

NOVENSIA 32

# NOVENSIA 32

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Piotra Dyczka

# NOVENSIA 32



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Paweł Gołyźniak  
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## ATHLETE, HYMEN OR MELEAGER? AN INTAGLIO FROM OLBIA

**Abstract:** An intaglio found during National Museum in Warsaw excavations at the Olbia Pontica site in 2018 depicts a young male figure with a torch. This gem, made of carnelian, is dated to the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the first century AD. The identification of the figure engraved on stone considers three different possibilities: athlete, Hymen and Meleager, and discusses it in the context of an unknown possible sculptural model for the representations as well as remarks on personal choice of subjects to be engraved on gemstones. The find is contextualized from a historical and archaeological point of view within Roman-period Olbia Pontica. It is postulated that the gem may have belonged to a high-ranking Roman officer or a member of the local elite, and it is important testimony for the early presence of Romans in Olbia or at least their contacts with the indigenous population.

**Keywords:** athlete, Augustan Age, glyptics, Hymen, Meleager, Olbia Pontica

### Introduction

Trench R-23 at Olbia Pontica [Fig. 1], which yielded the find of the titular intaglio, has been excavated by the Polish Archaeological Mission from the National Museum in Warsaw from 2016 as part of a joint project with the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The trench is located on a plateau in the southeastern part of the ancient city, inside the territory of the so-called “Roman Citadel” that was not deserted like other territories of Olbia Pontica in the Roman period. There is a good view of the Bug River from here, as well as of the liman or estuary of the Dniepr and Bug to the south. Ukrainian excavations in the near vicinity (trenches R-25 to the south and L and L1 to the west) yielded house remains, proving that in the second and perhaps third century AD this area must have been quite densely populated.

The intaglio (field inv. no. Olbia/2018/R-23/245) was found just outside of the trench (square no. 209), by chance after two days of heavy rain, on 31 July 2018. It was not a stratified find, but it sits well with what is known about this area in the Roman period: a prestigious location, close

<sup>1</sup> Three seasons of excavations took place in 2016–2018 as part of the “Antiquities of the Black Sea” Project financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Since 2019, the project and excavations have continued as part of the Institute of Archaeology and

Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences project financed by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (grant 10/WFSN/2019). Since the beginning, the project and excavations have been headed by Alfred Twardecki.

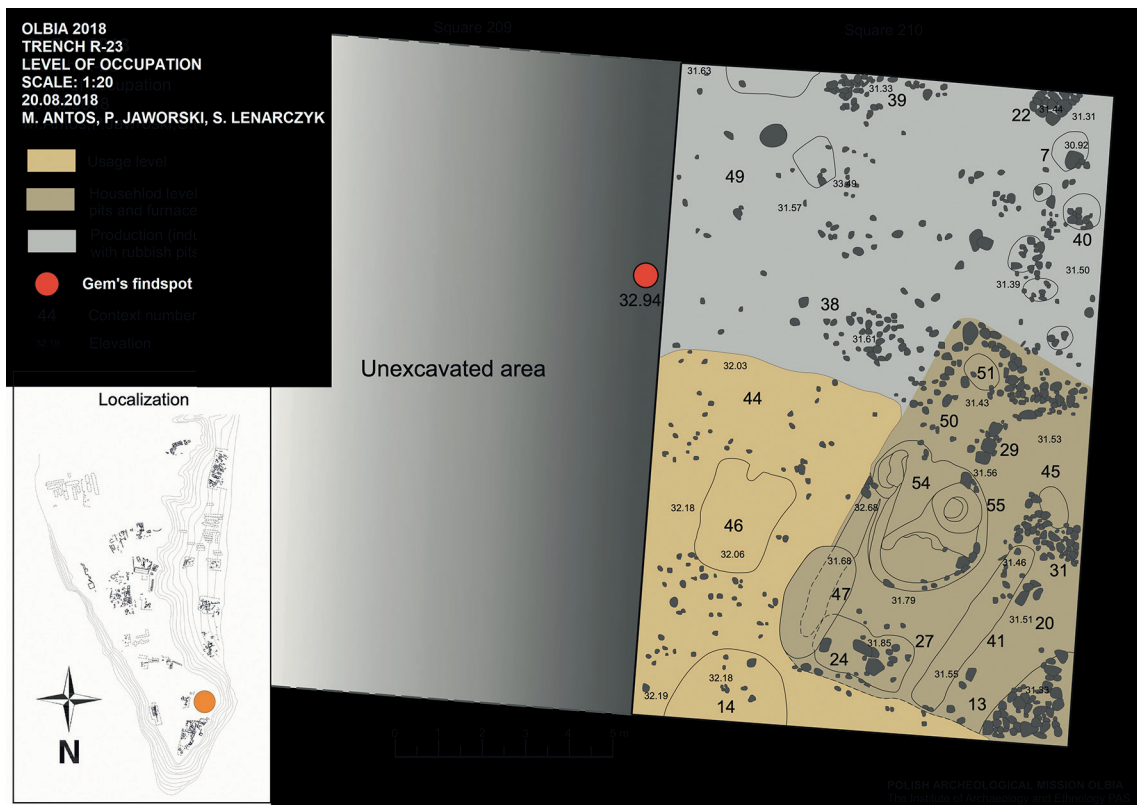


Fig. 1. Map presenting the findspot of the intaglio: Olbia 2018, Trench R-23, level of occupation, scale: 1:20, 20.08.2018 (drawing by M. Antos, P. Jaworski, S. Lenarczyk)

