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Elements of Gnostic Concepts in Depictions on Magical Gems

ABSTRACT

Magical gems, also called Gnostic gems, are dated mainly to the 1st-3rd century. The depictions, symbols and inscriptions on them often refer to Gnosticism, a religious-philosophical current very popular in that period. The relics discussed were amulets. The syncretic iconographic solutions as well as the words and inscriptions on them were of great importance. *Voces magicae*, the names of gods, and also words unintelligible in any language frequently appear. In order to maintain secrecy they were often written in code and clandestine names were used. To reach god, it was necessary to overstep the rules of ordinary language. Similarly to the Egyptian or Gnostic tradition, in Greco-Roman magic it was believed that words and names had power. On gems, just as in magical papyri or on magical tablets the so-called *charakteres* were also used, i.e. symbols inspired by shapes of the Greek, or less frequently the Semitic, alphabet used by magi, astrologists and Gnostics.

The kinds of depictions and ideas conveyed on magical gems are connected with Gnosticism. It might be stated that followers of this trend could also be among the producers of the amulets, but too little is still known about it, because evidence of Gnosticism was destroyed after it was regarded as heresy.

KEYWORDS

magical gems, Gnostic, Roman period, iconography

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Magical gems, also called Gnostic gems, are amulets produced in the first centuries of our era. They were made of semi-precious stones with syncretic depictions on their surfaces referring to many cultures and philosophical-religious currents. The interpretation of some effigies, inscriptions and signs on the amulets still provokes discussion, as does the location of their manufacture.

In the first centuries of our era, religious syncretism and mystery cults continued to develop. Many eschatological sects sprang up in Palestine.¹ Christianity and Gnostic sects were gaining in popularity. The sources on the Gnostic system are quite scant. The Church Fathers regarded it as heresy, hence all writings and traces of its followers were destroyed. What has survived are mainly excerpts quoted by Christians with the aim of criticising Gnostics, and rare manuscripts. A deep syncretic aspect is visible in Gnosticism; Babylonian astrological doctrines, Iranian theology, elements of Jewish tradition, Christian eschatology, oriental mythology, and Platonic terms and notions can be found in it.² Many motifs and references to this system are visible on magical gems. Perhaps the first Gnostic sects are what the relics referring to different religions as well as to astrology and magic at the same time should be associated with. There were many Gnostic sects and their programmes, some differing markedly from each other. Valentinus' system gained considerable popularity.³ The founder of the movement received his education in Alexandria and he later taught in Rome. Gnosticism gained popularity because it met people's expectations. Characterised by mysteriousness and religious syncretism, it made men aware of their divine origin and guaranteed salvation through knowledge. The so-called Hermetic texts, written in Greek and composed in Egypt, are connected with Gnosticism. The author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*⁴ referred to the knowledge of Egyptian priests, Platonism, Jewish-Iranian esotericism, as well as to astrological traditions.⁵ The work had a strong influence on the development of esoteric thought. Gnostic texts written in Coptic found in Nag Hammadi (Chenoboskion) in southern Egypt prove that various sects were growing in the land of Pharaohs.⁶ In Alexandria, Jewish theosophical and theological doctrines as well as the Gnostic stream of Christianity

¹ R. M. Grant, *Gnosticismo e Cristianesimo primitivo*, Bologna 1970.

² H. Jonas, *Religia gnozy*, Kryspinów 1994, p. 49.

³ H. Jonas, op. cit., pp. 189–190.

⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum*, eds. A. D. Nock, A. J. Festugière, Paris 1945–1954.

⁵ J. Lindsay, *The origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, London 1970, pp. 159–193.

⁶ J. R. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Leiden 1998; E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?*, "Church History" 1979, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 129–141.

reached a high level. Iranian religion had a considerable impact on the development of new cults. The Ophites also referred to the Zoroastrianism cult. As followers of one of the Gnostic Iranian-Jewish sects, they depicted the soul of the world in the form of Leviathan, a cosmic serpent biting its own tail.⁷ According to them, the world was created by Ialdabaoth whose name is also found on magical gems.

