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OEDIPUS RIDDLES

BY ANDREJ PRELOŽNIK

University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities,
Institute of Archaeology and Heritage, Koper, Slovenia;
andrej.preloznik@upr.si

AND

BY ALEKSANDRA NESTOROVIĆ

Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum, Ptuj, Slovenia;
aleksandra.nestorovic@pmpo.si

Abstract: The paper discusses an interesting group of glass intaglios with the motif of Oedipus and the Sphinx. They are known from sites between the Adriatic, the Danube and the Black Sea, and occur in various colors and cuts, which suggests production in different molds or even workshops. Probably modeled on an intaglio made in an Italian *officina gemmaria*, the glass replicas may have been produced at Aquileia. The style points to the Late Republican or Augustan era, whereas the material of the glass copies and the funerary context from Aquincum show they were in use and probably produced till the 4th century. The paper also discusses the possible meanings of the motif, from a simple illustration of the famous heroic adventure to a metaphoric depiction representing the mystic message of the key to a blessed afterlife.

Keywords: gems, intaglio, glass, Oedipus and the Sphinx, riddle, mystery cults

Introduction

We met Tamas Gesztelyi in June 2008, at a symposium on glyptics in Aquileia. During a pleasant conversation, we soon realized we shared an interest in the intriguing variant of glass intaglios bearing the depiction of Oedipus and the Sphinx. We knew of four such gems at that time: one from the Fol collection in Geneva, one from Aquileia, a third one from Aquincum, and a fourth one from Ptuj, the ancient Poetovio. With the distinct motif, specific workmanship and a single known context, they offered more questions than answers. Today we know of two more specimens, which only reinforce their elusive nature. It is with this topic that we wish to pay tribute to Tamas Gesztelyi and his contribution to the professional field, especially as he has been the only one to deal with this group of gems so far.

As stated, the subject of the paper is the glass gems showing the confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx, in a high-quality version of the motif. On the ground line stands Oedipus, in profile facing left; he is wearing a *chlamys*, draped down from his shoulders. His left hand is raised towards the chin, with a lance resting on his right shoulder. He is standing in mid-step, his left foot forward. The winged Sphinx is also depicted in profile, but facing right. She is sitting on her haunches with her left foreleg raised as she crouches on the wall above the city gates. A human skull lies on the ground in front of the gates, blocking the passage.

The revelatory moment of the encounter is chosen. Oedipus raises his right hand and points to himself; he has solved the riddle posed by the Sphinx and indicates himself as the answer – Man.

Currently, as mentioned, we know six gems of this type:

Unknown site, ex Walter Fol collection (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Genève, inv. no. MF 2331), violet glass, 14 x 11 mm (Fol 1876, 216; Moret 1984, 181 / cat. no. 136, pl. 73: 9)

Unknown site, ex Arthur Evans collection (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, bequest of Sir Arthur Evans, acc. no. 1941.393), amethyst-colored glass, 12 x 10.5 x 2 mm (Henig, MacGregor 2004, 106/cat. no. 10.37; <https://collections.ashmolean.org/object/481661>)

Aquileia, without context (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, Aquileia, inv. no. 27505), green glass, 14 x 12 mm (Sena Chiesa 1966: 275/731, T. 37/731; Moret 1984, 179/cat. 115)

Aquincum, Becsí road, grave 10 (Aquincumi Múzeum, Budapest, inv. no. 87.2.64), pale gray 'beril' glass, 15 x 12 x 2 mm, set in an iron finger-ring (Topál 1993, 73, pl. 174: 10/4; Gesztelyi 2008, 316/26; Facsády 2009, 103/112)

Ptuj, stray (settlement?) find (Ivan Brač collection), dark 'granate' violet glass, 15 x 13 x 2.5 mm, (Lamut 1995, 89; Nestorović 2005, 32/39, pl. 4: 39)

Mangalia, cremation grave (Muzeul de istorie națională și arheologie, Constanța, inv. no. 34664), violet glass (burnt), 12 x 11 mm, set in a gold finger-ring (Lungu, Covacef, Chera 2012, 105/ 28, pl. L: 28)

The details reveal them to have a common origin – made after the same prototype; everything else is shrouded in mystery. Oedipus, having so successfully answered the Sphinx's riddle, seems to be asking questions himself – let us see what they are!

What is the origin of the motif?

