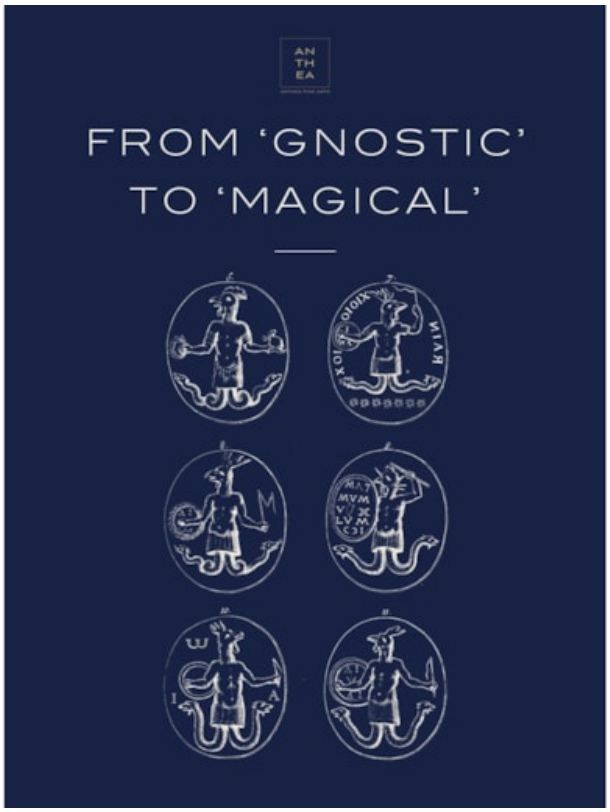
FROM ‘GNOSTIC’ TO ‘MAGICAL’

NOVEMBER 23, 2026



For three centuries these stones were taken for the work of heretics from the first Christian age. Cardinals, canons, painters and antiquaries collected them, drew them, published them and sometimes had them copied. This is how Roman amulets became ‘Gnostic’, and then ‘magical’.

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Experts in Classical Antiquities and Ancient and Modern Glyptics

13 minute read

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FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE RE

Magical gems never quite disappeared. Picked up in fields, kept in church treasuries, set on reliquaries, they came down through the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages did not tell magical gems apart from other ancient amulets, and all were highly prized. They were set in the signet rings of the great. In 1174 an anguipede authenticated acts of King Louis VII of France. Hubert Walter, Archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 1205, was buried with a Chnoubis on his finger.



Counter-seal with the anguipede on an act of Louis VII, 1174. Wax impression, 11 × 14 mm. Paris, Archives nationales, collection des sceaux, D 37 bis.

The medieval lapidaries descended from Techel's Liber sigillorum describe a jasper engraved with a helmeted man, shield at his neck, trampling snakes, as an amulet 'against all enemies'. The cockerel's head has turned into a helmet, the snake legs into a reptile underfoot.

Not all these stones were ancient. After examining the anguipede found in a bishop's tomb at Chichester Cathedral, Árpád Nagy judges it post-antique. The stone is very rare for the type, the back is domed, the engraving polished and glossy, the shield long like a Norman one. He cautiously suggests it is medieval work.

The anguipede was already being imitated before the Renaissance.



The Chichester anguipede, mounted in the Middle Ages in a gold ring.
Chalcedony, 12th century (?). Chichester, Cathedral treasury.

In the sixteenth century the descriptions become accurate again. Camillo Leonardi, whose Speculum lapidum came out in Venice in 1502, describes a figure with the head of a cockerel or lion, a cuirass, snake feet, a whip and a shield. As Erika Zwierlein-Diehl notes, these texts rely directly on the gems.

The stones bear out the texts. A seal from Kolozsvár, attached to a charter of 18 June 1513, shows a post-antique anguipede cut from ancient models. It is at least forty years earlier than Pirro Ligorio's study, the first on these gems.

Renaissance learned magic also produced new images in the manner of ancient gems. In his De vita of 1489, Marsilio Ficino writes about astrological images as a physician. The stone is to be engraved at a moment fixed by the stars. Against stings he recommends a scorpion, and against kidney trouble a lion rolling a stone under its paw.

Fabio Spadini recognises this lion as a misread ancient image. Roman intaglios often show a lion with its paw on a bull's head, and the bull's head has become a pebble.