Frequently featured on gems is the anguipede, or snake-legged: a syncretic deity with a human body, rooster's head and legs in the form of two snakes⁸ (Pl. I, 1). He originates from Gnosticism. Wearing a Roman military dress and holding a whip and a shield in hands, the figure is of belligerent nature. Many inscriptions accompany his image on gems, with the names Iao and Abraxas appearing most often. Every iconographic element, that is the rooster's head, snake's legs and soldier's clothes, has its own symbolism, but it remains unknown exactly who is hidden in this form. Already in the 16th century, attempts were made to explain the origin and functions of this deity.⁹ He was identified with the name Abraxas often accompanying him. Bonner suggests, however, that the name Abraxas can also be found with the images of other deities, so perhaps it is a "power word."¹⁰ Magical papyri indicate that it is a name of god.¹¹ Next to the anguipede one more inscription appears: 'Ιάω'. The name reoccurs more often than Abraxas, but it can also be found next to other deities. Appearing in papyri, it is identified with the Jewish god Yahweh.¹² Perhaps the names are of an apotropaic nature. According to Basilides, one of the first representatives of Gnosis, Abrasax (Abraxas) is a Jewish god, the leader of angels who created people. The numerical value of this

⁷ A. Welburn, *Początki chrześcijaństwa*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 68–70.

⁸ A. Le Glay, *Abraxas*, "Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae" (LIMC) 1981, Vol. I, pp. 2–7; M. P. Nilsson, *The Anguipede of the Magical Amulets*, "Harvard Theological Review" (HThR) 1951, Vol. 44, pp. 61–164; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco Roman Period*, Vol. 2, New York 1956, pp. 245–258; S. Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen. Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Stein der Antike und Neuzeit*, Berlin 2004, pp. 105–113.

⁹ J. Chiflet (J. Macarius), *Abraxas, seu Apistopistus; quae est antiquaria de gemmis Basilidianis disquisitio. Accedit Abraxas Proteus, seu multiformis gemmae Basilidianae portentosa varietas*, Antwerpiae 1657; E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien III*, München 1991, pp. 170–171.

¹⁰ C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor 1950, p. 136.

¹¹ K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri* (PGM), Index, 212, and VIII 49, 61, XIII 84, 466, 597.

¹² C. Bonner, op. cit., p. 126; E. R. Goodenough, op. cit., pp. 251–252; S. Michel, *Bunte Steine – dunkle Bilder: "Magische Gemmen"*, München 2001, p. 132.

name is 365 and equals the number of the heavens; $\alpha - 1$, $\beta - 2$, $\rho - 100$, $\alpha - 1$, $\sigma - 200$, $\alpha - 1$, $\xi - 60$. It was a paraphrase of the Jewish name Yahweh written with four letters; arba = abra. The number 365 corresponds with the number of days in the year, with seven letters also connected with seven planets and the seven days of the week.¹³ On amulets with the anguipede a palindrome: ABΛANAΘANAΛBA also appears frequently.

The snake-like form was characteristic of many deities from the Egyptian, Greek, and Eastern culture alike. The serpent was worshiped by the Orphics; for the Ophites and Naassene Gnostics it was a medium of revelation and a messenger of the highest god, as well as a symbol of redemptive powers.¹⁴ The depiction of the anguipede can be associated with Hellenistic Giants, the effigies on the Pergamon Altar.¹⁵ The idea of God as a giant was known to the Chaldean magi.¹⁶ The name of the Archangel Gabriel is translated “God is the strength” or “God’s rooster.”¹⁷ He is an angel of war. The Ethiopian Book of Enoch (20:7)¹⁸ mentions his snake-like legs: “Gabriel is set over the serpent.” With a whip as his solar attribute, Gabriel is a herald of light, brightness, sometimes an angel of fire. Some scholars believe that the figure of the anguipede is a kind of ideogram used to represent the Jewish Adam and can be identified with Gibbor, whose name is translated as “giant”: γίγας.¹⁹ On one of the gems with the anguipede an inscription of this kind can be seen: γιγ / αντ / ορήκ / τα.²⁰ One of the interpretations suggests that the deity was created by angels. The Book of Genesis (6.4) tells a story about angels, the children of god; they united with women who gave birth to sons called GiBoR or GiBWR, which means a hero or great man.²¹ The angels confided to the

¹³ S. Michel, *Bunte Steine...*, op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁴ T. Rasmus, *The Serpent in Gnostic and Related Texts*, [in:] *L'Évangile selon Thomas et les textes de Nag Hammadi: Colloque International*, eds. L. Painchaud, P. H. Poirier, Paris 2007, pp. 417–472.

¹⁵ G. Lippold, *Gemmen und Kameen des Altertums et der Neuzeit*, Stuttgart 1922, Pl. LXXV, No. 6–9.

¹⁶ A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche*, 49–113, [in:] *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum, Bollettino di Numismatica, Monografia 8.2.I*, ed. A. Mastrocinque, Roma 2003, p. 88.

