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*Group of Mask-Animal Gems
from the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński*

The interesting collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński (1818–1889), since 1886 part of the Kraków National Museum collection,¹ also holds important material for studies on the so-called mask-animal gems, in the past also known as *grylloi*. It contains as much as 45 objects falling into this category that may play an important role in studies on this group of gems.

The previously employed term *grylloi* is not very precise and refers to a group of Hellenistic and Roman intaglios with grotesque figures carved on the surface (**Fig. 1**). Currently a more precise term is often used, that is: mask-animal gems.² The traditional name *gryllos* (plur. *grylloi*) derives from a term employed by Pliny the Elder in reference to a weird figure once painted by Antiphilos, regarded as a caricature of sorts (*Nat.Hist.*, XXXV, 114f.). What were the features of this ‘caricature’ is unfortunately unknown.³ The term *grylloi* is commonly used to describe strange creatures, often a mixture of a human head with an animal or various parts of animal bodies, or consisting of joined human and Silenus faces/masks with body parts of various animals. Carved depictions of this type are found on the surfaces of oval gems made of easily accessible, cheap materials, such as jasper in various shades of red and brown. Gems of this type appeared from the times of the Republic until at least the Second–Third century AD. In older literature this entire class was considered to be a part of the so-called Alexandrian art.

The decorative pattern of the above described gems is often quite complicated in terms of composition, as it most often consists of quite complicated sets comprising of numerous elements, often viewable from different sides. Two general types of composition may be distinguished here:

1. A sort of composite masks, most often created from the head of a Silenus joined with the heads of animals such as horses, pigs, rams or donkeys (**Fig. 1A, D**).

¹ For more information on the collector and the history of his collection with a more precise description of two important groups of objects see: J. ŚLIWA, *Egyptian Scarabs and Magical Gems from the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński*, *Studia z Archeologii Śródziemnomorskiej* 11, Warszawa-Kraków 1989, and recently ID., *Badacze-kolekcjonerzy-podróżnicy. Studia z dziejów zainteresowań starożytnych*, Kraków 2012, pp. 301–321.

² In German: ‘Gemmen mit Tier-Masken’ or ‘Maske-Tier-Kombination’. Terms such as ‘groteskes/phantastisches Mischwesen’ or ‘Phantasie-Tiere’ are also still employed, while P. ZAZOFF, *Die antiken Gemmen*, *Handbuch der Archäologie*, München 1983, p. 337 still uses the term *Grylloi*. In French the terms *grylles* and *figures grotesques* are used.

³ It has often been assumed that it could have been a depiction of a human with an animal head (in this case a piglet/pig), since the word *gryllos* signifies ‘a pig’ in Greek, therefore a concept that is in some sense linked to Egyptian iconography. Some connections with Egypt are also indicated by the term *gryllismos* mentioned by Phrynichos (Fourth century BC) and referring to an obscene Egyptian dance performed by dwarf dancers (also referred to as ‘grylloi’, *sic!*), cf. *i.a.* E. PFUHL, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*, Vol. II, München 1923, p. 70. See a more informative work with a complete set of sources: W. BINSFELD, *Grylloi. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der antiken Karikatur*, *Diss.*, Köln 1956. ID., *s.v.* ‘Grylloi’, *RE Suppl.* IX, 1962, 76; Cf. also: G. BECATI, *s.v.* ‘Grylloi’, *EAA* III, 1960, pp. 1065f.; R. NÜNLIST, *s.v.* ‘Grylloi’, *Der Neue Pauly* 5, 1998, 6–7 and T. GESZTELYI, *Zur Deutung der sog. Grylloi*, *AcClass (D)* 28, 1992, pp. 83–90 (in particular: 83–85) [= *Zur Deutung*].



1. Group of mask-animal gems from the collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciażyński (since 1886 in the National Museum, Kraków). First–Second century AD (Phot. N.M. Kraków).

2. A sort of composite creatures on animal legs (most often rooster legs) created from the mask of a Silenus and animal heads (horse, ram, elephant) (**Fig. 1B, C, and E**). The decorative field is furthermore completed with emblems such as a snake, a corn-ear, a *kerykeion* or a palm branch.

