Lost Magical Gem from the Fayum
An Attempt to its Reconstruction and Lecture
During his subsequent stay in Egypt in 1908, Tadeusz Smoleński, a young Polish Egyptologist, quite accidentally encountered an interesting example belonging to the group of the so-called magical/gnostic gems. In relation to excavation works that took place in Gamhуд at the time Smoleński met one of the local employees of the Department of Antiquities. As he noted *I was visited in el-Feshn by Hassan Housny, an antiquities inspector from Fayum, and together we arrived in Beni Suef. [...] He left me a deposit of a gem with a Greek inscription, which I will study, and maybe publish, a few days later adding [...] The inspector from Fayum reminds me of his gnostic gem.* Since Smoleński was seriously considering studying and publishing this object, the lack of the original did not stop him in his research. A previously prepared copy of the text, that was indeed the main object of his interest, became a base for his later studies. A short note signalizing that ‘gnostic stone’ has already been published in the next volume of the official periodical of the Department of Antiquities.

Basing on the information given by Smoleński in that text it may be attempted to recreate that interesting object, as well as – due to great progress made in this field during the recent years – we may try to decipher the ‘mysterious’ writing. Unfortunately nothing is known of the circumstances in which the gem was discovered and where it came from, it was after all just a coincidence that brought it into Smoleński’s hands. The only information we have from the author is that the owner (Hassan Housny) had purchased it from one of the inhabitants of Fayum, most probably an accidental discoverer of the gem.

1 For more information on his life and accomplishments see J. Śliwa, L. Zinkow (Eds), Tadeusz Smoleński 1884–1909. Pisma naukowe i publicystyczne, Kraków 2010 [= T. Smoleński 1884–1909] (a profile of Smoleński is on pp. 7–20, and a list of his publications on pp. 21–38).

2 The category of the so-called magical/gnostic gems is an important class of objects, which except the classical elements also display clearly visible oriental influences (Egyptian, Coptic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Iranian). It is assumed that a considerable number of those gems may derive from the Alexandrian milieu from the first–third centuries AD. A visible increase in the interest in magical gems during the recent years is represented by publications such as H. PHILIPP, Mira et Magica: Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin-Charlottenburg, Mainz a/Rhein 1986 [= Mira et Magica] or S. MICHEL, Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum. Bd. I. Text, Bd. II. Tafeln und Indices, London 2001 [= Magischen Gemmen BM] as well as A. MASTROCINQUE (Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum. Parte I, Bolletino di Numismatica. Monografia 8.2.1. Anno 2003, Roma 2004 [= Sylloge I]). See also a comprehensive compendium by S. MICHEL, Die magischen Gemmen. Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit. *Studien aus dem Warburghaus 7*, Berlin 2004 [= Die magischen Gemmen].

3 The excavations in Gamhуд were directed by Tadeusz Smoleński in March 1907. Due to his deteriorating health, however, he was not able to finish the work. Ahmed Kamal (1851–1923) arrived there to help Smoleński as ordered by Gaston Maspéro, the director of the Antiquities Service, and he was responsible for finishing the excavations and preparing a final report (Fouilles à Gamhoud, *ASAE* 9, 1908, pp. 8–30). T. Smoleński’s next stay in Gamhуд and its vicinity was connected with packing and sending antiquities to Cairo. Cf. Śliwa, Zinkow (Eds), Tadeusz Smoleński 1884–1909, p. 58.


6 SMOLEŃSKI, *ASAE* 9, 1908, p. 92: [...] *elle avait achetée par un de mes amis au Fayoum, d’un indigene, au prix d’une livre anglaise.*
In accordance with further information given by Smoleński, the gem was made of a yellowish opaque stone, measured 26 x 14mm and was 4mm thick. On its frontal side a winged Eros/Amor riding a lion was depicted in bas-relief. Unfortunately, no photograph or drawing accompanies T. Smoleński’s publication and therefore it is only possible to refer to a gem currently in the British Museum, the surface of which is decorated by a similar scene (Fig. 1b). Unfortunately, the quoted object with the motif of Eros riding a lion, although quite popular in Roman glyptic, in case of magical gems is rare and – as stated by the author of the quoted publication – the magical inscription on the back of that gem has most probably been added later. Most probably a similar situation also took place in case of the gem discovered in Fayum that interested Smoleński. Therefore we should not search for a direct link between the decoration on the front of the gem and the text carved on the back, although some of the voces magicae there clearly also invoke love charms.