¹⁷ F. M. Schwartz, J. H. Schwartz, *Engraved Gems in the Collection of the American Numismatic Society: I Ancient Magical Amulets*, “Museum Notes. American Numismatic Society” 1979, No. 24, p. 156.

¹⁸ H. Philipp, *Mira et Magica. Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen. Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Berlin Charlottenburg*, Mainz am Rhein 1986, p. 102.

¹⁹ A. A. Barb, *Abraxas - Studien*, [in:] *Hommages à Waldemar Deonna*, “Collection Latomus” 1957, No. 28, pp. 76–79.

²⁰ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes. Bibliothèque Nationale. Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques*, Paris 1964, p. 29, No. 12.

²¹ A. A. Barb, op. cit., pp. 76–79; A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 85.

women the mysteries of magic, astrology, nature and secrets of stones.²² The connection between the anguipede and angels is proven by their names appearing on the gems with his image. The Samaritans also used the epithet: YHWH GBWR BMLHMH – “Yahweh, the hero of war.”²³ They accepted the old Jewish cults, including the cult of a deity in the form of a rooster. Known in solar symbolism, the bird greets first rays of the sun with its crowing, similarly to the shrieking baboons in Egyptian art. In Persia it was a sacred bird with the power of light. Ahura Mazda is also called the rooster.²⁴ Zoroastrianism strongly influenced Mithraism, Judaism, Gnosis and Christianity.²⁵ In the Greco-Roman period, many heterodox factions sprang up within the Jewish religion. Because of persecutions, representatives of new denominations used to escape to Egypt where they spread their faith. Probably the figure of the anguipede is a result of the syncretism of Hellenistic magic and Gnosticism.²⁶ In one figure, two contradictory elements were combined: the rooster is a solar animal, while the snake is connected with the earth. The deity represents solar, military, and chthonic aspects alike.

The clothes of the figure can be interpreted in different ways. They refer to depictions of Egyptian or Syrian deities, Roman emperors or Jewish angels. They could also have an apotropaic function.

The figure of the anguipede is shown frontally with his head in profile. Sometimes under his image or on the shield there is an inscription ‘Ιάω’, and ‘Abraxas’ on the reverse.²⁷ He usually wears armour or only a skirt. However, sometimes he is dressed in a coat.²⁸ He also appears in a legionary tunic, sometimes with a belt and a sword attached hanging over his shoulder.²⁹ Examining the skirts worn by the god, several designs can be distinguished. Perhaps it is connected with the place where the amulets were produced. On one gem he is shown wearing an Egyptian skirt with a palindrome on the

²² A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 88.

²³ J. A. Montgomery, *The Samaritans*, Philadelphia 1907, p. 276; A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 87.

²⁴ C. Bonner, op. cit., p. 126.

²⁵ M. Boyce, *Zaratusztrianie*, tłum. Z. Józefowicz-Czabak, B. J. Korzeniowski, Łódź 1988, pp. 134–135.

²⁶ C. Bonner, op. cit., p. 135.

²⁷ J. Śliwa, *Egyptian Scarabs and Magical Gems from the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński*. „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego” 1989, CMXVII, nr 96, pp. 73–74.

²⁸ P. M. A. Fossing, *Catalogue of the Antique Engraved Gems and Cameos, The Thorvaldsen Museum*, Copenhagen 1929, p. 249, No. 1862.

²⁹ B. Nardelli, *Gemme magiche della Dalmazia*, [in:] *Gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., pp. 181–194, No. 5.

reverse side: Ablanathanalba.³⁰ The deity is armed with a shield and a whip. The whip probably has an apotropaic function, or else it indicates a connection with the Greek god Helios and emphasises the sun cult. The round shield carried by the deity was popular in Roman infantry in the early empire.³¹

On gems with a depiction of the anguipede there are many different inscriptions. The names of archangels often appear: Michael, Gabriel and Uriel, sometimes also Raphael.³² Occasionally, the names of archangels can be found next to names known from the Old Testament: Adonai and Sabaoth (Sabaoth is a Greek version of the Hebrew “Lord of hosts.”)³³ They also appear in Gnosticism as names of the demiurge’s sons. Every archon had his own heaven, angels, and archangels, his own domain of rule over the world.³⁴ There are also other names, known from magical papyri: Εἰάω, a variant of Iao,³⁵ or Αἰλωέ as Ελωε³⁶ which resembles the name of one of the archons: Elaoi. Among numerous inscriptions there are also those connected with the sun, such as Σεμεσιλάμψ³⁷ or φρη,³⁸ or with solar deities, for example the formula BAINWWWX.³⁹

On one of the gems, the anguipede is surrounded by the Ouroboros.⁴⁰ A snake eating its own tail often runs through various cultures.⁴¹ The symbol of Ouroboros was widespread in the Greco-Roman period; the Gnostics used it in their theories and it also found its place in alchemy (Pl. I, 2). A snake shedding its skin was supposed to be a symbol of revival, eternity and infinity. Everything ends and begins in its mouth, which symbolises endless cyclicality. In Gnosis, just as previously for the Egyptians, it formed a border around the

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 182–183, No. 1.