Gems of the described type were most probably not intended for stamping/sealing, instead they served as amulets and were supposed to banish evil through the signs/symbols they were equipped with (their apotropaic function was therefore important),⁴ they were furthermore intended to provide such virtues as love, wealth and fertility.⁵ Sometimes

⁴ Plutarch's opinion (*Quest. conviv.* V.6,681) is often quoted to prove the efficacy of such depictions.

⁵ Among others luck in love was provided by a depiction of Eros/Amor (with a whip in his hand or driving a horse-drawn cart); a head of a Silenus – joyous celebrations and trouble free festivities; a phallus and an elephant's trunk – manly vigor and fertility; a horse head – success in races; a corn-ear – abundance of crops/bread; a ram head – numerous flock, abundance, fertility; an ostrich, a snake – overcoming obstacles; an eagle – courage and military success. Body elements of a rooster may also be linked with solar beliefs. For more information on the iconography of gems of this type and attempts to clarify particular elements see also: M. HENIG, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites. Pt I: Discussion, BAR-IS 8.1*, London 1974, pp. 128–141.

the names of their owners are also given, possibly also short wishes for good luck and happiness. We can state with certainty that the composite creatures are not depictions of mythic monsters or ancient giants, they arose from the need to create such a composition that could enclose a larger number of magical elements. Gems of this type were inserted into rings that served as their bezel setting and gained considerable popularity.⁶

Amulet-gems of this type, as it has been often said before, fell perfectly within the notions of the Roman social circles, beginning with the First century BC, even among the nobilitas.⁷ Superstition and magic were widely practiced at the time, with proper experts and theoreticians, such as Nigidius Figulus and Appius Claudius Pulcher. A love spell was particularly important and popular, intended to provide reciprocity of feelings,⁸ also backed by many written records, among others the lyric magical texts and poetry (Lucretius, Vergil and during the times of the Roman empire – Ovid).

The origin of those complicated creatures depicted on gems is a mixture of varied elements and has not yet been unequivocally established. Some connections to the Orient seem doubtless, it is where the oldest compositions of this type are known from, dating as early as the Second millennium BC, falling to both the above mentioned groups (composite masks, rooster-legged creatures).⁹ Despite the fact that a part of similar depictions (rooster-legged creatures) in terms of composition seems to relate to the Greek concept of the so-called *hippalektryon* (visible among others in pottery decoration during the period between c. 570–500/490 BC),¹⁰ it seems rather impossible to derive it from that tradition. Also Egypt has its place here since we also know syncretic creatures of analogical features from that area, present in late magical papyri (**Fig. 2**).¹¹ Both the Oriental and the possible Greek tradition, however, went cold as early as the Fourth century BC and the phenomenon/motifs that we are dealing with when analyzing the gems appear in the Roman glyptic no earlier than in the First–Second century BC.

⁶ Certainly the sort of stone that was used as well as its color were also important. Materials such as jasper in various shades of red and brown were often used. Considerably cheaper objects made of glass paste were also quite popular.

⁷ See the concluding notes of GESZTELYI, *Zur Deutung*, pp. 85–90 (this work includes also a noteworthy explanation of three spheres appearing on some gems).

⁸ Such an example comes from the collection of Schmidt-Ciążyński (see below, p. 384 and Fig. 1.C above).

⁹ A comprehensive look on the problem with numerous Oriental examples (Sumer, Lurestan, Iran, Scythian, and also Sardinian) were included by A. ROES, *New Light on the Grylli*, *JHS* LV, 1935, pp. 232–235, who is inclined towards the Iranian origin of the described depictions. Such an origin was also supported by C. BONNER, *Amulets* Chiefly in the British Museum. A supplementary Article, *Hesperia* 20, 1951, pp. 301–345 (mainly p. 318). See also: J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *Das phantastische Mittelalter*. Antike und exotische Elemente der Kunst der Gotik, Frankfurt 1985 [= *Phantastisches Mittelalter*], pp. 27–37.

¹⁰ This opinion had once been presented by A. FURTWÄGLER, *Antike Gemmen* II, Leipzig 1900, p. 353. D. WILLIAMS, s.v. ‘Hippalektryon’, *LIMC* V.1, 1990, 427–432, thinks that the reappearance of *hippalektryon* during Roman times (at that time as a horse head on rooster legs) is most probably not related to the Greek and Etruscan iconographic tradition, may however be linked with an inspiration from Greek literature.

¹¹ PH. DERCHAIN, *Le papyrus Salt 825* (B.M. 10051). *Rituel pour la conservation de la vie en Égypte*, fasc. II, Bruxelles 1965, Pl. XV.