The motif of Oedipus and the Sphinx appears on gems relatively often, the reasons for which will be discussed below. The depiction of the motif on the six gems

presented here stands out in a comparatively higher quality and specific composition. Oedipus is commonly shown in profile, with the Sphinx on a pillar or crag in front of him.¹ In contrast, the six gems show Oedipus in a dynamic pose from behind, and the Sphinx crouching above the city gates, which, as Gesztelyi already noticed,² is a feature unique to this group of gems. The gates and walls are elements that bring this series close to some other gems with scenes from heroic myths, for example the famous gem with the scene of Odysseus and Diomedes in front of the Trojan walls, made by Felix (Marlborough 165), or the one with Apollo between two soldiers (Marlborough 339), the intaglio depicting the escape of Aeneas from Troy, or the equally famous Philemon gem with the depiction of Theseus standing next to a defeated Minotaur from Vienna.

Generally, the motifs or compositions on some gems are believed to be copies of famous works of sculpture, while others appear to have been inspired by paintings. With regard to the latter, "multi-layered" motifs with an architectural or bucolic background can readily be found on the wall paintings in Pompeii.³

Some of the mentioned "wall" gems also provide close parallels for depictions from the hero's back. This is how Theseus is depicted on the Philemon gem, and the deity statue on the Felix gem is standing in an almost identical posture. The closest parallel for the posture of Oedipus shown from the back, however, can be found on the destroyed stucco from the tomb of C. Calventius Quietus at Pompeii – precisely in the scene of Oedipus and the Sphinx. The Sphinx there is placed on a low wall/plinth, also with a raised paw.⁴

All these parallels are stylistically clearly attributable to the 1st century BC or the first half of the 1st century AD. Gesztelyi even identified the *Bildtypus* from Campania in them.⁵ This may, however, be an exaggeration due to a lack of comparable works elsewhere. What is certain is that the works of art from this period served as templates for the gems, transmitting individual elements and the composition. One of those must also be the intaglio used as a matrix for making molds for the glass replicas.

When were the gems used?

If the dating of the original gem is clear, the same cannot be said of its glass copies. Unfortunately, the contexts in which they were found remain largely unknown.

¹ Collected in Moret 1984.

² Gesztelyi 2008, 305.

³ E.g. Moret 1984, 114.

⁴ Moret 1984, 117/no. 158; Krauskopf 1994, no. 31.

⁵ Gesztelyi 2008, 305.

The example from Ptuj is a stray find, probably from habitation layers in the center of the Roman city. The gem from Mangalia, the ancient Callatis, is set in a gold finger-ring found in a cremation grave, of which nothing more is known so far. Only the gem from Aquincum comes from a known context: it was found set in a finger-ring worn by a man buried in the 4th century.⁶

If this gem was in use in the 4th century, was it also made then? Tamas Gesztelyi believed as much.⁷ He concluded this after comparing it with a gem from Intercisa with a standing figure, which is specific because it is also made of transparent glass, and inserted in a gold finger-ring, which he dated to the 3rd or 4th century as well.⁸ Notably, the finger-ring from Intercisa, which has four beads reinforcing the contact between bezel and hoop is also a close parallel for the finger-ring from Mangalia!

Alessandra Magni provides an important, albeit indirect clue connected with the topic at hand.⁹ For a dark violet glass gem from the gem collection of the Civici Musei d'Arte di Verona, she found identical parallels in two colorless glass gems: one from Carnuntum and the other from the necropolis at Mont-Augé (Vert-Toulon) in France, of which the latter was found in a female inhumation grave from the 4th century. The motif of comedians on those three gems is stylistically and substantively attributable to the Late Republican or Early Imperial period. In this case as well, glass gems cast according to early originals of high quality were used at least three centuries later. And the similarity does not end there, as the gem from Vert-Toulon is also inserted into a silver finger-ring, which has four beads between the bezel and the hoop.¹⁰

How were they made?

Gems used in the 4th century were not necessarily also made at that time; they could have been produced earlier. What is noticeable is that the glass gems with Oedipus differ from one another in technological details.

The most obvious difference is diversity of their colors. It is not uncommon for sets of gems from the same mold to be of different colors. In those cases, however, the colors are uniform, whereas the gems of this group come in two distinctive color types, namely monochrome and layered. The Oxford, Ptuj and Geneva gems are made of uniformly violet glass. The Mangalia gem was probably similar, but

⁶ Topál 1993, 73.

⁷ Gesztelyi 2008, 305.

⁸ Gesztelyi 2000, 65, 142, no. 165.

⁹ Magni 2009, 320–321.