to the harbor which lies to the east and near the centre of Roman Olbia extending to the south and west. The intaglio is now housed in the Natural History Museum in Kiev (Archaeological Section, inv. no. O-2018/P-23/497).

### Historical context

Olbia Pontica's most prosperous period was said to have been in the fifth and fourth centuries BC,<sup>2</sup> after which, in Hellenistic times, it suffered destruction most likely at the hands of the king of the Getae Burebista (80/61–44 BC), who sacked it sometime after 55 BC. The archaeological record indicates a period of hiatus for the duration of perhaps one generation, with settlement returning in Roman times. The Roman town occupied only about a third of the area of the fifth-century BC city, concentrating around the harbor and well-fortified riverside plateau. In the third century AD, the town appears to have been largely deserted with just a handful of residents, Goths one should think, continuing to live there through the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century AD. It is highly unlikely that the Olbians of Roman times were descendants of the Greek colonists from before Burebista's invasion still living in the city area. In its heyday, Roman Olbia was an important military strongpoint for the Roman fleet at the Pontos Euxeinos and for the Roman

<sup>2</sup> Herodotos 4.19; BRAUND, KRYZHITSKIY ed. 2007.



army controlling the route to Crimea, where the Bosporan Kingdom and Tauric Chersonesos were crucial allies of the Roman Empire.

Having visited Olbia, Dio Chrysostomos (AD 40–115) left a description of the city and its inhabitants. In his Borysthenic Oration (*Or.* 36), he paints a picture of a small town with a great history and an elite still speaking slightly archaic Greek, living most probably in the citadel area. However, the presence of a Latin-speaking Roman military garrison in the town is proved by some Latin inscriptions, including a tombstone of a Roman legionary Gaius Valerius Victor.<sup>3</sup> There was also a representative population of descendants of the indigenous people. Generally speaking, Olbia was a place where the Roman, Greek and barbarian elements coexisted in the first centuries of the common era. From the point of view of the literate citizens of Rome, Olbia was a city located on the far outskirts of the civilized world.<sup>4</sup> Still, connections must have existed and the intaglio in question, the product of a master Italian workshop, was clearly something that had been carried by a visitor from Rome itself. A similar case of a lost seal of a legionary officer accompanying the emperor Titus on his visit to the oracle of Aphrodite is known from Nea Paphos in Cyprus.<sup>5</sup> The high quality of the intaglio from Olbia, combined with one of the possible interpretations of the representation at it (see below), may suggest that it had belonged to a high- or middle-ranking Roman army officer or a member of the local elite.

Roman military presence in Olbia is confirmed for the first through third centuries AD.<sup>6</sup> The Roman-Bosporan War (AD 45–49) would be the first chance for the military to appear in Olbia in number, but large quantities of Roman imported pottery already from the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius are evidenced in the excavations of the site, testifying to intensive contacts between Olbia's then inhabitants and the Roman world. The activity of Tiberius Plautius Silvanus as legate of Moesia (AD 61–66) is of particular interest in the context of this article. He “visited” the Crimean Chersonesus in a military capacity and it is probably with this incident that the Olbian honorary decree found on the Mangup plateau should be connected.<sup>7</sup> In AD 64, the year of the Great Fire, he also supplied Rome with food after the catastrophe. It is then that archaeological and epigraphic sources for the first time confirm the presence of Roman military units in Olbia.<sup>8</sup> A system of Roman fortifications was constructed in Olbia itself and in the surrounding area. Taken together, all of these indications suggest intensive Roman activity (including military) in the area, for which the intaglio in question is additional and important testimony. Indeed, the connection between the gem and Roman military activities in this part of the world seems more probable than other possibilities, such as the presence of exiled members of the Roman upper classes (like Ovid) or just tourists (like Dio Cocceianus), which cannot be entirely excluded of course.