³¹ It is found on numerous relics, for example coins with images of tropaia; it was also carried by Mars, Victoria, Roma and Minerva.

³² A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., pp. 35–36, No. 30.

³³ M. Simon, *Bunte Steine...*, op. cit., pp. 132–133.

³⁴ K. Rudolph, *Gnoza*, tłum. G. Sowiński, Kraków 1995, p. 71.

³⁵ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., p. 30, No. 15; K. Preisendanz, op. cit., Index 219a.

³⁶ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., p. 29, No. 14; K. Preisendanz, op. cit., Index 168.

³⁷ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., p. 27, No. 7.

³⁸ E. D’Amicone, *Les intailles magiques du Musée National à Rome*, [in:] *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique*, ed. J. Ries, Louvain 1982, p. 80.

³⁹ H. Philipp, op. cit., p. 104, No. 164.

⁴⁰ C. Bonner, op. cit., p. 281, No. 172.

⁴¹ L. Kákosy, *Uroboros*, “Lexikon der Ägyptologie” (LÄ) 1986, VI, eds. W. Helck, E. Otto, pp. 886–897; G. Bąkowska, *Ouroboros on Magical Gems. Some Remarks*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Second Central European Conference of Young Egyptologists, Egypt 2001: Perspectives of Research Warsaw 5-7 March 2001*, ed. J. Popielska-Grzybowska, “Światowit” Supplement Series E: Egyptology, Vol. III, Warsaw 2003, pp. 13–16.

well-ordered world, separating it from chaos. A snake eating its own tail is a metaphor for human life.

The anguipede also appears on gems with Bes Pantheos (Pl. I, 3). An Egyptian god warding off evil and a protector of children, Bes Pantheos is a syncretic deity incorporating many aspects.⁴² The task of the deity was to protect the owner of the amulet from all evil. The reverse of one of the amulets shows a creature with snake-like legs.⁴³ Another gem depicts an effigy of Pantheos with a rooster head.⁴⁴ The deity has two pairs of wings and one pair of hands with a sceptre in the right. His feet and knees are decorated with plumes. The figure is standing on the Ouroboros with an inscription “Iao” inside its body. On gems with Pantheos the following inscriptions refer to Gnosticism: the expression βαινχωωων – “the soul of darkness.”⁴⁵ On a gem from Vienna there is an inscription: “Now (and) ever I shall be the victor.”⁴⁶ In another instance, the names of angels were inscribed on the reverse: “Michael, Gabriel, Koustiel (perhaps Ariel), Raphael.”⁴⁷ The name Iao also appears.⁴⁸

Egyptian and Gnostic traditions are apparent on an amulet depicting Thoth in the form of a man with an ibis head and two pairs of wings on his shoulders⁴⁹ (Pl. I, 4). Standing on the Ouroboros, the god is holding a scorpion in one hand, and a caduceus, an attribute of Hermes in the other. He is wearing a short Egyptian skirt. The depiction is surrounded by an inscription emphasizing the gnostic nature of the amulet: Abraxas, Iao. The Moon God is also accompanied by Chabrach, a formula connected with Iao.⁵⁰

In the Hellenistic period a syncretic deity Thoth-Hermes was born in Egypt. On the reverse of one gem with his depiction there is a magical-gnostic inscription: Δαρυνγω βαινχωχι θυσορ βαινχωωχω, surrounding an image of

⁴² C. Bonner, op. cit., 156–160; G. Bąkowska, *Bes Pantheos. Some Remarks Concerning his Representation on Magical Gems*, [in:] *Proceedings of the First Central European Conference of Young Egyptologists, Egypt 1999: Perspectives of Research Warsaw 7-9 June 1999*, ed. J. Popielska-Grzybowska “Światowit” Supplement Series E: Egyptology, Vol. I, Warsaw 2002, pp. 11–14, Pl. 1–3.

⁴³ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., pp. 137–138, No. 177.

