Finds Research Group 700 — 1700

DATASHEET 27

ENGLISH GEM-SET SEALS

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Objects with a history embracing more than one period have a particular fascination, revealing something of the attitudes of a former society to an even more distant past. Only a small proportion of medieval personal seals incorporate engraved gemstones, although it is clear from the quality of some of them and the distinction of their owners that ancient (mainly Roman) gems were very much prized. As with all seals they are preserved in two ways, through the actual seal and the wax impression affixed to deeds and other documents. (Medievalists commonly refer to the former as the 'matrix' or die, to avoid confusion.)

The original Roman gems considered here are of hardstone, generally quartzes such as cornelian, jasper or onyx, circular or ovoid in shape and with their upper surfaces either flat or convex. The devices with which they are carved cover almost the whole range of Roman art, including deities, personifications, heroes, portraits of philosophers, emperors or private people (the owner or a member of his family), genre scenes, animals, objects and symbols as well as magical devices. Originally they would have been mounted in metal finger-rings and used to validate documents, sign letters, act as pledges of loyalty or serve as protective charms. Not infrequently they dropped out of their settings and were lost, to await the eye of the diligent searcher, and as will be seen in the medieval period especially between the 12th and 14th centuries there were plenty of people willing to purchase such items. When reset in contemporary settings they in fact served precisely the same purpose as in Antiquity, no doubt in part because through the continuity of Roman legal practice and its influence even on Common Law, the same or similar customs for validating signatures applied.

The re-use of Roman gems owes much to the high value placed on such stones in contemporary lapidary books. The mysterious devices were often given a new lease of life by being re-interpreted to suit current beliefs, religious or moralistic as well as astrological. It

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is notable that descriptions of these devices often begin with the words 'if you find a stone...' and no doubt they were recovered from Roman sites throughout Europe, but it is probable that many of those used in Britain were brought in from the continent, especially from Italy (as the considerable number of Augustan period or even Republican intaglios attest) or as far afield as the Holy Land, the likely source of such Graeco-Egyptian amulets as attested by the green chalcedony depicting Chnoubis set in Archbishop Hubert Walter's gold signet ring (Fig. 1). No doubt the owners, especially when men of learning, realised that these gems dated from approximately the time of Christ.

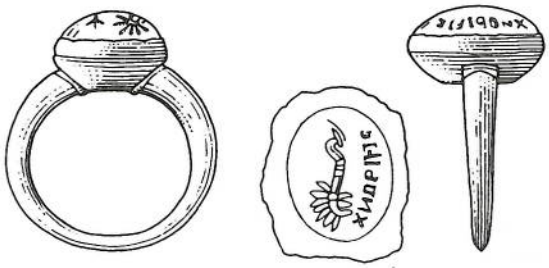

Fig 1 Signet ring of Archbishop Hubert Walter. Canterbury Cathedral treasury (Scale 1:1)

Apart from their re-use as seal matrices, Roman intaglios as well as cameos were frequently set in sacred metalwork such as shrines and jewelled crosses. The crozier of Archbishop Hubert Walter, for example, like his ring recovered from his tomb, was set with four gems of which three remain (Henig 1983). An English crucifix of *c* 1170/80 now belonging to the church of St Mary, Monmouth has a Medusa cameo at its base, perhaps representing Adam, the first man who was subject to death and is normally represented as a skull at the foot of the cross: a cameo showing a head (the Medusa) was regarded, evidently , as a substitute for this. A much more famous cameo, a wonder-working gem depicting *Divus Augustus* in a 12th-century setting, was one of the greatest treasures of St Albans Abbey but as such it was almost certainly smashed at the Reformation (Henig and Heslop 1986). There are many examples of gem-studded metalwork still extant in Continental treasuries, for instance in the Shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne (E Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die Gemmen und Kameen des Dreikonigenschreines*, 1998). However on the whole these are unlikely to come the way of the archaeologist.