### The intaglio

The Olbian intaglio is made of carnelian, a typical stone employed by Roman engravers to carve intaglios to be set mostly in private rings used as seals, amulets or for personal adornment, among others. Its form (18 mm high and 13 mm wide), with beveled sides making the top larger, ensured

<sup>3</sup> KOZLENKO 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the very beginning of Juvenal's Satire 2: “Ultra Sauromatas fugere hinc libet et glaciale / Oceanum, quotiens aliquid de moribus audent / qui Curios simulant et Bacchanalia vivunt.” Actually, ancient maps show Olbia in Sarmatia. Not to mention the case of Ovid in Tomis, not far from Olbia.

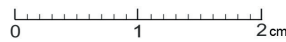
<sup>5</sup> DASZEWSKI 1973.

<sup>6</sup> KOZLENKO 2020.

<sup>7</sup> It is a widely discussed Olbian decree dated about AD 60: SIDORENKO 1996 (*ed. princeps*) and *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 46 (1996), p. 947 with further literature, comments and apparatus.

<sup>8</sup> KOZLENKO 2020, p. 5.

firm mounting of the stone in its setting while providing the largest possible surface for the carved image. The subject matter of this intaglio is a young male figure standing in three-quarter view from behind with his left leg bent (*contrapposto*) and with the head in profile to the left. He is naked except for a *chlamys* tied below his neck, hanging over the right shoulder and down his back. In his left hand the figure holds a lowered torch [Fig. 2].



Polish Archaeological Mission "Olbia" 2018  
Copyright by National Museum in Warsaw

Fig. 2. Intaglio, carnelian, 18 × 13 mm,  
end of the first century BC – beginning of the first century AD,  
Hymen or Meleager. The Natural History Museum in Kiev (since 2018),  
Archaeological Section, inv. no. O-2018/P-23/497  
(photo © The National Museum in Warsaw)

A sizeable, blunted drill was used to carve the larger parts of the body, while the detailing was rendered mostly with rounded wheel grooves. The effect is a figure with well-balanced proportions of the body, with much emphasis put on the musculature. All parts are finely polished. The fine skill of the master engraver is best exhibited in the head area, where the artist depicted a fleshy neck turned back to let the head be seen in profile. The male face is elegant with a calm expression, well cut with just a few concentric cuts for the chin, mouth, nose, eye and ear. The hair, engraved in the form of numerous short curls, received particular attention, each lock being cut individually, so that they build a mass of small concentric strokes. The rich texturing of the *chlamys* also indicates a master gem engraver. Overall, based on the stone format, slightly larger than regular glyptic products of the period, and especially the style of engraving, it can be said that the intaglio was cut in the age of Augustus at the turn of the first century BC and the first century AD.

One of the peculiar features of Augustan glyptics was that the styles were increasingly influenced by earlier and contemporary Greek workshops. This was mainly due to the fact that a number of Greek gem cutters transferred their businesses from the Eastern Mediterranean to Rome and Italy, where they sought new patrons and operated on large new markets. The competition between them from the first century BC is attested by the largest group of intaglios and cameos known to be signed by gem masters.<sup>9</sup> Very often these artists based their engravings on Classical Greek art of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, especially famous statues, reliefs and paintings.

<sup>9</sup> MÖBIUS 1964; VOLLENWEIDER 1966; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL pp. 50–54, 71–72, 95–97, 111–113, 134–135, 145, 157–2007, pp. 109–126, and recently also GOŁYŹNIAK 2020, pp. 159, 193–195 and 215–216.

However, this revival of Classical motifs was influenced by a strong Hellenistic “Neo-Attic” trend that emerged at the end of the second century BC.<sup>10</sup> The carnelian gem from Olbia is evidently part of this artistic phenomenon. Suggesting this is the pose of the figure with the clearly marked *contrapposto*, captured in a three-quarter view from behind, and the thick groundline, which may actually indicate a sort of base for a statue. The next indicator of a sculptural prototype as inspiration is the strong verticality of the composition, rendered here by the right leg that carries the whole weight of the figure. The arrangement of the hands — one with the torch falling freely alongside the body, the other akimbo, covered by the cloak — is reminiscent of sculptures of male gods and heroes as well as private figures from the fourth century BC.<sup>11</sup> Even in the case of mere mortals, they were represented in a way that highlighted physical prowess and the ideal male body, also because many of them indeed represented actual athletes or statesmen seeking to self-advertise. As a recent study has demonstrated, the tradition developed from the earlier accomplishments of Polykleitos and the advances made foremost by two greats of Greek fourth-century BC sculpture, Lysippos and Skopas, and their workshops. Lysippos focused on an accurate rendering of the human body,<sup>12</sup> while Skopas mirrored emotions like ecstasy, longing and pain with ease and pathos.<sup>13</sup> A close examination of the head of the figure depicted on the Olbia gem reveals the influence of Skopas, betrayed by the deeply sunken eyes and slightly open mouth. Yet, the facial expression follows the principles of Augustan Classicism. In fact, the head type is to some degree redolent of the one used for portraits of the first emperor of Rome and often employed at the time for various characters in glyptics and in other art forms.<sup>14</sup>