⁴⁴ H. Philipp, op. cit., p. 101, No. 156.

⁴⁵ E. Zwierlein-Diehl, op. cit., p. 166, No. 2218.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 165, No. 2217.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ O. Névéro, *Gemmes, bagues et amulettes magiques du sud de l'URSS, Gemmes, bagues et amulettes magiques du sud de l'URSS*, [in:] *Hommages à Maarten*, ed. M. J. Vermasere, “Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain” (EPRO) 1978, No. 68/2, pp. 833–848, pl. CLXVII–CLXXVIII, p. 837, No. 13.

⁵⁰ C. Bonner, op. cit., pp. 260–261, No. 46.

a key.⁵¹ It is probably the key to the world of the dead. Because of his wisdom and magical power, Thoth-Hermes received the appellation “Thrice Great”, Greek: Trismegistos.⁵² He was believed to be a prophet who possessed the great wisdom of the Egyptian priests. The authorship of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was attributed to him, while in fact it was a collection of tractates of various authorship, written in Greek. They were of a theological-philosophical nature and referred to medicine, astrology, geography and magic. One of the most famous tractates is *Poimandres*.⁵³ A Gnostic text without any links with Christianity, it describes cosmogony and the history of mankind, expressing the mood of the epoch.

Jewish sources identified Thoth with Moses, while Ethiopian Copts and Gnostics compared him to Christ.⁵⁴ Some look for characteristics linking him with the Archangel Michael.⁵⁵

On amulets, the name Chnoubis (Χνουβις) is often repeated, which is a Greek version of the word Chnum⁵⁶ (Pl. I, 5). It was the name of an Egyptian god worshipped as the maker. The deity is also connected with the snake-creator, Kneph/Kematef popular in Greco-Roman Egypt, or the Gnostic demiurge.⁵⁷ Chnoubis appears in the Gnostic sect of Ophites.⁵⁸ The serpent Chnoubis sitting on a lotus flower is sometimes identified with Harpocrates and Ialdabaoth.⁵⁹ The latter was considered by Gnostics to be the demiurge, the first ruler with the face of a lion and snake, he was also called Ariel because he used to take on the form of a lion.⁶⁰ The figure is associated with Egyptian and Jewish tradition as well as with Gnosticism and astrology.⁶¹

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 261, No. 47.

⁵² J. Lindsay, op. cit., pp. 159–193; K. Seligmann, *Lo specchio della magia*, Firenze 1965, pp. 120–125.

⁵³ H. Jonas, op. cit., p. 160.

⁵⁴ G. Mussies, *The Interpretation Judaica of the Thot – Hermes*, [in:] *Studies in Egyptian Religion dedicated to Professor Jan Zandee*, eds. M. Heerma van Voss, D. J. Hoens, G. Mussies, D. Van Der Plas, H. Te Velde, Leiden 1982, pp. 102–105.

⁵⁵ G. Lanczkowski, *Thot und Michael*, “Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo” (MDAIK) 1965, 14, pp. 117–120.

⁵⁶ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., pp. 179–181.

⁵⁷ M. Henig, *Classical Gems Ancient and Modern Intaglios and Cameos in the Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 226–227.

⁵⁸ S. Michel, *Der NYXEYA BOABAX – Logos*, [in:] *Gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 129.

⁵⁹ A. Mastrocinque, *Pregare Ialdabaoth (Il dio seduto sul settimo cielo nelle preghiere magiche)*, [in:] *Modi di comunicazione tra il divino e l'umano*, ed. G. Sfamini Gasparro, Cosenza 2005, pp. 191–216.

⁶⁰ K. Rudolph, op. cit., pp. 70–74.

⁶¹ S. Michel, *Der NYXEYA BOABAX...*, op. cit., pp. 128–132.

Chnoubis is a syncretic figure, not yet fully identified, strongly connected with the solar cult, which is indicated not only by the iconography, but also by the inscriptions. Among the inscriptions the word GIGANT (ΓΙΓΑΝΤ)⁶² very often appears, which is also found on gems with the anguipede; the word is connected both with the Jewish tradition and Gnosticism. The connection between Chnoubis with the anguipede and Heliorus indicates perhaps that gems with these scenes are connected with one community knowing each of the iconographic symbols. Perhaps in the form of the deities a shared idea is hidden with one corresponding deity.