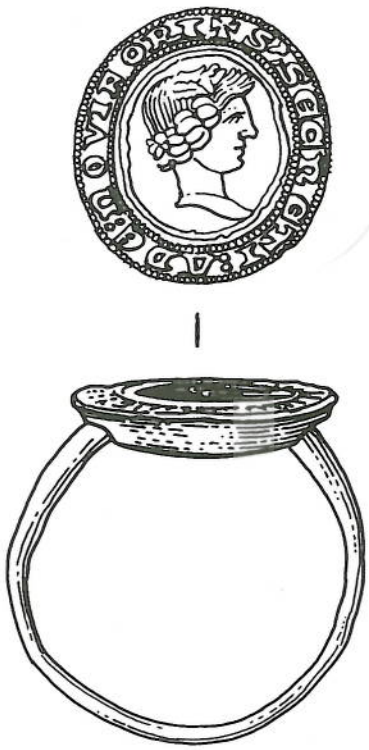

Fig 2 Gold seal from Shepreth. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (2:1)

The medieval seals incorporating gems are of the normal forms used in conventional seals at the time, generally oval or vesica-shaped, fitted with a suspension loop above so that they could be worn on a chain, or else the bezels of rings. Gold seals are comparatively rare survivals but are occasionally found. Not surprisingly, considerable care was taken to match the material with an intaglio of high quality. One, now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, was found at Shepreth, Cambridgeshire in 1940 and is an oval finger-ring inscribed
S'SECRETI:ADE:NOVIFORI
containing a cornelian dating from the late 1st century BC with a profile head of Medusa (Fig 2). This remarkably fine *secretum* belonged to Adam of Newmarket, a Lincolnshire knight prominent on the baronial side in the Barons' Wars. A near contemporary vesica-shaped seal, again with an Augustan cornelian, this time with a head of Hercules was found near Moated Manor Farm, Great Eversden, Cambridgeshire, in 1953 and is in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Fig 3). It was the seal of Simon Passelewe, one of Henry III's clerks,

Fig 3 Seal from Great Eversden. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Scale 2:1)

three times an envoy to the French court in the 1260s. A garnet with a figure of Jupiter engraved on it, set in a medieval gold ring now in the British Museum, was found on the site of St Martins le Grand, London. The enigmatic legend AGLA around the surround evidently comes from the Hebrew *Atha Gebri Leilan Adonai* (Thou art mighty for ever, O Lord) and Jupiter was clearly seen as the type of God the Father.

Silver seals and seal rings were very much commoner. Typical is a seal found at Cold Harbour Farm, Crowmarsh, Oxfordshire in January 1999, whose inscription shows it to

Fig 4 Seal from Cold Harbour Farm, Crowmarsh (Scale 2:1)

have belonged to one Nicholas of Padworth (Fig 4). The intaglio, apparently a leached chalcedony, depicts a satyr facing a sacred column, cut in a style once again belonging to the Augustan period.
So too is a cornelian showing Argus working on the Argo set in a silver gilt matrix found west of Westbury Farm, Shenley Church End, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire in 1991, and subsequently purchased by the Buckinghamshire County Museum (Fig 5). The inscription in French IE SU SEL DE AMI LEL* (I am the seal

of a loyal friend) has a courtly flavour but the meaning is much the same as the regular Latin +LECTA : TEGE (Read, conceal) or +SIGILLUM.SECRETI (the seal of the secret) for the seal protects secret correspondence. An example of the

Fig 5 Seal from Westbury Farm, Milton Keynes. Buckinghamshire County Museum (Scale 2:1)

first legend is to be seen on the surround of an ovoid seal found at North Walsham, Norfolk, now in Norwich, containing an onyx depicting a satyr (Fig 6) while a

Fig 6 Seal from North Walsham, Norwich. Castle Museum, Norwich (Scale 2:1)

vesica-shaped seal mounted on a ring found by a metal detectorist near Lichfield, Staffordshire, submitted to the Potteries Museum, but alas subsequently sold, has the second legend (Fig 7). In this case

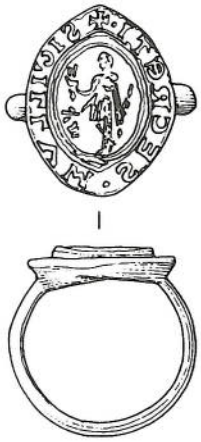

Fig 7 Seal found near Lichfield, Staffordshire (Scale 1:1)

the gem was a red jasper depicting Bonus Eventus. In both cases the gems date from the 2nd century and are of types well-known from the north western provinces and it is not impossible that they were found on Roman sites in Britain (perhaps at Caistor by Norwich in the first instance and Wroxeter in the second). With regard to the Lichfield seal, it was accidentally broken which resulted in a piece of cloth being found between the gem and its setting that could have had some additional amuletic significance.

