

A Roman Republican Carnelian Intaglio. Nemesis with butterfly.

H. 15 mm (with the frame)

Intaglio dim. 9 x 13 mm

Roman Republican period, Late 1st century BC

Nemesis is shown standing to the left, delicately raising a fold of her peplos with one hand. The carving displays exceptional refinement in the treatment of both the flowing drapery and the finely detailed feathers of her wings. Before the goddess, a butterfly hovers in flight toward the left.

This iconographic type finds a compelling parallel in the extremely rare aureus issued by the Caesarian moneyer C. Vibius Varus in 42 BC (Crawford 494/35), on which Nemesis appears on the reverse in a strikingly similar stance, albeit facing right. That coin—a unicum in Republican coinage—was struck on the eve of the Battle of Philippi, and its imagery belongs to the broader ideological programme of the Caesarian faction: Nemesis embodies divine retribution, the righteous vengeance meant to restore an order shattered by the assassination of Julius Caesar. The choice of this figure, unprecedented in traditional Republican monetary iconography, attests to the intensification of symbolic discourse and the progressive sacralisation of political conflict in the late Republic.

In the present gem, however, Nemesis is paired with a butterfly—an association not found in standard Roman public imagery. In Greek, ψυχή (psyché) denotes both "soul" and "butterfly," and in the classical imagination the insect served as a powerful metaphor for the life-force departing the body, reinforced by the creature's own metamorphosis from caterpillar to chrysalis to winged form.

Within the more intimate sphere of private glyptic—as opposed to state-sponsored coinage—such a pairing likely carried apotropaic and eschatological resonances. The goddess may here be understood as the guarantor of the soul's destiny, an embodiment of a cosmic justice that extends beyond earthly existence to encompass the posthumous fate of the psyché.

Literature

M.H Crawford, 'Roman Republican Coinage', I-II, London: Cambridge University Press, 1974, n. 494/35