Harpocrates was a very popular deity in the Greco-Roman period, worshipped mainly in Alexandria.⁶³ Numerous depictions of the god can be found in the area of the whole Roman Empire, where he was identified with Apollo, Helios, Heracles, Eros and sometimes also with Cronus. In the Gnostic theology and art he was compared to Christ. In one of the Gnostic doctrines, Isis functions as Sophia, and Harpocrates as Logos, while from Epiphanius' texts it is known that in the 4th century for Alexandrian pagans Horus/Harpocrates was Aion.⁶⁴ A Gnostic sect also existed whose followers called themselves Harpokratianoï, or Carpocraziani; it is possible that they worshipped Harpocrates.⁶⁵

A serpent is sometimes visible in the scenes on magical gems with Harpocrates on a lotus (Pl. I, 6). According to some scholars this scene shows one of the decanes from Dendera,⁶⁶ but this depiction can also be connected with Gnostic doctrines.⁶⁷ A phoenix is a frequent motif on gems. The symbolism of its sacrifice and resurrection was adopted by Christianity. The bird played an important role in Gnosticism.⁶⁸ In astrology, it symbolises the planet Venus. In alchemy, the colour red, which is connected with regeneration and life, corresponds with this. Red was also the colour of gems with a depiction of a phoenix carved in hematites. On gems the phoenix is usually shown on an altar, above it there is a scarab with its wings spread.⁶⁹ The phoenix de-

⁶² M. Henig, *Classical Gems...*, op. cit., pp. 227–228, No. 501.

⁶³ D. Meeks, *Harpokrates*, “Lexikon der Ägyptologie” (LÄ) 1977, II, pp. 1004–1012.

⁶⁴ R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco – Roman World*, New York 1971, pp. 210–221.

⁶⁵ A. Mastrocinque, *Pregare Ialdabaoth...*, op. cit., pp. 191–216.

⁶⁶ S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum*, Band I, II, London 2001, pp. 70–71, No. 107, and pp. 73–74, No. 111.

⁶⁷ A. Mastrocinque, *Pregare Ialdabaoth...*, op. cit., pp. 191–216.

⁶⁸ M. Tardieu, *Pour un phénix gnostique*, “Revue de l'histoire de religions” (RHR) 1973, CLXXXIII, pp. 182–184.

⁶⁹ Á. M. Nagy, *Gemmae magicae selectae. Sept notes sur l'interprétation des gemmes magiques*, [in:] *Gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 162.

picted on an altar has a ball under its legs.⁷⁰ Perhaps its power over the world is shown in this way. On the reverse sides of these amulets, the word *πεπτε* (*pepte*), “to digest”, can be found as well as a symbol connected with Chnoubis: SSS crossed out.⁷¹ The story of a long life of phoenix and its rising from the ashes suggests the reason why the bird was used in medical magic.⁷²

Also connected with the idea of revival is a scene showing a baboon worshipping Osiris, with an inscription typical of Gnostic amulets: IAW CA-BAWΘ ABACAZ.⁷³ Names of Gnostic deities⁷⁴ or a popular palindrome: ABAANAΘANAABA⁷⁵ often appear on gems with a depiction of a baboon. Most frequently it is shown in a standing position, ithyphallic, with its front paws raised, sometimes its tail is replaced with a depiction of a snake.⁷⁶ It usually has a solar disc on its head, sometimes a uraeus or the Atef crown. It is often accompanied by a star and a moon. The reverse sides of the gems are blank or covered with inscriptions, while some-times there are the *charak-teres* signs. Most often the inscriptions refer to magic and Egyptian tradition. Some of them are found in magical papyri.⁷⁷

Aion appears on gems too.⁷⁸ He is also mentioned in Hermetic texts.⁷⁹ Sometimes he is interpreted as Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), the evil incarnate, an enemy of Ahura Mazda. He was shown in the form of a man with a lion’s head, surrounded by a snake. Ahriman is also mentioned in Gnostic texts, where he is identified with Ialdabaoth.⁸⁰ Alexandrian Aion is also named Ialdabaoth. This god was identified with Mitra, who is in turn identified with Osiris, Cronus and Chronos.⁸¹ Aion as the god of the universe was also compared to Ouroboros.⁸² The depictions of Aion on amulets are accompanied by the inscriptions Iao or Abraxas.⁸³

⁷⁰ R. Van Den Broek, *The myth of phoenix according to classical and early Christian tradition*, “Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain” 1972, Vol. 24, Pl. VIII, fig. 5, 6, 9 and Pl. VI, fig. 8, 9.

⁷¹ C. Bonner, op. cit., p. 270, No. 106.

⁷² G. Bąkowska, *Gemmy medyczne*, “Meander” 2000, nr 6, pp. 553–568.

