu/cbd/1514/?sid=12668>
3. Jesus, multiplication of loaves and fishes: Downloaded: 20/10/2022 <http://imaginemdei.blogspot.com/2020/08/illustrating-miracles-multiplication-of.html>
4. Jesus, multiplication of loaves and fishes: Downloaded: 20/10/2022 https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zearly/1/4mosaics/2ravenna/4nuovo/index.html
5. Károly Lotz: The wonderful multiplication of bread: Downloaded: 20/10/2022 <https://pec-siegyhazmegye.hu/hirarchivum/82-lectio-divina-eucharistica/3302-a-csodalatos-kenyer-es-halszaporitas>

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DOI 10.22315/ACD/2023/2

ISSN 0418-453X (print)

ISSN 2732-3390 (online)

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