When he began his work on the intriguing ‘gnostic stone’ Tadeusz Smoleński was not faced with an easy task. He sought specialized help, which as a matter of fact was not hard to find in Cairo: According to [Giacomo] Biondi and [Pierre] Lacau Hassan Housny’s stone is a gnostic stone and I should publish it. Lacau and [Henri] Gauthier will provide me with literature, among others [Léon] Barry. The first order of business was to copy the seven verses of text carved on the back of the stone, further to be published (cf. Fig. 1a).

---

7 Ibid., p. 92: [...] c’est une pierre non transparente, ayant l’aspect de la cire jaune. Possibly it could have been jasper.
8 Ibid., p. 93: Sur l’autre face est représenté, en relief, un Amour ailé, armé d’un fouet, chevauchant un lion. T. Smoleński points to the resemblance of this scene to a depiction known from one of the gems from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, published by L. Barry, Notice sur quelques pierres gnostiques, ASAE 7, 1906, pp. 241–249, No. 8, where ‘un cynocephale’ is riding the lion.
9 A gem of dark green jasper measuring 18 x 24 x 4mm, dating to the third century AD, in: Michel, Magischen Gemmen BM, Cat. No. 257.
10 Ibid., p. 159.
11 T. Smoleński’s ‘Diary’, entry made on 19th February 1908, cf. Stachowska, Rocznik Biblioteki PAN w Krakowie 33, 1988, p. 134. In case of the mentioned gem T. Smoleński means the above quoted article of L. Barry, Notice, in which the author describes one of the magical gems from the collection of Dr. D. Fouquet (1850–1914), as well as ten magical gems from the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.
Smoleński also added a modest epigraphic commentary on the typeface of characteristic letters: *Le lettre ω est partout faite comme un W* as well as expressing his doubts regarding the last letter of the seventh verse. In his own version Smoleński assumed it to be Σ, however not being entirely sure he made a footnote with his reservations, adding that Léon Barry defined this sign otherwise. Smoleński also maintains proper distance with regard to the text itself and particularly to understanding it, since as he himself notes, *the key to this objective had been lost.* With no wide comparative material he was still able to acutely point to a certain ‘closeness’ of the first verse of the text (IHWAEW) and the sound of the last verse (ΧΑΡΟΠΙΛΕΞ) to writings on gems that had been published slightly earlier by Léon Barry in the same periodical.

Tadeusz Smoleński proposed his version of the ‘lecture’ of the text on the gem from Fayum in the above quoted publication (Fig. 1a). The first four verses even today pose the most difficult task, as signs carved here are sequences of letters with distorted order (*Buchstabenfolgen*), which are a sort of pseudo inscription, hard to compare with the known *voces magicae*. A comparison with the known inscriptions from other gems allows us to distinguish the following groups, of which the last three are much well attested and understandable:

1. IHW
2. AEWOY
3. ΦΘΑΧ
4. AWHΙΘWXAWEH
5. AIA
6. HIEΗΗΟΥΟΥΟΥ
7. MAPΜ•ΑΡΑΟΥΥΩ (8) BAINΧWWΧΧΧW (9) ΜΙΧΑΡΟΠΙΛΑΕΞ

(1) IHW – it is possible that the intention was to write YHW and maybe also IAW, the most common transcription of the Hebrew ‘Yahweh’, which on gems is the most commonly encountered name of the solar god. The YHW form was used during the fifth century AD by Jews on Elephantine.

(2) AEWOY – a set of vowels (*Vokabelreihen*), perhaps as IAOY, that is a different version of the name IAW or IAYOI; also similar to AEOAYM.

(3) ΦΘΑΧ – noted twice as ΦΘΑ. It is also present in Greek magical papyri, it is possible to see it as the name of the Egyptian god Ptah.

---

12 Smoleński, *ASAE* 9, 1908, p. 93, n. 2: *Le dernier signe n’est pas certain. M. Barry le rend par un N couche.* Currently we may sure assume that it was Ξ. Smoleński also notes that one letter is illegible in verse 5 (in my opinion, however, it was only a slightly wider space between two signs, since a clear *vox magica* is legible here – MAPΜΑΡΑΟΥΥΩ).