2. Phantastic monster from a Late Egyptian magical papyrus – pap. Salt 825, British Museum 10051 (after: DERCHAIN, *Le papyrus Salt 825*, pl. XV).

Among the gems from Kraków we shall only discuss a few chosen examples of both groups. Those are oval, flat-surfaced gems with diagonally cut sides, decorated in bas-relief. One of the groups consists of gems carved with depictions of composite creatures consisting of human faces in profile/masks and animal heads (**Fig. 1.A, D**). One of them features a creature composed from two human faces/masks (**Fig. 1.A**).¹² On the left a male face is depicted in profile, carved with quite schematic, short strokes. On the right another male face adjoins it, featuring rich facial hair linked to the hair of the left-hand head. Also here a tool had been used to perform sharp, decisive strokes. A head dress resembling a Phrygian cap created from an animal head (hippopotamus?) is depicted on the right-hand mask.

The next gem (**Fig. 1.D**) features a more complicated composition of two melted human heads: the first one is of a bald-headed Silenus with blunt nose, bearded and moustached; the second head belongs to a man with big aquiline nose and characteristic moustache hanging down.¹³ The Silenus' head is additionally combined with the massive phallus transformed in the trunk of an elephant; at its end a palm branch (or feather?) is inserted, situated at the edge of the gem. Deep, detailed and more plastic carving.

The second group includes gems decorated with combinations of human masks and animal heads, placed on rooster legs (*hippalektryon* type). A quite typical creature is featured on one of the gems (**Fig. 1.B**)¹⁴ walking left, depicting a Silenus mask, bearded and bald, with blunt nose, ending in a horse's head depicted with mane and bit with reins. Coming out from behind the mask a ram's head with corn-ear in the mouth is visible. Above the ram's head the tail of a cock is engraved. A cock's legs support this fantasy structure standing on a short ground line.

¹² National Museum in Kraków, Inv. no. MNK IV-ZI-2089. Brownish jasper, size 2.1 x 1.6cm. Damage on the sides of the gem. First–Second century AD.

¹³ National Museum in Kraków, Inv. no. MNK IV-ZI-2095. Dark yellow jasper, size 1.2 x 0.9cm. Damage on the left side of the gem. First–Second century AD, cf. A. DIMITROVA-MILCHEVA, *Antique Engraved Gems and Cameos in the National Archaeological Museum in Sofia*, Sofia 1981, No. 250 (a good iconographic and stylistic analogy).

¹⁴ National Museum in Kraków, Inv. no. MNK IV-ZI-1816. Yellow jasper, size 1.3 x 1.0cm. Partially damaged on the upper side of the gem. First–Second century AD, cf. M. HENG, *The Lewis Collection of Engraved Gemstones in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*, BAR–SS I, London 1975, No. 144 (similar iconographic features, however different style); M. MAASKANT-KLEIBRINK, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems in the Royal Cabinet the Hague. The Greek, Etruscan and Roman Collections*, The Hague 1978, Nos 1088, 1089, 1090 (iconographic differences). See also: M.-L. VOLLENWEIDER, *Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève. Catalogue raisonné des sceaux, cylindres, intailles et camées*, Vol. II: *Les portraits, les masques de théâtre, les symboles politiques*, Mainz 1983, No. 388.

An analogous composition is depicted on the next gem (**Fig. 1.C**).¹⁵ Bearded mask with straight nose ends in a horse's neck and head depicted with mane, turned left. From behind to this structure, standing on cock's legs, the ram's head with corn-ear in the mouth is attached. Standing at the ram's head a small naked Eros/Amor, with wreath in his hand, turned left, is additionally situated. In the left part of the decoration field an upright arranged snake of three coils is driving at the horse's snout, while the end of his tail forms the ground line.

Yet other details can be seen on the depiction on the next gem (**Fig. 1.E**).¹⁶ The creature faces left as well, staying on a ground line. The body of this monster is created from a mask (face in profile) of a bearded and moustached man with a straight nose, placed horizontally and resting on rooster legs (thus creating a silhouette resembling an ostrich). The beard of the man is at the same time the tail of the bird. From the low forehead of the described mask rises an elephant head in profile, the end of its trunk holds a palm branch. The elephant head is quite thoroughly carved, an eye and a long, pointy tusk are depicted.