¹⁰ Lantier 1984, Tav. 5: 4.

was damaged in fire, which hinders the identification of its original color. The Aquincum gem is also made of uniform glass, in this case pale gray. The Aquileia gem is made of two layers: the lower one is colorless, the upper one is green; the border between them is clearly visible and the green layer appears to be made of molten finely ground crushed glass.

Color is not the only distinguishing element. The Ptuj gem has a steeper edge and a fairly clearly identifiable motif. The latter can also be said of the piece from the Fol collection, which survives with the most details (e.g. tail of the Sphinx). They seem to be made in the same series, but the one from Ptuj in a more worn mold. Similar cut but poorer legibility of the motif has gem from Aquincum. The gem from Aquileia, on the other hand, has a flatter edge. In contrast to all other, the Oxford gem has inward-bevelled edge and distinctly smaller dimensions.

Does this mean the gems were made in (at least) two series? Those made of colorless or layered glass are generally of an inferior quality and with less recognizable details. Were they made later? In a used mold? Or even in a second-generation mold made on the basis of a single-color glass gem? Reducing the size of the gems from Aquileia and Oxford may support this assumption.

It is worth noting that even with the above-mentioned trio of gems with comedians of the Verona – Carnuntum – Vert-Toulon type, the gem made of dark violet glass from the Verona museum is of a significantly higher quality than the other two, colorless gems. And even in this case, it seems that the colorless ones have a less steeply cut edge – at least judging from the drawing of the French example.¹¹

Where were they manufactured and distributed?

Of the six gems, four come with a known findspot. Their distribution extends from the northern Adriatic across the Pannonian Plain to the western coast of the Black Sea, or, in ancient terms, from Italia, Panonnia superior, Panonnia inferior to Moesia inferior. We can only speculate about the origin of the two gems from the collections today in Oxford and Geneva. Most of the gems in the Fol collection probably came from Italy, while Evans also acquired many artifacts during his stay in Dalmatia.

The intaglio that served as the model for the group of six gems was probably made in a quality workshop in Italy (Rome?), while the glass replicas could also be made in smaller workshops. Their wide distribution suggests their production

¹¹ Lantier 1984, Tav. 5: 4.

is most likely connected with Aquileia, which was not only a large production center, but also had a widespread trade network.

The message of the motif: victory over death, admiration of the “intellectual” hero or warning against *hybris*?

The motif led Gesztelyi to identify the finger-ring from Aquincum as a funerary item, i.e. made for burial.¹² The confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx, in fact, most commonly occurs in funerary art.¹³ It adorns mausolea and other tombs across the empire. In a funerary setting, the symbolism is clear: the Sphinx is the demon of death and, by defeating her, Oedipus vanquishes death.

Having said that, not every depiction of Oedipus and the Sphinx should be associated with the funeral sphere, which is especially true of gems. The motif is far too common in glyptics, on the one hand, and many motifs typical of funerary art that symbolize death or rebirth, such as Adonis and Venus, or Selena and Endymion, are practically unknown on gems, on the other.

The explanation for the popularity of the motif on gems must be sought elsewhere. Oedipus was celebrated as a hero among the Greeks and Romans despite his terrible fate. Vanquishing a monster, he stands in a line of heroes such as Bellerophon, Herakles and Perseus, with the difference being that Oedipus' victory is intellectual¹⁴, without blood and physical violence, only with a word/gesture. He did not kill the Sphinx, rather she committed suicide. In comparison with other heroes, he confronts Sphinx of his own accord, without the help of gods or sages. The victory over Sphinx is not a progression act, it happens in a moment.

Solving the riddle transforms Oedipus from a foreigner into a hero. He solved the riddle by “simple reflection”. The response is in itself, through its content, auto-reflective: “my-self” or “man.” And the enigma, in its very formulation, concerns the counting of feet (*pous*), a word that is at the root of the name “Oedipus” (*Oidipous*, swollen foot) and the indication of his identity. It is thus with reference to himself, in an act of self-knowledge and self-identification, that Oedipus solves the riddle of the winged creature.

We can imagine that many educated people saw this kind of victory as an ideal worth following. However, to a more careful “reader” of Oedipus' story, the motif of the hero and the Sphinx could have communicated yet another warning.

Formally the myth is connected with initiation. The hero is challenged by the Sphinx, he successfully solves the riddle, and is integrated in a symbolical social

¹² Gesztelyi 2008, 305.

¹³ Krauskopf 1994, 14.

¹⁴ Ahrens Dorf 2009, 413.

order. But the integration is false.¹⁵ The intellect and the self-importance of the ego are reinforced and lead to the negation of the gods' will and the denial of all prophecies. Such, however, is the *hybris* of Oedipus.¹⁶ Paradoxically, solving the riddle leads him to fulfill his tragic destiny.

