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CAST IN GLASS: AN INTAGLIO FROM HALMYRIS*

Abstract: The glass intaglio from Halmyris, a site in the north-eastern part of the province of Moesia Inferior, is apparently the first glyptic find made of glass paste discovered in northern Dobruja. The subject represented on the device is common: a satyr with a typical *pedum/lagobolon* and a bunch of grapes. The article discusses the dating of the piece, the intaglio production process, parallels for the representation and iconographic deviations from the classical model.

Key words: Moesia Inferior, Halmyris, glass intaglio, satyr with *pedum*, early Roman period

The extremely rich and varied archaeological material from Halmyris, a site near Murighiol in Tulcea county, includes a rare example of Roman glyptic art of the finest artistry. To date, the only other gem of the kind discovered in the region is a silver ring furnished with an almond-shaped bezel fitted with a carnelian gemstone decorated with the image of a standing Mars facing left, wearing a typical Corinthian type helmet, holding a spear in his left hand and a shield in the right.¹ Indeed, the number of glyptic finds from the region around the mouth of the Danube mouth is small² compared to the finds from the southern regions of Dobruja³ and generally Moesia Inferior.⁴

According to Mihail Zahariade in charge of the excavations at Halmyris, the gem in question was a stray find discovered south of the road from Murighiol to Dunavățul de Sus, in front of the first *vallum* belonging to the late Roman fortress. This area coincides with the so-called “civil settlement”, a large habitation site enclosing the fortress from the east, south and west. For the past few decades, the civilian settlement of Halmyris was connected with the early Roman *vicus classicorum*, the existence of which is attested in 10 epigraphic documents discovered in the late Roman enclosure walls of the fortress.⁵ However, chance discoveries of archaeological material over the years have demonstrated a long evolution of the civilian settlement through the late sixth century AD.⁶

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¹ COVACEF, ZAHARIADE 2009, p. 479, no. 5, pl. 3/1.

² SIMION 2005–2006, pp. 173–182.

³ COVACEF, CHERA 1977, pp. 191–202.

⁴ DIMITROVA-MILČEVA 1980; DIMITROVA-MILČEVA 1987, pp. 193–208.

⁵ SUCEVEANU, ZAHARIADE 1986, pp. 109–120; SUCEVEANU *et alii* 2003; ZAHARIADE, ALEXANDRESCU 2011. According to Florian MATEI-POPESCU (2016, p. 219), the votive altars were transported from Noviodunum to Halmyris.

⁶ NUȚU 2011, pp. 171–199.

The gem [Fig. 1] is oval in shape with bevelled sides and a flat upper face. The cross-section resembles Henig's *Flat 2*⁷ / Guiraud *P2* form.⁸ The material is a translucent glass paste⁹ and the process of production probably involved moulding. The translucency of the paste suggests that a dark substance was used to glue the gem to a ring bezel to achieve a marked contrast.¹⁰ According to one idea, natural water-sensitive resins were used to glue gems to bezels. It would explain why so many glyptic products were found in the drainage of Roman baths.¹¹

The image rendered on the device consists of a satyr walking/running to the left, slightly bent in front, holding a bunch of grapes in his right hand and the crook (*pedum* or *lagobolon*) in his left hand raised above his head. The figure may also suggest a dancing satyr, a common image on many gems.¹² The bottom end of the intaglio was chipped. The dimensions of the gem are 14 × 12 mm and 2 mm thick; the image measures 11 mm in height. Based on the general shape and on the small cracks noted on the sides, the gem was undoubtedly set in a ring, now lost. The find belongs to the collection of the Eco-Museum Research Institute in Tulcea, History & Archaeology Museum (inv. no. 50915).