Other engravers followed a book rather than a stone. A chalcedony in the Cabinet des médailles shows a pillar-shaped god standing on a dragon between two scorpions. Attilio Mastrocinque links it to a recipe in the Picatrix, repeated by Cornelius Agrippa, in which Saturn is to be shown as a man in black garments standing on a dragon. The type is dated to the seventeenth century.

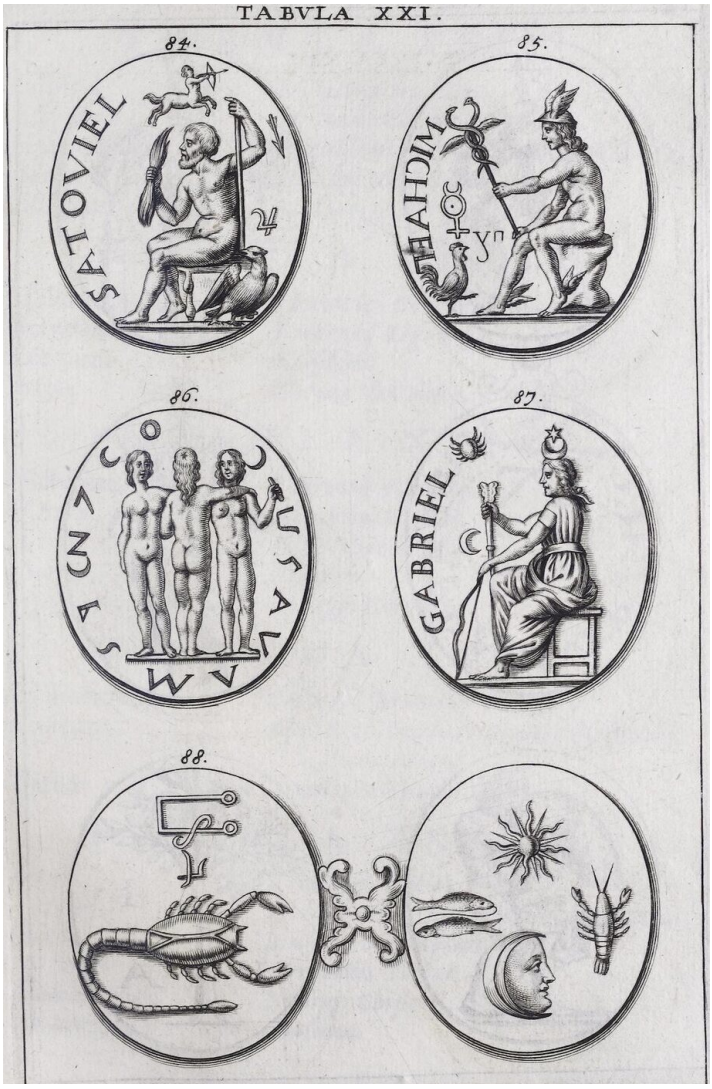
Events in the sky may also have mattered. The modern fashion for Ophiuchus gems may follow the new star of 1604 in that constellation, described by Kepler.



Pillar-shaped god on a dragon, between scorpions and charakteres. Chalcedony, 48 × 28.5 mm, type dated to the 17th century. Paris, BnF, Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques.

One series shows this magic at work. Three stones from the cabinet of Thomas Le Cointe, published by Chiflet and later by Montfaucon, show planets in ancient guise: the Moon seated, Jupiter with his thunderbolt, Mercury with his caduceus.

Each carries an angel's name in Latin letters: Gabriel, Satoviel, Michael. The authors of the Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum date them to the Renaissance and conclude that they came from one workshop serving one client, 'surely very learned': Le Cointe himself.



The stones from Thomas Le Cointe's cabinet engraved by Chiflet: Jupiter with the thunderbolt, named SATOVIEL, Mercury with the caduceus, MICHAEL, the Moon seated, GABRIEL. Abraxas seu Apistopistus, Antwerp, 1657, plate XXI. Heidelberg University Library.

His collection, 'rich in modern intaglios', is a poor reference for any stone that

comes from it.

BARONIUS, CHIFLET AND THE GNOS

Cardinal Baronius was the first to call these gems ‘Gnostic’. At the end of the sixteenth century, in his Annales ecclesiastici under the year 120, he describes an amethyst that Fulvio Orsini took to be one of the images used by the Basilidian heretics.

Baronius was a man of the Counter-Reformation, looking in the stones for traces of ancient heresy.