### Identification: athlete? Hymen? Meleager?

The gem is rather distinctive for its style and date, however, the identification of the figure depicted on it is much more complex. It is highly probable that the young male is either a divinity or at least a male of heroic status. His nudity speaks to that. As Henig argues, nudity on gems was almost exclusively applied for gods and heroes, with one exception being made for athletes.<sup>15</sup> Zanker<sup>16</sup> and Bonfante<sup>17</sup> support this idea. There is no distinctive attribute other than the torch in the figure’s left hand. There are not many mythological figures shown with a torch and because the lack of wings dismisses Eros or Eros-Thánatos, we are left with essentially two characters: Hymen and Meleager. An athlete as an alternative identification, especially a runner taking part in the *lampas/lampadedromia*, the torch race, is questionable upon closer inspection.

#### Athlete?

Athletes are quite popular on engraved gems, especially in the late Etruscan and Roman material, which might be due to the introduction of the first sports grounds in central Italy in the fourth century BC and their growing popularity over the next centuries.<sup>18</sup> One can find all types

<sup>10</sup> PLATZ-HORSTER 1970; PLANTZOS 1999, pp. 86–90.

<sup>11</sup> A good illustration of this trend in fourth-century BC Classical Greek sculpture is the famous Daochos Monument, decorated with a group of eight statues representing male family members and ancestors, consecrated by Daochos II as a gift to the Delphi Sanctuary; see DOHRN 1968; LATTIMORE 1975.

<sup>12</sup> CHILDS 2018, pp. 276–278.

<sup>13</sup> STEWART 1977; LATTIMORE 1987; CHILDS 2018, pp. 114–115.

<sup>14</sup> ZANKER 1988, p. 351.

<sup>15</sup> HENIG, WILKINS 1982, p. 380.

<sup>16</sup> ZANKER 1988, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> BONFANTE 1989.

<sup>18</sup> HANSSON 2005, p. 130.

of sportsmen: wrestlers, boxers, discus or ball throwers, runners, chariot riders etc.<sup>19</sup> These representations are almost exclusively reserved for youths and because physical prowess was much appreciated in the Etruscan, Italic and Roman cultures as a crucial preparatory stage for entering military service, those who showed it were granted high social status within their community.<sup>20</sup> It was then natural to communicate this to peers and as the surviving number of gems related to this issue testifies, carrying a ring with a gem engraved with a representation reflecting one's sport occupation was an important and widespread social behavior. Moreover, as Henig points out, the highlight of physical prowess combined with the pursuance of ideal male beauty was an attractive element of Roman culture, quickly adopted and proudly manifested by local elites with the use of gems in the newly organized provinces, such as Britannia in the first century AD.<sup>21</sup> At first glance the figure depicted on the gem found in Olbia meets the basic criteria of an athletic representation. It reflects the ideal of male beauty with the body perfectly captured and depicted in *contrapposto*. However, the two attributes, a cloak and a torch, and the way they are arranged make such an identification problematic.

Generally speaking, athletes on ancient gems are presented naked, without cloaks or any other dress unless they are chariot riders.<sup>22</sup> The torch may suggest the figure to be a generic athlete participating in the *lampas/lampadedromia*, a torch relay race that was performed before several religious festivals in ancient Greece, e.g. the Panathenaic games, especially in the Hellenistic and early Roman Imperial periods.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, figures of this kind are represented on gems in the same convention as on red- and black-figured Greek vases and in reliefs, namely as naked runners with a plate-torch in hand, sometimes passing it from one runner to another during the race.<sup>24</sup> The figure on the gem found in Olbia does not match this iconographical scheme. Nor does it fit the image of a victorious athlete using the torch to start a fire on the altar once the race was over. For one thing, there is no altar shown on the gem and for another, the lowered torch has funeral associations, of which below. Moreover, as demonstrated by surviving Attic reliefs, the figure on the Olbian gem cannot be a gymnasiarch, trainer or sponsor of a team of ephebes taking part in a competitive race, because these were depicted as much older, usually bearded and completely dressed males.<sup>25</sup> All in all, even though attractive, the identification of this figure as an athlete does not appear to be convincing.