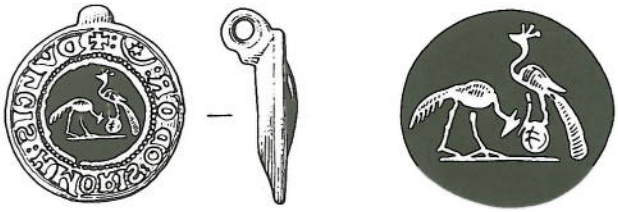

Fig 8 Seal from the Thames foreshore at Southwark, London (Scale 1:1)

This was almost certainly the case with a leaf, perhaps nettle, set behind a chalcedony gem from the Thames foreshore at Southwark, London. The device of the gem and the legend around this lovely little seal allude to its amuletic significance as a protective charm (Fig 8). The seal is circular and the intaglio depicts two peacocks, one of them standing on a globe, engraved in the style of the late Republic, early in the 1st century BC. The medieval legend +DVLCIS : AMORIS : ODOR presumably refers to the supposedly incorruptible flesh of the peacock.

Fig 9 Gold seal from Wootton, Bedfordshire. British Museum (Scale 1:1)

The demand for Roman gems outstripped supply and led to something of a rebirth in gem cutting. The best of them are very accomplished indeed, like a gold seal of *c* 1300 in the British Museum from Wootton, Bedfordshire, with the legend CLAVSA . SECRETA TEGO (I cover the secrets enclosed) and a contemporary red jasper intaglio of a profile bust of a lady (Fig 9).
Although her headgear is typically 13th-century, her coiffure is adapted from that of 2nd-century empresses such as Faustina II and the gem must have been based on an antique model. Such refined glyptic work has been attributed to France but there is no reason why it should not have been practised in England. This was surely the case with more ordinary examples. Two of three gems now in Norwich, both of them bloodstones, are contemporary.

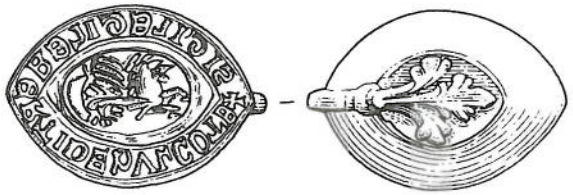

Fig 10 Seal from Norwich Castle: Castle Museum, Norwich (Scale 1:1)

From Norwich Castle itself comes the seal of William de Hulcote, derived from the classical hippocamp but perhaps intended as a basilisk (Fig 10), while the other, from Thwaite, Suffolk, inscribed AMICE . CRISTI . IOHANNES * depicts in its setting a cockerel, recalling the denial of St Peter (Fig 11). This John is as anonymous to us as Thomas, the owner of a seal

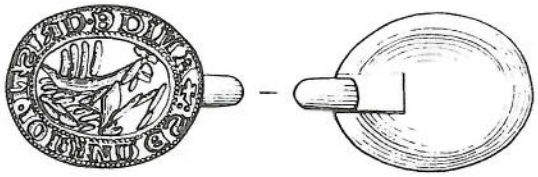

Fig 11 Seal from Thwaite, Suffolk. Castle Museum, Norwich (Scale 1:1)

from Maer, west of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, who likewise used a cockerel which in this case was engraved on a piece of blue glass intended to represent an amethyst or a sapphire (Fig 12). The great interest of this latter is the mismatch between the silver seal and the cheap material of its setting.

In a statute of Edward I dated 1300, gravers and seal-cutters were enjoined to match precious metals with true stones (which were no doubt notionally tariffed at the same rate); such laws of course would have been hard to enforce and there must have been many other instances where glass was married with a silver mount.

Fig 12 Seal from Maer, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire (Scale 2:1)

While it has to be admitted that the average curator is unlikely to come across very many gem-set seals, the beeswax impressions of seals survive in vast numbers in archives and record offices, and of personal seals, up to about 8% are gem-set. The problem for the would-be researcher is to gain access to this material and to obtain high definition photographs. Even in instances where documents have been calendared, descriptions of sealings tend to be cursory and compiled without sufficient knowledge and ancient art. There is great potential here for the Classical archaeologist to uncover a vast, almost untapped archive of classical art, and for the medievalist to experience the range of devices and reinterpretations used by men and women of the time. To date, the only attempt to do so systematically has been a limited one by G Demay in France in the 19th century (Demay 1877).

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