The argument rested on a name. Abrasax is engraved on a great many gems, and the Church Fathers report that the followers of Basilides, in the second century, used it for the supreme God of the 365 heavens. In Greek, the numerical values of its letters add up to 365.

The debate was more open than is often claimed. Other scholars pointed out that St Jerome equated Meithras and Abrasax on the same grounds. Some concluded that Abrasax was Mithras and that the stones belonged to solar cults. Athanasius Kircher argued that Abrasax is not so much Mithras as Iao Sabaoth.

Kircher and Pignoria in the seventeenth century and Montfaucon in the eighteenth, whose real passion was Egypt, preferred ‘magical’.

How these stones are viewed, the historian Attilio Mastrocinque remarks, says as much about the viewer as about the stone.

Jean L'Heureux, known as Macarius, a canon of Aire, spent some twenty years in Rome studying ancient monuments. He died in 1614 with nothing published. His manuscript on the Basilidian gems lay in Tournai.

Jean Chiflet, a canon of the cathedral, had it printed at Antwerp in 1657, at the Plantin press. He added his own collection: 120 pieces on twenty-eight plates, an index of the gems with their owners' names, and a commentary that arranges the stones by figure.



A plate from Chiflet: six anguipedes. The heads, shields, weapons and letters vary from one stone to the next. Abraxas seu Apistopistus, Antwerp, 1657, plate II. Heidelberg University Library.

The stones come from private cabinets, those of Pignoria, Gorlaeus and Philippe Chiflet. The commentary already points out engraving errors. In one place the inscription is ‘cut awry in the stone’, in another ‘the engraver’s hand faltered more than once’.

On the image, Chiflet prefers the Mithraic interpretation to Baronius’s reading. On the Hebrew names he remains a theologian. He recognises the Tetragrammaton in Iao, and in Sabaoth the biblical epithet ‘of hosts’, which he says the Gnostics mistook for the name of a power.

PEIRESC, RUBENS, MONTFAUCON: T

Behind these books lay a circle in which impressions, drawings and readings changed hands.

Lorenzo Pignoria collected Egyptian antiquities in Padua, and Kircher and Chiflet used his casts of gems. From Aix, Peiresc obtained gems and cameos through dealers all over the Mediterranean. By 1633 he owned two hundred amulets and magical intaglios. That year he met Kircher at Avignon.

Rubens collected them just as eagerly. His theoretical notebook, written in Italy between 1600 and 1608, mixes natural philosophy, alchemy and number mysticism. Macarius describes several stones that passed to his son Albert.



Anonymous, Rubens and his Son Albert, oil on canvas, 133.5 × 112.2 cm. In the background, a statue of triple Hecate. St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. GE 7728.

On 7 June 1627 Peiresc told Rubens he had seen, ‘among the intaglios of these Basilidians and Gnostics’, a winged Jupiter with a thunderbolt inscribed Iao. What strikes him, in that letter, is the Hebrew name of God cut into a pagan setting.

Contemporaries were not all taken in. Around 1616–1618 Peiresc wrote to Aleandro, about a zodiac gem on which a unicorn accompanies Virgo, that he strongly suspected it was modern. He was right. The unicorn comes from the

medieval Physiologus.

The Barberini circle thought these gems worth collecting, studying, ‘and sometimes even manufacturing’.

The market kept pace. In 1702 the Venetian senator Antonio Capello published the 272 intaglios in his cabinet, formed around the collection of the physician Charles Patin. He had added other stones, ‘among them some modern ones’.

When the Landgrave of Hesse wanted to buy the collection in 1701, Bernard de Montfaucon was asked to judge whether the pieces were ancient.

By about 1700, then, a scholar was already being called in to vet magical gems before a sale.