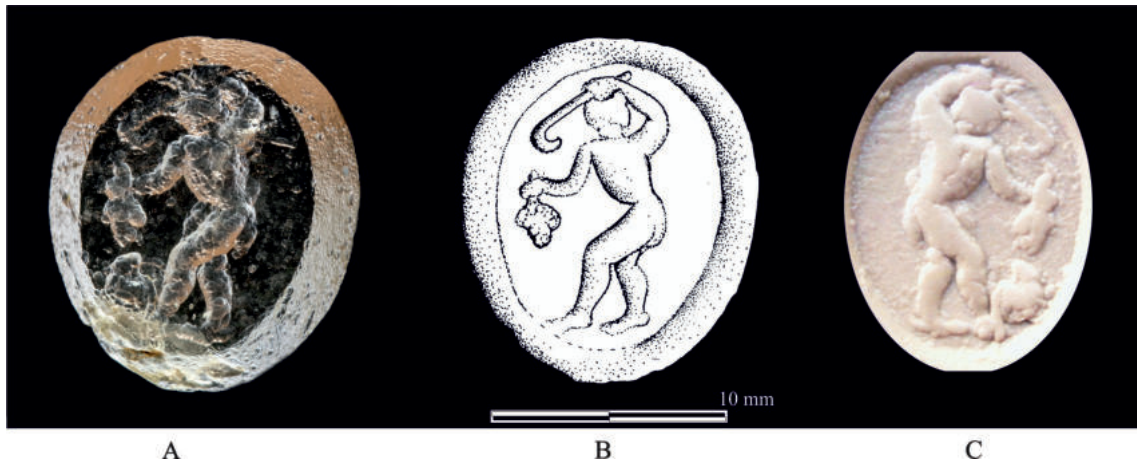


Fig. 1. The glass intaglio from Halmyris: A. photo; B. drawing; C. impression

The *pedum* and the bunch of grapes are typical of satyr representations. Satyrs have been linked to idyllic country life; they were associated with abundance and good things, and they were symbols of joviality and sexual pursuit. In glyptics, their representation comes in a variety of forms; gems bearing their image were discovered in all the Roman provinces without clustering in any specific region. They were immensely popular as Dionysus's companions. Joyce argued that

⁷ HENIG 1974, fig. 1.

⁸ GUIRAUD 1988, p. 29, fig. 9.

⁹ The intaglio was examined under an Optika SZR 10 stereo zoom microscope, which is ideal for laboratory research because of its outstanding optical properties. A large number of microscopic bubbles and some flaws of the glass casting process were revealed.

¹⁰ Or the item itself had a gold foil, see SPIER 1992, p. 145.

¹¹ ZIENKIEWICZ (1986, p. 118) stated this clearly when analysing the large number of gemstones retrieved from

the drainage of the internal bath building of the Second Augustan Legion at Caerleon. The presence of an extremely rich assemblage of 88 gemstones in the *frigidarium* drain was explained by the fact that the stones “were held in their rings only by some sort of adhesive — we may suppose by a natural resin or bitumen — and were not firmly clasped in any way by the ring itself”.

¹² As, for example, an unprovenanced gem of glass paste depicting a dancing satyr from Bulgaria: DIMITROVA-MILČEVA 1980, p. 59, no. 118.

Romans “loved their satyrs” and that the representations on intimate objects, like the gemstones set in fingerings, were meant to designate the owner and to disseminate the image itself.¹³ Finds from Britannia show a variety of representations on many types of stones.¹⁴ Thus, the subject is common in Roman glyptic art, but close parallels for the Halmyris intaglio are few to say the least.

Most gemstones with this representation were made of semiprecious stones. Glass paste as used in the Halmyris gem is recorded less frequently. The great demand for gems noted by scholars in the late Republican and early Imperial period must have had as a direct consequence difficulties in obtaining semiprecious stones, thus prompting lucrative fraud: false gemstones being made of glass paste.¹⁵ Not coincidentally, a growing demand revived glass gem production in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries¹⁶ based on imprints taken from ancient intaglios. This process was simple and inexpensive, and it required no artistry, the basics of moulding replacing the technique of carving in relief. A mould (of clay or more seldom of a copper alloy) would be made from an ancient gemstone¹⁷ and the less successful glass gems would have been finished by cutting.