⁷³ A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, op. cit., p. 78, No. 92.

⁷⁴ H. Philipp, op. cit., p. 98, No. 148.

⁷⁵ S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen*, op. cit., p. 97, No. 151.

⁷⁶ M. Henig, *Classical Gems*, op. cit., pp. 229–230, No. 505.

⁷⁷ K. Preisendanz, op. cit., VIII, 83.

⁷⁸ D. Levi, *Aion*, “Hesperia” 1944, XIII, p. 269–274.

⁷⁹ L. Kákosy, *Osiris – Aion*, “Oriens Antiquus” (OA) 1964, Vol. 3, pp. 15–24.

⁸⁰ R. M. Grant, op. cit., p. 63.

⁸¹ L. Kákosy, *Osiris*, op. cit., pp. 15–16.

⁸² M. G. Lancellotti, *Il serpente ouroboros nelle gemme magiche*, [in:] *Gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., pp. 75–77.

⁸³ A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul mitraismo. Il Mitraismo e la magia*, Roma 1998, p. 28.

Ialdabaoth, the most important Gnostic demiurge, the creator of people, is also identified with the god Serapis. On amulets with a depiction of Serapis, appeals to “One Zeus Serapis Iao (Yahweh)” appear, or those saying that Serapis Iao is the only god.⁸⁴ On gems with Serapis there are appeals to gods known from the Gnostic and Jewish religions, the word ABPA is also Semitic.

Amulets with a depiction of Solomon as a rider are strongly represented. Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel, was considered to be a great sage, magus and exorcist.⁸⁵ He is mentioned in magical papyri, and also in Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi.⁸⁶ Flavius Josephus talks about him as an exorcist, also portraying his healing abilities.⁸⁷ Some of the amulets with Solomon’s depiction belong to a category of medical gems similar to those with a depiction of the uterus.⁸⁸ For a long time a representation of the uterus was a riddle for archaeologists. Many interpretations were proffered of varying degrees of credibility. The meaning of the amulet was regarded as mystical; the representations used to be associated with Gnostic doctrines. Authors wrote about *psychostasis*, about a vessel of sins.⁸⁹ The symbolism of the uterus also appears in Gnostic cosmology.⁹⁰

On magical gems there are some inscriptions referring to Gnosticism. Adonai, “My Lord,”⁹¹ is known from the Old Testament. In Gnosticism, Adonai is an angel with the face of a monkey. In the Testament of Solomon he is the first Decane of lion. The name Iao is identified with the Jewish god Yahweh and found in the Bible, rabbinic texts, in magical papyri and in Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi. Ialdabaoth, a word of Semitic origin, probably means: “the begetter of Sabaoth” (i.e. Abaoth) that is, of heavenly powers.⁹² It is an

⁸⁴ See: A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., pp. 70–71; S. Michel, *Bunte Steine...*, op. cit., pp. 28–29, No. 13.

⁸⁵ D. C. Duling, *Solomon, Exorcism and the Son of David*, “Harvard Theological Review” (HThR) 1975, Vol. 68, pp. 235–252.

⁸⁶ A. Cosentino, *La tradizione del re Salomone come mago ed esorcista*, [in:] *Gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., pp. 41–59.

⁸⁷ Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VIII, ch. II, part 5, [in:] *Josephus Complete Work*, trans. W. Whiston, Michigan 1978.

⁸⁸ G. Bąkowska, *Gemmy*, op. cit., pp. 553–568.

⁸⁹ J. Matter, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme*, Paris 1828, pp. 52–53, Pl. II. C.

⁹⁰ A. A. Barb, *Diva Matrix*, “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes” (JWCI) 1953, Vol. 16, pp. 197–198, footnote 72.

⁹¹ S. Michel, *Bunte Steine...*, op. cit., pp. 129–130; K. Preisendanz, op. cit., Index 213; H. Philipp, op. cit. p. 84, No. 52.

⁹² A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sulle gemme magiche*, IV–VI, “Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik” (ZPE) 1998, 122, pp. 105–118; A. Mastrocinque, *Perseus and Sabaoth in Magic Arts and Oriental Beliefs*, [in:] *Mito y Magia en Grecia y Roma*, eds. E. Suárez de la Torre, A. P. Jiménez, Barcelona 2013.

esoteric paraphrase of the god of Jews. The name Iαλδαβαώθ was used by Gnostics, both Sethians and Ophites.