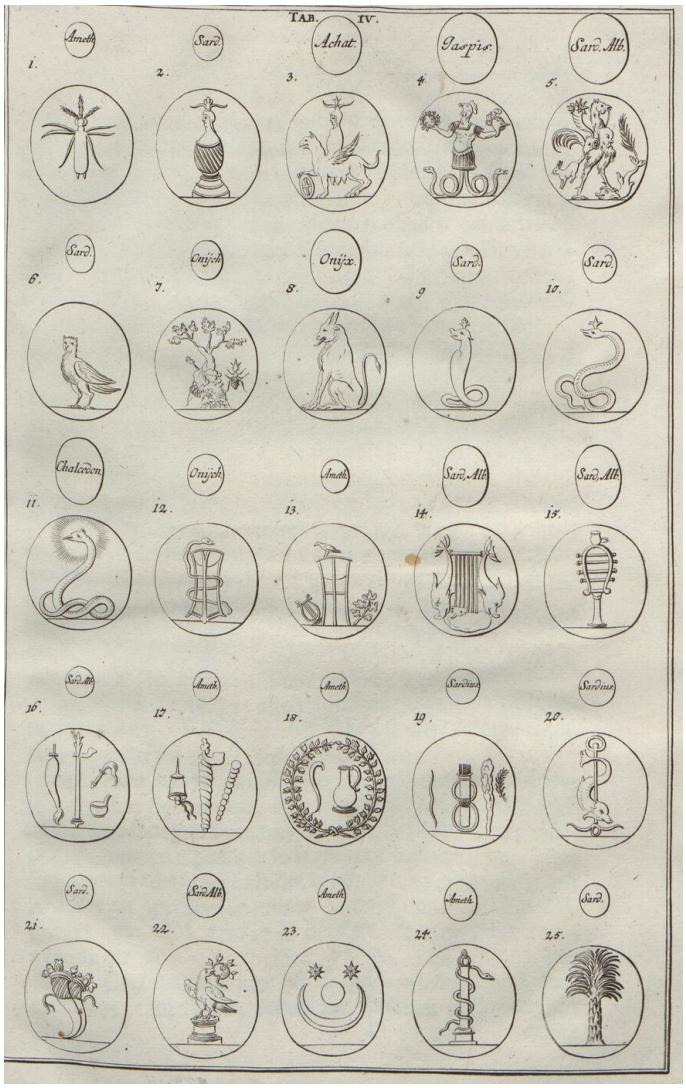
Montfaucon went on to reproduce the plates of Chiflet, Capello and several others in L’Antiquité expliquée.

FROM THE BOOK TO THE STONE

A published drawing travels faster and further than a stone. An engraving by Chiflet, Kircher or Montfaucon becomes a model available to any engraver, with its merits and its mistakes. Many copies were born this way, from stone to book and from book back to stone.

The catalogues prove it. In 1720 Johann Martin von Ebermayer of Nuremberg published a Thesaurus of gems that includes stones already published by

Chiflet and Kircher. His collection consisted largely of gems cut by German engravers of his own day. Winckelmann judged him harshly.



A plate from Ebermayer's Thesaurus: twenty-five stones, each with the name of its material. J. M. von Ebermayer and J. J. Baier, Gemmarum affabre sculptarum thesaurus, Nuremberg, 1720, plate IV. Heidelberg University Library.

One stone from the Pignoria collection shows the whole chain. Known from an impression, it appears in Kircher, in Chiflet, in the reissued Gorlaeus, in Montfaucon, in Ebermayer and finally in Matter.

The Sylloge classes it as ‘modern’. The barque from which Harpocrates’ lotus rises has become a sickle blade with a shrub growing on it, and an armoured warrior stands on the shrub. For two centuries, six books reproduced an image its engraver had not understood.



On the left, the ancient type: Harpocrates in the papyrus boat, on a haematite of the 3rd century AD (London, British Museum, inv. G 530). On the right, Pignoria’s stone engraved by Chiflet: the boat has become a sickle, the lotus a shrub, and a warrior has taken the god’s place. Abraxas seu Apistopistus, 1657, plate XXIII.

A drawing distorts, and a copy fixes the distortion. On a scorpion seal, the example Chiflet saw had already turned the animal’s tail into a lizard. The British Museum has two stones cut after his drawing.



The scorpion seal. On the left, Chiflet's drawing. In the centre and on the right, two stones in the British Museum engraved after it: marble, 22 × 17 mm, 17th–18th century (inv. G 200); chalcedony, 32 × 25 mm, 17th century (inv. G 198).

In the eighteenth century impressions made the stones travel. Cabinets had sulphurs, plasters and glass pastes cast, and collectors exchanged them like books. The collections of Baron Philipp von Stosch and the pastes of James Tassie spread thousands of them.

Glass keeps the composition. It loses the material, which gave the stone its virtue.

The collections of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries carried the process on. Wilhelm Froehner, who left some 3,540 objects to the Bibliothèque nationale and the Louvre in 1925, bought in Italy, Egypt, Cyprus and Palestine and at the Paris sales. His notebooks seldom say whether a place name refers to the findspot, the purchase or the sale.