13 Ibid., p. 92: *Je n’esayerai pas de donner une traduction de cette suite de lettres, dont la clef est perdue.*

14 Ibid., p. 93, nn. 1, 2.


21 Ibid., p. 525.

(4) AWHIΩWXAWEH – an undefined sequence of letters;\textsuperscript{23} some elements close to […] WHOIAOPHIA from the gem in the British Museum.\textsuperscript{24}

(5) AIA – ‘Ata, corresponds to Hebrew ‘He who is’.\textsuperscript{25}

(6) HIEHIHOYOYO – a sequence of vowels.\textsuperscript{26}

(7) MAPMARΛOYWΩ – the proper wording is either MAPMAPIW(Θ) or MAPMAPAYW(Θ), from Aramaic or Syriac ‘Lord of Lights/Lord of Lords’.\textsuperscript{27} Also name of one of the decans. A phrase connected with solar context.

(8) The last two letters of the fifth verse and the sixth verse (minus the last two letters) as BAINXWWXW are clearly a transcription of a well attested word Bainchôôôch (here with an inversion of the last W), most commonly encountered in solar context. It derives from the Coptic BalNXWWX (Egyptian B3 n kkw), which may be translated as The soul/ram of darkness (a term used for Atum who traverses the otherworld in the form of a ram).\textsuperscript{28} The word also has a strictly defined numeric value: 3663 (the third ω has been added due to this fact). The term is often used in a context connected with Pantheos.\textsuperscript{29}

(9) The last, seventh verse with the two last letters of the previous verse (ΜΙΧΑΡΟΠΙΛΕΣ as Smoleński transcribed it\textsuperscript{30}), commonly encountered, is an anagram of the phrase ΠΙΛΗΞΟΝ ΧΑΠΙΝ (German ‘Sporne Gunst an’; Italian ‘Sprone il favore’).\textsuperscript{31} Nicharôplêx is encountered both in solar context (Anguipedes, Helios, tropaion, Leontocephales, Osiris) and in chthonic context, as well as in the circle of love charms (Eros and Psyche). It seems that in our case the choice of decoration with Eros/Amor on a lion was not entirely incidental. We need to mention once again that the first letter of that vox magica had been incorrectly written as M (instead of N), while the last one had been wrongly deciphered by Smoleński as Σ, although with well-founded doubt: he rightly points to a similarity with the inscription ΝΕΙΚΑΡΟΠΙΛΗΞ on the gem mentioned by L. Barry.\textsuperscript{32}

---

\textsuperscript{23} MICHEL, Die magischen Gemmen, p. 483 (s.v. Buchstabenfolgen/reihungen) and p. 487 (s.v. Vokale, Vokalreihen).

\textsuperscript{24} Id., Magischen Gemmen BM, Cat. No. 494.

\textsuperscript{25} MASTROCINQUE, JRA 15, 2002, p. 175, n. 7.


\textsuperscript{29} MICHEL, Die magischen Gemmen, p. 483 (s.v. Bainchôôôch) and p. 318 with a list of objects [41.d.1].

\textsuperscript{30} SMOLEŃSKI, ASAE 9, 1908, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{31} MICHEL, Die magischen Gemmen, p. 485 (s.v. Nicharôplêx) and pp. 219–220, n. 1144; MASTROCINQUE, Sylloge I, pp. 106–107.

\textsuperscript{32} BARRY, Notice, pp. 247–248 (No. 9).
The following fate of the ‘gnostic stone’ from Fayum that accidently found its way to Tadeusz Smoleński’s hands is unfortunately unknown. The object, until now, has not been mentioned in any recent publication: it has not been mentioned neither in competent and material-rich analyses nor specialized catalogues recently published. The only trace that remains is the publication by Tadeusz Smoleński, taken into consideration in this paper.

Joachim Śliwa
Instytut Archeologii
Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków
j.sliwa@uj.edu.pl

33 Due to the characteristic text an identification of the object could have been certain.
34 Cf. MASTROCINQUE, Syloge I; MICHEL, Magischen Gemmen BM; Id., Die magischen Gemmen.