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough study of many different types of athletes appearing on gems see KLOSE, STUMPF 1996. Examples: 1. runner – LANG, CAIN 2015, no. II.7 (with further literature); VITELLOZZI 2010, no. 349 (with further literature); 2. discus thrower – FURTWÄNGLER 1900, pl. XLIV.25–27; BRANDT, SCHMIDT 1970, no. 998; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1969, nos. 478–479; GOLYŹNIAK 2017, no. 125 (with further literature); 3. Apoxiomenos – BRANDT, SCHMIDT 1970, no. 999; WEIB 2007, nos. 347–348 (with further literature); GOLYŹNIAK 2017, no. 123 (with further literature); 4. boxer – BRANDT, SCHMIDT 1970, no. 1483; 5. an athlete oiling his body – BOARDMAN *et alii* 2009, no. 429; WEIB 2007, nos. 345–346 (with further literature); 6. victorious athletes – ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1991, nos. 1693–1698; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1998, nos. 257–258; HENIG 2007, no. 520; GOLYŹNIAK 2017, no. 124 (with further literature); 7. chariot riders in circus – MAASKANT-KLEIBRINK 1978, nos. 258, 716 and 792; SPIER 1992, no. 291; WEIB 2007, nos. 350–353 (with further literature); ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1998, no. 254; 8. victorious chariot riders – MAASKANT-KLEIBRINK 1978, no. 257; VOLLENWEIDER 1979, nos.

398–406; WEIB 2007, nos. 354–356 (with further literature); ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1998, nos. 255–256; GOLYŹNIAK 2017, no. 517 (with further literature).

<sup>20</sup> HANSSON 2005, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> HENIG 2007b.

<sup>22</sup> See above, note 5.

<sup>23</sup> KLOSE, STUMPF 1996, pp. 49–50 (esp. notes 120–124 listing relevant ancient literary sources describing such races); CHANKOWSKI 2018.

<sup>24</sup> For example, a red jasper intaglio in the Frank L. Kovacs collection see KLOSE, STUMPF 1996, no. 71. The plate-torch alone as a symbol of such a race was also depicted on gems and coins; see KLOSE, STUMPF 1996, nos. 70 and 72; FURTWÄNGLER 1896, no. 6463. For representations of participants of the *lampas* race on red- and black-figured vases see BENTZ 2007 and for their representations in reliefs see PALAGIA 2000.

<sup>25</sup> PALAGIA 2000, p. 404.

## Hymen?

The nudity of the figure, as suggested already, could be an indication of divine or heroic status. The physical features, however, are rather indistinctive. The *chlamys* can be seen on many mythological characters depicted on gems and other archaeological artifacts. Even though not very helpful, it still rather excludes a typical mortal, like the athlete considered above. Having this in mind, the torch might be more helpful as an indicator of identity. The torch is a typical attribute associated with the limitations of human life, and it was used by a narrow group. It is Eros who is most often depicted with it, and there is ample evidence for this in the glyptics. Eros torments Psyche with the torch, usually under the guise of a butterfly.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, this might have been a reference to the charms of revenge as noted by Schwartz and Platt,<sup>27</sup> but, on the other hand, the theme was considered a funerary one and related to the transport of Psyche's soul to Olympus and in a more general sense, the transport of the soul of the gem owner into the afterlife.<sup>28</sup> The second aspect was even more directly addressed by the depiction of Eros-Thanatos, who is often represented on Roman sarcophagi and gems alike, standing straight, with one leg crossed over the other, leaning on an upturned torch. In addition, he is connected to funeral practices and might be perceived as a tomb-guardian or simply a *memento mori*<sup>29</sup> [Fig. 3].

The torch was also used by those who heralded a forthcoming victory, hope for the better, for good luck and prosperity, as well as light dissipating the terrors of darkness. That is why on the carnelian intaglio in Naples Octavian-Apollo-Sol is driving a quadriga with a torch in his hand: he is establishing the new world order after his victory at Actium.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, on a lost gem reproduced by Tomasso Cades, Diomedes is depicted marching with Palladion and a torch in his



Fig. 3. Intaglio, agate, 11 × 9 × 5 mm, third century AD, Eros in the form of a butterfly tormenting Psyche with a torch. The National Museum in Kraków (since 1886), inv. no. MNK IV-Ew-Zł-1786 (photo © Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Kraków)

<sup>26</sup> GOLYŹNIAK 2017, nos 337–338 (with a commentary and further examples listed and literature). See also PLATT 2007 and the theme was especially popular on late Antique cameos, see HENIG, MOLESWORTH 2018, pp. 161–162.

<sup>27</sup> SCHWARTZ 1999, pp. 18–19; PLATT 2007, pp. 96–97.

<sup>28</sup> HENIG 2007a, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> HENIG, MOLESWORTH 2018, pp. 162–163.

<sup>30</sup> ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2007, pp. 126–127 and 420; GOLYŹNIAK 2020, pp. 172–173.

hands, prophesied as the founder of the New Troy, that is, Rome.<sup>31</sup> The famous amethyst intaglio from Naples signed by Apollonios, depicting Diana Lucifera with two torches held upside down, a motif likely based on a Praxitelean statue and copied on an ancient carnelian gem in St. Petersburg, are two further examples of the torch being employed for positive symbolism and referring to Diana as the bringer of light<sup>32</sup> (with an interesting commentary on the sculptural prototype<sup>33</sup>). One should also add the act of marriage to this pool of positive ideas associated with the torch, because it was the start of a couple's "new life", usually much celebrated and receiving special attention. The Greeks had a special deity, Hymen, whose role was to take part in the marriage ceremonies and guarantee success instead of disaster. The deity inspired special songs that were sung during the marriage feasts and processions.

