

Israel Exploration Journal

VOLUME 47 ★ NUMBERS 3-4
JERUSALEM, ISRAEL ★ 1997

VARIA

A Note on the Chnoubis Gem from Tel Dor

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A MAGICAL gem from Tel Dor, recently published in *IEJ*,¹ has, on its obverse, the well-known image of Chnoubis: a serpent with a lion's head, shown in profile, with rays radiating from the head.² On the reverse the authors note 'an emblem encircled with an unintelligible pseudo-Phoenician inscription'. However, a look at the excellent photograph reveals the Chnoubis sign — three parallel crooked lines with a crossbar running through them — and a Greek inscription, Χνοῦμις. Chnoumis and the more common variant, Chnoubis, appear on numerous gems.³ Contrary to the authors' suggestion, this gem displays no 'phoenicianising' elements and is probably not connected with the Eshmun-Asklepius cult. As for its date, the second century C.E., suggested by the authors, is quite likely, but a later date, in the third or fourth century, is equally possible. Unfortunately, the dating of magical gems is an extremely difficult task, given the schematic and conservative nature of their design and execution, and the dearth of specimens that can securely be dated on stratigraphical grounds. In fact, most of the c. 5,000 known magical gems from the Roman Empire are of unknown provenance and of insecure date, having surfaced mostly in uncontrolled excavations. For this reason, gems whose find-spot is documented are of supreme importance. The more detail the archaeologist can supply

- 1 E. Stern and I. Sharon: Tel Dor, 1993: Preliminary Report, *IEJ* 45 (1995), pp. 26–36, esp. p. 32. See also R. Kotanksy: The Chnoubis Gem from Tel Dor, below, pp. 257–260.
- 2 For Chnoubis gems, see esp. Drexler, in W.H. Roscher: *Lexikon der Mythologie* II.1, Leipzig, 1890–1894, pp. 1258–1264; C. Bonner: *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor, 1950, pp. 54–60; A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain: *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes*, Paris, 1964, pp. 54–73; H. Philipp: *Mira et Magica, Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der staatlichen Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin-Charlottenburg*, Mainz, 1986, Nos. 125–135. For further discussion and extensive bibliography, see H.M. Jackson: *The Lion Becomes Man, The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 81), Atlanta, 1985, pp. 75–86.
- 3 E.g., Bonner (above, n. 2), Nos. 88–89; Delatte and Derchain (above, n. 2), Nos. 56–58, 65, 68, 72–73, 76, 78; Philipp (above, n. 2), Nos. 128–129, 132.

concerning the stratigraphical and spatial context of each gem, the more useful it becomes for students of Greco-Roman religion and magic.⁴

In commenting on Chnoubis gems, it should be noted that this specific design is explicitly mentioned several times in Rabbinical literature. In m AZ 3:3, we find the injunction that 'Whoever finds utensils with the figure of the Sun or the Moon' or the figure of the *dracon* (דרקון) (צורה) upon them, must take them to the Dead Sea.⁵ דרקון is, of course, a transliteration of the Greek δράκων (serpent), but 'the figure of the *dracon*' was not an ordinary serpent: 'Which kind of *dracon* is forbidden? R. Shimeon b. Eleazar says, Whichever has rays coming out of its neck (כל שהציצין מצוארו) (t AZ 5.2).⁶ This figure is often mentioned in non-Jewish sources. Galen, while discussing the medical properties of various stones, notes the efficacy of green jasper as an amulet against indigestion. He adds that some authorities suggest that the amulet becomes even more effective when one engraves upon it the figure of 'the serpent with rays' (τὸν τὰς ἀκτῖνας ἔχοντα δράκοντα), although his own experiments demonstrated that the engraved gems were no more effective than the plain ones.⁷ Similar descriptions in the works of later physicians, as well as several Hermetic, astrological and mineralogical tracts, make it amply clear that 'the serpent with rays' is none other than the astrological Decan Chnoubis/Chnoumis.⁸ In light of such parallels, the identity of the Rabbinical דרקון with the Chnoubis design is well established. The design itself is mentioned elsewhere in Rabbinical literature, as in the illuminating story of R. Eleazar Hakappar, who forced a non-Jewish passer-by to efface a Chnoubis ring he chanced upon (b AZ 43a). Naturally, the discovery of Chnoubis gems in Tel Dor, as well as Caesarea,⁹ demonstrates their prevalence in Roman Palestine, thus corroborating the impression that emerges from the Rabbinical corpus itself.

4 Note, for example, that the discovery of many magical gems in Alexandria has often led to the erroneous assumption that it was mainly there that they were produced (see esp. Ph. Derchain: *Alexandrie et la fabrication des intailles*, *Revue d'Égyptologie* 26 [1974], pp. 19–20). Yet the discovery of dozens of magical gems in Caesarea alone (cf. below, n. 9) demonstrates the fallacy of such simplistic arguments.

5 Cf. t AZ 5.1. For a good discussion of the Rabbinical דרקון, see M. Hadas-Lebel: *Le paganisme à travers les sources rabbiniques des IIe et IIIe siècles*, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.19.2 (1979), pp. 417–420.

6 Cf. b AZ 43a. In j AZ 3.3 (42d), the last statement is attributed to Shimeon b. Azai.

7 Galen, *De simplicibus medicamentis* 10.19 (ed. Kühn, vol. XII, p. 207).

8 See R. Halleux and J. Schamp: *Les lapidaires grecs*, Paris, 1985, p. 170, n. 4, for references to this design. For Chnoumis, cf. also Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.58.

9 See Stern and Sharon (above, n. 1), n. 12, referring to A. Hamburger: *Gems from Caesarea Maritima*, *Atiqot* (English series) VIII (1968). In Hamburger's publication, Nos. 110–112 are of the type discussed here. Unfortunately, these gems were not unearthed in controlled excavations, and their exact find-spots have not been recorded.