Compositions falling into both the described groups are characterized by a carefully thought form that in a concise and very compact way composition-wise managed to merge in one emblem a number of elements providing good fortune in many fields and at the same time ward against many dangers, including the evil eye. As mentioned before, the origin of this category of depictions is hard to establish. After a period of particular popularity in Italy during the First–Third century AD they have not been entirely forgotten and in a way their life lasts until this day. Creatures known from the ancient 'gryllo' enjoyed considerable popularity during the Middle Ages, and by the end of that period Hieronymus Bosch was a master in creating them.¹⁷ Interesting compositions of this type can also be observed in newer art. A bearded human head on bird legs became a common motif among others in the folk art of southern Austria and Germany (bird's head on a long neck, holds in its beak a human nose as if with tongs).¹⁸ The motif was especially popular in Tyrol, where a similar painting was created, depicting a creature known from the mask-animal gems, which – as was the case with the above mentioned copper-plate – 'pinches' the mask's nose with its beak (**Fig. 3**).¹⁹ A similar motif can also be found in the Tyrolean wood-carving

¹⁵ National Museum in Kraków, Inv. no. MNK IV-ZI-1818. Red jasper, size 1.8 x 1.2cm. Small damage on the sides. First–Second century AD. See also objects quoted above, in the footnote 14.

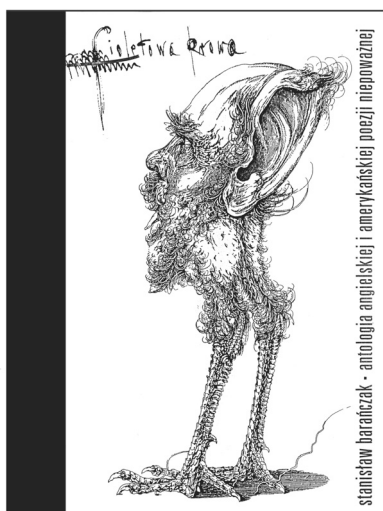
¹⁶ National Museum in Kraków, Inv. no. MNK IV-ZI-1893. Red jasper, size 1.6 x 1.3cm. Small damage on the sides. First–Second century AD.

¹⁷ BALTRUŠAITIS, *Phantastisches Mittelalter*, pp. 17–27 and 38–73.

¹⁸ See, among others: a copper plate dating to the turn of the Seventeenth–Eighteenth century from the workshop of J.F. Leopold in Augsburg (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, reprinted on the title page of the magazine *Das Fenster. Tiroler Kulturzeitschrift*, Heft 4, Innsbruck 1968) with a text referring to a folk saying: *Zupf dich selbst bey deiner Nasen* (litt.: *Mind your own nose*, meaning: *Mind your own business*).

¹⁹ Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum, Innsbruck. Oil on wood, size 59 x 41cm. Locally made, Eighteenth century. Inscription at the bottom: *Ziech sich ein yezts selbst bei der nasn / Wass dich nit Prendt Thue auch nicht Plasn*. More on the motif: L. SCHMIDT, *Der Vögel Selbsterkenntnis. Zwischen Volkskunst und Redensart*, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 55, 1952, pp. 134–144.

3. Mask-animal combination ('Vogel-Selbsterkenntnis'). Oil on wooden panel, size 59 x 41cm. Tyrol, Eighteenth century. (Phot. Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum, Innsbruck, courtesy of Prof. Paul Naredi-Rainer).



4. Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz (1945–2011), copper-plate cover of an anthology of English 'nonsense poetry', compiled and edited by Stanisław Barańczak, Poznań 1993.

as a decorative element of sleigh.²⁰ There is also no shortage of contemporary use of the ancient mask-animal/*grylloi* motif. One of the more interesting examples is a copper-plate by Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz (1945–2011) used to decorate the cover of a volume of English ‘nonsense’ poetry (**Fig. 4**).²¹

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²⁰ Such objects are in the collection of the Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum in Innsbruck (I am grateful to the Director of the Museum in Innsbruck for the picture and information) as well as Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna, see: SCHMIDT, *op.cit.*, pp. 134–137.

²¹ S. BARAŃCZAK (Ed.), *Fioletowa krowa. 333 najsławniejsze okazy angielskiej i amerykańskiej poezji niepoważnej, od Williama Shakespeare’a do Johna Lennona*. Antologia, Poznań 1993.