Hymen was the son of either Apollo and one of the muses (Clio, Calliope or Urania) or Dionysus and Aphrodite.<sup>34</sup> In ancient Graeco-Roman art, he was usually represented as a handsome young man, sometimes winged, holding a wreath of flowers and a torch. He appears mostly in wall paintings, mosaics and sarcophagus reliefs, typically as an element of a marriage scene (for instance, that of Peleus and Thetis), whereas he is rarely depicted on gems.<sup>35</sup> For example, it may be Hymen who is depicted at the wedding ceremony of Cupid and Psyche represented on the famous Arundel cameo in Boston, presumably from the second century BC, with the signature of Tryphon added most likely in the Renaissance.<sup>36</sup> He may also be engraved on a carnelian intaglio dated to the first century BC from the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon<sup>37</sup> [Fig. 4]. The point is, however, that a winged Hymen on gems can easily be mistaken for Eros. Thus, the number of objects depicting him may be largely underestimated, and, even in the case of the two objects listed above, one cannot be entirely sure about the figure's identity. In glyptics, most of the winged young male figures with a torch appear in a context implying Eros or Eros-Thanatos, as discussed above. Representations in which the figure is carrying or simply holding the torch



Fig. 4. Intaglio, carnelian, 11 × 9 mm, second half of the first century BC,  
Hymen or Eros shouldering a torch.  
The Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon — Founder's Collection (since 1955)  
(photo © Carlos Azevedo)

<sup>31</sup> MORET 1997, no. 239.

<sup>32</sup> RICHTER 1971, no. 639; NEVEROV 1976, no. 110; PANNUTI 1994, no. 72.

<sup>33</sup> LAPATIN 2015, p. 246, pl. 93.

<sup>34</sup> De BELLEFONDS 1988, p. 583; BREMMER 1998, pp. 784–785.

<sup>35</sup> De BELLEFONDS 1988, pp. 583–585. See also a marble relief from the front of a Roman sarcophagus in the

British Museum, presenting a wedding ceremony accompanied by Hymen; inv. no. 1805,0703.143: [https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?assetId=241199003&objectId=460103&partId=1](https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=241199003&objectId=460103&partId=1) (retrieved on 21 March 2020).

<sup>36</sup> BOARDMAN *et alii* 2009, no. 1.

<sup>37</sup> SPIER 2001, no. 15.

are extremely rare on gems, and, for some scholars, they indicate an iconography created in the Renaissance rather than in antiquity.<sup>38</sup> This is certainly not the case of the gem found in Olbia.

In fact, the torch in Hymen's hands could be an illustration of his connection with Apollo, the sun god, sometimes identified with Sol, who travelled with a torch in his chariot. But among many stories related to Hymen, the Orphic legends describing his death and then restoration to life by Asclepius might be of significance here, too.<sup>39</sup> For, as mentioned above, the torch used by either Eros or Eros-Thánatos represented rebirth. In the case of Hymen, it could be related to the same aspect rather than being a bridal symbol exclusively. Be that as it may, another plausible identification to be considered is that of Meleager, whose mythical story also touches on the issues of light and death.

### Meleager?

Meleager was a Greek hero who hosted the Calydonian boar hunt and ultimately killed the beast. In Greek and Roman art, he is usually depicted with a javelin (or two) and a dog at his feet, wearing only a *chlamys*, presenting the head of the Calydonian boar as his trophy. One of the most famous representations of this motif was a lost bronze masterpiece by Skopas (fourth century BC), known only from a number of copies (mostly Roman) that vary in quality and in fidelity to the original.<sup>40</sup> Among them, the most famous is a Roman marble in the collections of the Museo Pio-Clementino in Rome.<sup>41</sup> Glyptics provide evidence of the massive popularity of the hero, especially in the first century BC and early first century AD, but the earliest examples of his presence on gems can be traced back to the third century BC.<sup>42</sup> This was most likely due to his exceptional hunting skills, courage and physical prowess. These qualities were praised, and thus Meleager was set as an *exemplum virtutis*, an example to follow or one to which the gem owner could compare himself in his act of self-advertisement, a typical purpose of intaglios at the time.<sup>43</sup> Descriptions of Skopas' bronze statue have not come down in any of the ancient literary sources, and it is questionable to what extent the Roman marble statuary copies reflect the original; hence it seems that glyptics may turn out to be very helpful in its reconstruction.