The chalcedony with the pillar-god in the Cabinet des médailles is a telling case. This seventeenth-century stone already appears as ancient in Mariette's

Traité des pierres gravées. Salomon Reinach reproduced it in 1895, and Delatte and Derchain published it among the magical gems in 1964.

A modern stone that entered a royal collection early can acquire the pedigree of an ancient one within three centuries.

Neither an old provenance nor an early publication, then, is any guarantee.

THE MAGICAL READING, FROM PASS

In the eighteenth century Giovanni Battista Passeri, in his dissertation on the Basilidian gems, put forward a third view. The amulets were made by magicians and charlatans of the imperial period, not by Gnostics or worshippers of Mithras.

In the nineteenth century Jacques Matter and Charles William King nonetheless still spoke of ‘Gnostic’ gems.

Passeri’s view prevailed once the magical papyri were published. Gems and papyri draw on the same repertoire: the same divine names, the same magical words, the same words of power.

Scholarly study begins with Armand Delatte, whose articles of 1914 tied the

stones to the magicians who wrote the recipes in the papyri. Karl Preisendanz then edited the magical papyri, and in 1950 Campbell Bonner produced the first major general study.

Since then the accepted view has been that these amulets, magical rather than Gnostic, were the work of magicians of the imperial period, under Egyptian and Near Eastern influence.

Gnosticism did leave its mark on parts of the papyri, and the magic of astral names occurs in papyri, curse tablets and Gnostic texts alike. Magic can be seen as gnosis in a broad sense. But the gems were meant to protect and to heal far more than to express a doctrine.

FROM ANTIQUARIANISM TO PSYCHO

In Psychology and Alchemy (1944), C. G. Jung reproduces several gems after C. W. King's book: a Harpocrates on the lotus, the serpent Chnoubis crowned with rays, a Harpocrates within the snake biting its tail. He sets the last beside the prime matter of the alchemists.

This is a psychologist's reading, not proof of descent. More than a thousand years separate these images and, as far as we know, no ancient document links the one to the other. It does show that the second life of the amulets did not end with the antiquaries.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why are they called Gnostic gems?

Because Cardinal Baronius, at the end of the sixteenth century, saw in them images of the Basilidian heretics. The name Abrasax, engraved on a great many of these stones, is the one the followers of Basilides gave to the supreme God of the 365 heavens.

Who was Basilides?

Basilides of Alexandria was one of the Gnostics of the second century. According to the Church Fathers, his followers used the name Abrasax for the supreme God of the 365 heavens.

Were magical gems worn in the Middle Ages?

Yes. They were set on reliquaries and in the signet rings of the great. An anguipede authenticated acts of Louis VII in 1174, and Hubert Walter, Archbishop of Canterbury, was buried with a Chnoubis on his finger.

What is Chiflet's book?

A collection published at Antwerp in 1657 as Abraxas seu Apistopistus. It brings together Macarius's dissertation on the Basilidian gems and Chiflet's own collection of 120 pieces on twenty-eight plates.

Did Rubens really collect these stones?

Yes. He traded drawings, impressions and readings with Peiresc and other antiquaries, and Macarius describes several stones that passed to his son Albert.

Is a gem published in the seventeenth century necessarily ancient?

No. The cabinets of the period also held modern stones, and the engravings in the published collections served as models for copies. An early publication is no guarantee.

When does the scholarly study of magical gems begin?

With Armand Delatte, whose articles of 1914 tied the stones to the magicians of the papyri. In 1950 Campbell Bonner produced the first major general study.

Which term should be used today?

‘Magical gems’. These amulets, magical rather than Gnostic, were meant to protect and to heal far more than to express a doctrine.

FURTHER READING

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IMAGE SOURCES

The photographs of the seal of Louis VII (CBd-1970), the Chichester anguipede (CBd-1570), the BnF chalcedony (CBd-3243) and the British Museum stones (CBd-526, CBd-997, CBd-998) come from the Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database, which names the rights holders. The three plates from Chiflet and the one from Ebermayer come from the copies digitised by Heidelberg University Library. The portrait of Rubens is a photograph from the State Hermitage Museum, in the public domain (Wikimedia Commons).

Adapted from a study by Bianca Massard of Graeco-Roman magical gems (2026).