Intaglios have their roots in Classical Greece and they grew increasingly popular in the Roman period, when a large spectrum of colours and motifs was employed, including cast-glass gems with bands of different colours or layered glass imitating *niccolo*.¹⁸ In this respect, the Borowski collection of ancient glass gems is a wonderful example of the variety of these minor arts.¹⁹ However, the quality of glass gems is in many cases distinctly inferior [Fig. 2] to that of the stone-made pieces, mainly because of crude moulds and air bubbles within the glass paste.²⁰

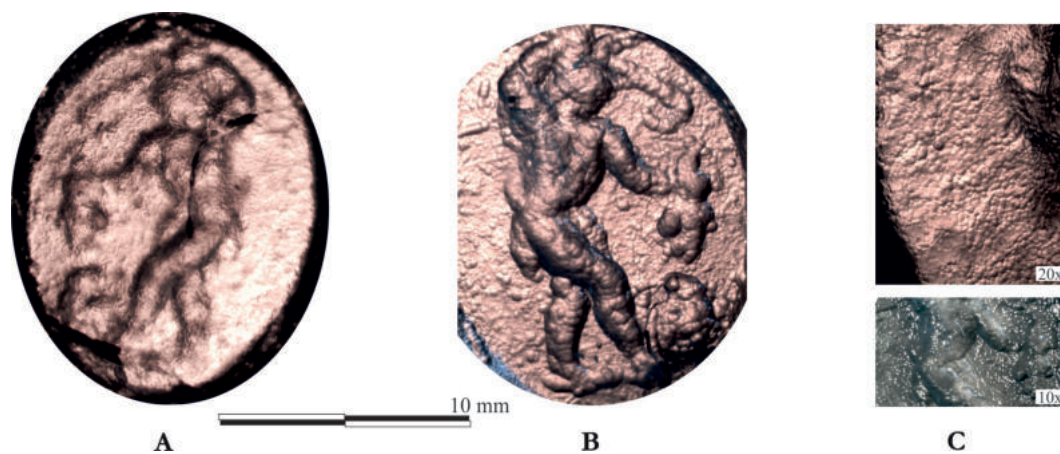


Fig. 2. The glass intaglio from Halmyris:
 A. microscopic view of the glass paste — positive;
 B. microscopic view of the details — negative;
 C. microscopic images of details, magnification 10/20 ×
 (trinocular stereo zoom microscope Optika SZR-10)

¹³ JOYCE 2002, pp. 120, 123.

¹⁴ HENIG 1974, p. 95.

¹⁵ SMITH 1888, p. 2; SENA CHIESA 1966, pp. 5–7.

¹⁶ HENIG 1994, p. 384.

¹⁷ See, for example, a copper alloy mould for glass gems from Gallia Belgica: GUIRAUD 1988, p. 32, fig. 11/d; also, JOHNS 1996, pp. 78–79. The evolution of various tech-

niques is presented in detail by ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2007, pp. 326–328.

¹⁸ BERNHEIMER 2002, pp. 229–230.

¹⁹ BERNHEIMER 2002, pp. 227–271. See also the paste intaglios from the Sa'd collection from Gadara (Jordan): HENIG, WHITING 1987, p. 38, nos. 397–406.

²⁰ GUIRAUD 1988, p. 58.

Parallels

Some details of the Halmyris paste representation are unique, but this is due to the production process. Obtaining a perfect mould for casting a paste intaglio is not an easy task and many of the known examples are crude, presenting serious deviations from the “classical” type. An image carved in a carnelian gemstone set in a gold ring found at Jászberény-Csegelapos (Szolnok district) in the *Barbaricum* is a close parallel to the Halmyris gem. The ring was part of a hoard of 44 precious objects that included a denarius issued by Antoninus Pius, but it was in itself earlier, coming from the first century AD. The representation consists of a dancing (or running?) satyr in profile, to the left, holding a *pedum* in the right hand and a bunch of grapes in the left.²¹ Another series of moulded glass gems (mainly *niccolo*) comes from Gallia, from contexts ranging from the first century AD to third century AD.²² The running or dancing pose can be observed on other gemstones, too, as in the case of two finds from Republican Rome now in the Thorvaldsen Museum collection.²³