Meleager on gems is depicted in the usual form: in three-quarter view seen from behind, wearing a *chlamys*, with his javelin (or two) and sometimes a dog at his feet, in front of a shrine of Artemis/Diana, and atop rocks or an altar and under a tree. The Calydonian boar's head is placed nearby, illustrating the myth with reference to its inception, and Meleager is often shown raising his hand in a gesture of adoration toward Artemis/Diana<sup>44</sup> [Fig. 5]. Toso correctly observes that by offering his trophy to Artemis/Diana, who sent the Calydonian boar to terrorize the land ruled by king Oeneus because the hero had affronted the goddess at a festival of the gods, Meleager expresses his *pietas* and makes amends.<sup>45</sup> It can only be added that by having Meleager engraved on his gem, the owner of the piece may have wanted to express his own *pietas erga deos* in a general sense, too.

There are also cases (much rarer) when Meleager is depicted in exactly the same circumstances, that is, presenting the Calydonian boar's head as his trophy, but also collecting the Golden Fleece, which is hanging from a tree, suggesting he is participating in the mythological quest of the

<sup>38</sup> BOARDMAN *et alii* 2009, no. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.3.

<sup>40</sup> STEWART 1977.

<sup>41</sup> Inv. no. 490: WOODFORD 1992, p. 415, no. 3.

<sup>42</sup> TOSO 2007, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> GOLYŹNIAK 2020, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> FURTWÄGLER 1896, no. 2484; SENA CHIESA 1966, no. 844; BRANDT, SCHMIDT 1970, no. 853; SCHLÜTER,

PLATZ-HORSTER, ZAZOFF 1975, nos. 983–984 (with a list of further examples); MAASKANT-KLEIBRINK 1978, no. 607; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1979, no. 494 (with more parallels); GOLYŹNIAK 2017, no. 106.

<sup>45</sup> TOSO 2009, p. 214.

Argonauts<sup>46</sup> [Fig. 6]. Actually, Meleager's connection to both of these myths and his intimate relationship with Artemis/Diana indicate the closeness of the sphere of the hunt with that of the sacred. Because engraved gems were strictly private objects, this phenomenon is much more evident than in any other type of archaeological artifacts. Consequently, the hero here is presented in sacro-idyllic surroundings involving a shrine and a tree. However, if one was to focus on the figure itself, the approach is more or less similar: the pose, body position, even the attributes (javelins, *chlamys* and boar's head) and companion (dog). Taken together, these elements of the iconography are helpful in the reconstruction of the appearance of the original work by Skopas.

Regarding Meleager and the Calydonian boar hunt on gems, there is one more type of representation illustrating the myth, namely intaglios featuring a young male head with a spear behind and the head of a boar below it.<sup>47</sup> Vollenweider associated this motif with Octavian, and, due to the accompanying symbolism, identified him as Octavian-Meleager; he took the piece as commemorating the Battle of Naulochus.<sup>48</sup> Although Vollenweider's hypothesis is attractive and has been accepted by some scholars,<sup>49</sup> Gołyźniak, more recently, has argued that the identification of the portrait with Octavian is uncertain and the symbolism unusual for him.<sup>50</sup> In the case of the Olbian gem, we encounter a similar situation: the head type recalls that of Octavian, but, basically, due to the fact that some features of his portrait influenced Roman art in general, the figure cannot be linked to the *princeps* as such (see above). Even though there might be some connections between Octavian propaganda and mythological figures like Achilles or Theseus, the case of Meleager seems to function primarily in the private sphere, and the gems depicting him reflect personal choices rather than acts of official propaganda.<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 5. Intaglio, carnelian, 13 × 10 × 3 mm, second half of the first century BC, Meleager with his dog in front of a shrine of Diana.

The National Museum in Kraków (since 1886), inv. no. MNK IV-Ew-Zł-165 (photo © Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Kraków)



Fig. 6. Intaglio, carnelian, 14 × 12 × 3 mm, second half of the first century BC, Meleager collecting the Golden Fleece, head of the Calydonian boar in front of him. The National Museum in Kraków (since 1886),

inv. no. MNK IV-Ew-Zł-751 (photo © Photographic Studio of The National Museum in Kraków)

<sup>46</sup> TOSO 2009, pp. 213–214, fig. 12; GOŁYŹNIAK 2017, no. 107.

<sup>47</sup> FURTWÄNGLER 1896, no. 5126; FOSSING 1929, no. 1201; VOLLENWEIDER 1972–1974, pl. 149.14; BRANDT *et alii* 1972, no. 3357.

<sup>48</sup> VOLLENWEIDER 1972–1974, pp. 205–206.

<sup>49</sup> TOSO 2007, p. 100.

<sup>50</sup> GOŁYŹNIAK 2020, p. 185.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.