The magi knew the language of the gods and demons. To reach a god, it was necessary to overstep the rules of ordinary language, hence the conventions and principles of Greek were disobeyed, although the letters of the language were used. Gods could only be addressed in their own language. Names, appeals, symbols were meant for them while man lacked the ability to understand the language of gods. Similarly as in Egyptian or Gnostic tradition, in Greco-Roman magic it was also believed that words and names had power.⁹³ On gems, in magical papyri and on tablets the so-called *charakteres* were also used – symbols inspired by the shapes of letters of Greek and, less frequently, the Semitic alphabet, used by magi, astrologists and Gnostics.⁹⁴ In magical papyri they are considered to be symbols of a god's power.⁹⁵ On gems they are often repeated three times. The majority of them still remain a riddle. The Greek X, a universal sign associated with the cosmos or human soul, popular among Christians and Gnostics, was believed to be the cross of Moses made of two bronze snakes, the cross of Christ or a cross containing Pleroma, separating it from the material world.⁹⁶ The Book of Jeū describes the so-called “marks” – “seals” a soul of a dead man must be given to pass through each eon and reach the highest god.⁹⁷ The soul should know the correct incantations and secret names to defeat the archons who strove not to allow the soul through successive eons. Gnostics used identification symbols – “seals,” amulets, as well as numerous magical sentences and mysterious ceremonies.⁹⁸

In Greco-Roman voces text manipulations are visible; letters are arranged to form different figures (a column – plinthion, a wing – pterygion, a triangle (a pyramid) – klima, an upside down triangle (an upside down pyramid) = heart – kardia).⁹⁹ Anagrams were used: words with letters or syllables reordered (for example AIW as an anagram of IAW – Iaô), palindromes (from the Greek “running back”): words or whole phrases which can also be read backwards (for example Αβλναθαναλβα); logoi: formulas composed of several voces. AEEIIHHHHIIIIIOOOOOWWWWWW – such a line of letters can be found in, among others, magical papyri. Each of the seven letters corre-

⁹³ Y. Koenig, *Magie et Magiciens dans l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris 1994, pp. 245–250.

⁹⁴ A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., pp. 90–98.

⁹⁵ K. Preisendanz, op. cit., LVII, 27.

⁹⁶ A. Mastrocinque, *Le gemme gnostiche...*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁹⁷ K. Rudolph, op. cit., pp. 153–154.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, p. 152.

⁹⁹ R. Gordon, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

sponds to one planet: A is Mercury, E is Venus, H is Sun, I is Saturn, O is Mars, Y is Moon, W is Jupiter.¹⁰⁰

It is believed that Alexandria was the main centre of magic/Gnostic gem manufacture.¹⁰¹ This is where in the 2nd century AD, Gnosis evolved as a product of Hellenistic syncretism; Greek, Jewish, Iranian, and Christian influences are visible within it. Texts found in Nag Hammadi show how Jewish concepts and Greek philosophy affected the development. In Alexandria Basilides and Valentinus taught – great Gnostics, creators of philosophical systems whose influence is visible on magical gems. Followers of Gnosticism were known for their esoteric observances, the use of mysterious symbols and Egyptian iconography in their depictions. Gnostics drew largely on Judaism. Perhaps the names of Jewish angels appearing on gems have a Gnostic meaning or refer to both religions. It is also distinctive that names known from the Bible and the Apocryphon of John are used, which also appear in Hermetic texts, and especially in Gnostic texts. These names are Iao, Abraxas, Adonoi Sabaoth among others. Also some *charakteres* signs are found in the Gnostic Book of Jeū. Secret signs treated as seals helped the souls of Gnosticism devotees to pass through successive eons and reach the transcendent god. In Gnosticism this highest god and his name, both hidden, were objects of manifold exploration.

The kinds of depictions and ideas conveyed on magical gems are strongly connected with Gnosticism. In the Roman period this religious-philosophical current was very popular throughout virtually the whole Mediterranean Basin. It might be stated that the amulets were produced by followers of Gnosticism, but still too little is known about this religion whose legacy was destroyed after it was regarded as heresy. We learn about it mainly from the skeptical appraisals of Christian authors, but rarely from source writings.

¹⁰⁰ K. Preisendanz, op. cit., I, 13–19; V 81–89; C. Bonner, op. cit., pp. 12, 138, 186; S. Michel, *Bunte Steine*, op. cit., p. 134.

¹⁰¹ G. Bąkowska, *Aleksandria jako ośrodek produkcji gemm magicznych*, [in:] *Portolana I. Studia Mediterranea*, ed. D. Quirini-Popławska, Kraków 2004, pp. 65–72.

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