Other examples of intaglios are illustrative of the original model used to cast the Halmyris paste. The excavations at Elms Farm in Heybridge, a late Iron Age and Roman settlement, brought to light an intaglio (11 × 9 mm), made of onyx, with a “blue upper face on a dark ground (*niccolo*)” showing a satyr walking to the right and holding the typical *pedum* in the right hand and a bunch of grapes in the left hand. Exceptionally, the backside of the intaglio bears the graffito EYTY (Eutyches), probably the name of the artisan.²⁴ It is a fairly close parallel for the Halmyris gem, but the satyr’s image is reversed and it shows him standing. An ancient gem similar to the Elms Farm intaglio and probably from the same period is set in the Enger reliquary in Berlin.²⁵ There are other examples, too, like the one housed in the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne.²⁶

Discussion

As only two intaglios have been discovered at Halmyris in almost 40 years of research, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the local glyptics on these grounds. The silver finger ring set with a carnelian gemstone depicting the God of War, Mars, in full body armour, holding a shield and spear, is easily associated with the military units assigned to this frontier post. Moreover, the context of the discovery suggests a military connection, because *Domus II* seems to have been a command building in a part of the local garrison.²⁷ Wherever a clear archaeological context was available, gemstones depicting the martial gods were related to the Roman army. There are examples from various provinces; suffice it to mention here a banded agate gemstone discovered at Aelia Capitolina/Jerusalem that was connected with the army²⁸ and a series of gemstones from the baths of the Second Augustan Legion at Caerleon²⁹ and from the Roman fort at Housesteads, on Hadrian’s Wall.³⁰

However, the gemstone discussed in this paper may be connected with the Bacchanalia, with abundance, sexual desire and a taste for idyllic rural life. No wonder, if we think of sailors³¹ who lived in the *vicus classicorum* or, generally, the civilian settlement, whose voyages on water made them wish for a safe return home. However, this claim must be regarded with caution, since gemstones reflect personal preferences and shed light on personal taste.

²¹ GESZTELYI 2000, pp. 42–43, no. 32.

²² GUIRAUD 1988, pp. 115–116, nos. 263–268, pl. 18.

²³ FOSSING 1929, p. 76, nos. 374, 376, pl. 5.

²⁴ HENIG 2015, no. 487.

²⁵ KORNBLUTH 2011, p. 251, fig. 12.

²⁶ KRUG 1981, p. 230, no. 317, pl. 112.

²⁷ COVACEF, ZAHARIADE 2009, p. 479, no. 5, pl. 3/1.

²⁸ PELEG 2003, pp. 56–57, figs. 1, 7.

²⁹ ZIENKIEWICZ 1986, p. 135, nos. 43–46, pl. 11.

³⁰ HENIG 2009, p. 470, nos. 423, 425, fig. 14.22.

³¹ A red jasper gemstone with the image of a satyr as a device was found at Vindolanda in a typical military milieu, see GREENE 2006, p. 97, no. 35.

Last but not least, the glass gem from Halmyris does not fall into either of the two groups distinguished for Gaul by H el ene Guiraud (colour paste or *niccolo* imitations).³² Its translucent paste is uncommon and, even if the motif may be traced to the first–second centuries AD, a general dating through the third century cannot be ruled out, at which time their production ceased in general.

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³² GUIRAUD 1988, pp. 58–59.

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Streszczenie

Odlane w szkle: intaglio z Halmyris

Przypadkowo znalezione odlane w szkle oczko pierścienia z Halmyris to zapewne jedyne do-tychczas znane znalezisko gliptyki z pasty szklanej pochodzące z północnej Dobrudży. Tematem przedstawienia jest dość powszechne przedstawienie satyra trzymającego typowe *pedum/lagobolon* oraz kiść winogron. Artykuł omawia analogie do tego przedstawienia, datowanie przedmiotu, proces produkcji oraz odstępstwa od klasycznych wzorców ikonograficznych.

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