From this point of view, the moral of Oedipus' story and the true answer to the riddle of the Sphinx could be that self-recognition as knowledge about the limitations of human existence is a victory over ignorance and a stage on the way to a happier afterlife.¹⁷

Another possibility – key for the initiates into the mysteries?

The most illustrative representation of the confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx is the famous wall painting with select scenes of the Oedipus myth from a house-tomb at Tuna el-Gebel in Egypt.¹⁸ It also offers another possible interpretation of the motif and its meaning, and one possibly pertaining to the bearer of the gems with this motif.

The decorations in Tuna el-Gebel are full of Dionysiac imagery with possible mysteries connotations. This is not unusual in sepulchral art. As Sophocles (Frag. 837 Radt) declares: "Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen the Eleusinian mystery rites and thus enter Hades: for them alone there is life, for the others all is misery."¹⁹ The purpose of mysteries is therefore salvation of the immortal soul.

Symbolism and metaphors played an important role in the mysteries. Plato, for example, wrote (Phaedo 69C) that the initiates talked about the mysteries through riddles. In that context, the story of the Sphinx riddle was perfect for metaphoric messages, as the painting in Tuna el-Gebel shows. The painting in House-tomb 16 is believed to be "a philosophical-religious elucidation of the myth"²⁰, in which the benefits of the search itself stand in contrast to the disasters of ignorance.

The depicted scenes of the Oedipus cycle at Tuna el-Gebel include labelled personifications. The left scene depicts *Zetema* (search/questioning) observing Oedipus solving the riddle, *Agnoia* (ignorance) is flying from the hero shown killing his father in the right scene, and the personification of the city of Thebes is sitting in the center. On a mystic level, *Zetema* personifies a fruitful afterlife.

¹⁵ Goux 1990, 22–24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 134.

¹⁷ Krauskopf 1994, 15.

¹⁸ Venit 2012.

¹⁹ Venit 2015, 89.

²⁰ Baldassarre 1970, 944.

Agnōia (ignorance) is death without such knowledge and thus without the hope of achieving a blessed afterlife.²¹ As Oedipus, through his intellectual triumph over the Sphinx that augurs death, so the initiate achieves a similar transcendent state through the knowledge accrued by initiation into the mysteries.

Which motif would be a better choice of the initiates to encapsulate that complex message of the myth – in life or death – than the precise moment of Oedipus solving the riddle?

Conclusion

Despite certain unanswered questions, the gems presented here are a good example of the dynamism of ancient glyptics. We can indirectly trace their development over centuries, from the transfer of the motif from large-format and high-quality art, made in major artistic centers, to the creation of miniature masterpieces, and later to replicas accessible to a broader public and reaching the far corners of the empire.

The meanings that the motif of Oedipus and the Sphinx could have had for the owners of the gems are similarly dynamic and diverse, ranging from the depiction of an undoubtedly well-known and popular story of a young hero, to his symbolic victory over death. On a higher level, the depiction emphasizes the significance of the intellectual triumph of an individual, the recognition of oneself with all the shortcomings, regardless of the destiny, and also the way to attaining immortality through the mysteries. The extraordinary choice of the subject of the Oedipus story, with its idiosyncratic and original means, reveal the owner of a finger-ring with such a gem as a sophisticated person.

A gem with the depiction of Oedipus and the Sphinx is itself a metaphor for intellectuals educated in the Greek literary tradition and indicates the intersection of Greek and Roman thought and intellectual sensibility of the owner.

These are also qualities we admire in Tamas Gesztelyi.

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²¹ Venit 2012, 413–414.

("Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu), Dana Macmillan, Paul Roberts and Ilaria Perzia (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

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Figures:



Fig. 1. Glass gems with the depiction of Oedipus and Sphinx.

- a:** Ptuj (© archive of the Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum, photographer: Igor Dolinar),
- b:** Geneva, ex Fol collection (© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photographer: Bettina Jacot-Descombes),
- c:** Aquileia (© Archive of the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia (Ud), photographer: Elena Braidotti. Published with the authorization of the Ministry of Culture (ITA), Regional Directorate of Museums of Friuli Venezia Giulia),
- d:** Aquincum (© BHM Aquincum Museum, Budapest, photographer: Péter Komjáthy),
- e:** Mangalia (© Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie Constanța, photographer: Oltița Țiței).

Scale approximately 2:1.