Although the male figure on the intaglio from Olbia lacks the attributes typical of Meleager, the way in which the youth is presented, including his pose, arrangement of body parts and even the stylistic features of the image, suggests its close relationship to casual depictions of that Greek hero known from Roman glyptics. It should be remembered that the choice of the subject matter for an engraved gem was always deliberate and highly personal, many times related to reflections on human life and destiny. For this reason, it should be considered whether the gem from Olbia, showing the youth with a torch, actually refers to Meleager and the burning log that materialized the prophecy of the Moirai. According to the myth, when Meleager was born, the Moirai predicted he would live only until a piece of wood, burning in the family hearth, was consumed by fire. Upon learning this, Meleager's mother Althaea hid the log immediately. Nevertheless, during the hunt for the Calydonian boar, Meleager fell in love with a skilled huntress Atalanta, who wounded the boar for which she was rewarded afterwards. Not all accepted this, especially Toxeus, Plexippus, Iphicles and Eurypylus, whom Meleager then killed in a subsequent feud. His mother Althaea, upon receiving news of the death of her close relatives at the hands of Meleager, took the log and set it afire, fulfilling the prophecy of the Moirai and killing Meleager.

### Conclusions

The story of Meleager reflects the brevity of human life and proves that no matter how strong and skillful one may be, death may come quickly and unexpectedly, making no exceptions. On the gem from Olbia, the youth is holding a burning torch rather than a log, but this might be due to Graeco-Roman artistic conventions. The identification of the figure is made difficult because the physical appearance and attributes may refer to either Hymen or Meleager. It is less likely that the image is of a victorious *lampas* runner with a torch, although it may have been intended to show the ideal nude male body regardless of the figure's actual identity. By selecting this particular image, the gem's owner might have wished to highlight his physical prowess and it might be postulated that he took Meleager as his *exemplum virtutis* — an example to follow. This is in accordance with archaeological observations from the area where the gem was found, suggesting that the owner was a representative of the privileged elite or perhaps even more accurately, a high-ranking officer in the Roman army, either visiting Olbia or stationed there (see above). It is also the better suggestion because Meleager was much more popular on gems and very often presented in the same pose as on the intaglio from Olbia, based on a sculptural prototype that we actually know existed. Moreover, the torch is lowered, suggesting sadness and death, as in the case of Eros-Thanatos discussed above. This detail would point to Meleager and his dismal fate, because in the case of Hymen the torch is always pointed up and another of his attributes, that is, a flower wreath, is also depicted. Yet, the fact that Hymen is often mentioned by ancient writers as one who died prematurely, actually like Meleager,<sup>52</sup> and, since in the Orphic legends he was given a new life by Asclepius, and, finally, because some regarded him as the son of Dionysus, who was considered a savior of souls, one cannot reject the possibility of it being his depiction on the Olbia gem.

Perhaps the concept of the brevity of life and hope for the afterlife was the other motivation the gem owner entertained when selecting the subject for his personal gem. It should be noted that the torch itself is often found on Roman gems. It is usually set together with a butterfly, reflecting the story of Cupid and Psyche. However, its metaphorical essence remains the same: it

<sup>52</sup> DE BELLEFONDS 1988, p. 583.

symbolizes the ultimate end of life or love, the constant attempt to enflame or destroy the soul<sup>53</sup> [Fig. 7]. The torch was also an attribute of Nemesis, the personification of revenge, justice and destiny.<sup>54</sup> Appearing alone on a gem, the object could stand for her and be a reminder of the inevitable destiny resolved by Nemesis. Thus, if Meleager's identity is accepted for the Olbia intaglio, the torch makes perfect semantic sense in reference to his story. Finally, Meleager and his story became a popular subject on Roman sarcophagus reliefs, especially during the Antonine period, and as convincingly argued by Lorenz, this was due to the fact that the mythological narrative was understood through the light of the everyday that is a reflection on earthly life and the afterlife following it.<sup>55</sup>

All in all, it seems that, in the case of the Olbian intaglio, regardless of the actual identification of the figure, the subject was selected specifically for personal reasons. On the one hand, it could have been meant for a personal wedding gift commemorating marriage, given to a lover. On the other hand, it could illustrate the outstanding qualities of the gem user in an effort to compare himself to the Greek hero Meleager and his *pietas* towards the gods and destiny, humbly remembering the fragility of human life and living with the hope for continuity in the afterlife. The affirmation of a perfect male body reflected in the intaglio's exquisite carving was surely an additional asset to its owner in his attempts at self-advertising.



Fig. 7. Intaglio, amethyst, 12 × 8 × 6 mm,  
last third of the first century BC, torch and butterfly.  
The National Museum in Kraków (since 1886),  
inv. no. MNK IV-Ew-Zł-122  
(photo © Photographic Studio of  
The National Museum in Kraków)

<sup>53</sup> ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 1998, no. 165; GOŁYŹNIAK 2017, no. 274 (with an extensive list of parallels).

<sup>54</sup> KARANASTASSI, RAUSA 1992, pp. 769–770.

<sup>55</sup> LORENZ 2011.

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