

A Graeco-Persian gold swivel ring with a carnelian engraved seal. Mercury and male figure.

Gold and carnelian

H. seal 13 mm

US 5 1/4 - UK K 1/2 ; Total weight 7,50g

Graeco-Persian, 5th century B.C.

Gold swivel seal ring with an oval hoop forged in a single piece, rising into swollen shoulders that clasp a six-sided prismatic bezel of orange carnelian. The bezel, pierced horizontally by a gold axis, rotates freely to expose its faces: two bear figural intaglios, while the remaining four are left smooth. This prismatic seal typology — derived from Near Eastern stamp seals and archaic scaraboids — is characteristic of the workshops of the western Achaemenid satrapies in the 5th century BC.

Face A — Mercury (Hermes) standing

The messenger god is shown standing, nude, in profile; he wears the petasos and holds the caduceus, while the talaria mark his ankles. The figure is rendered in the frontal-profile scheme characteristic of the hybrid Greco-Persian style, in which classical Hellenic iconography is adapted to the linear sensibility and narrative taste of the Asia Minor workshops. The presence of Hermes — god of exchange, travel, and borders — takes on particular resonance in the context of the western satrapies, zones of intense contact between the Greek and Persian worlds.

Face B — Heroic male figure

Male figure standing, nude, wearing a conical cap — possibly a pilos, petasos, or the Persian kyrbasia — holding in his left hand a long staff or spear and, in his right hand, what appears to be a small stylised animal. This iconography evokes the well-attested motif of the master of animals (πότνιος θηρῶν / potnios thêrôn), a central theme of Oriental glyptics adopted and reinterpreted by Greco-Persian engravers. The figure could also represent a hunter displaying his quarry, or a local heroic figure — definitive identification remains open pending close examination of the attributes.

Style and cultural context

Swivel seal rings with prismatic bezels are among the most refined products of the Greco-Persian glyptic workshops active along the Ionian, Lydian, and Carian coasts in the 5th century BC. They bear witness to the remarkable stylistic synthesis that took shape in the western satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire, where the Greek glyptic tradition — heir to the archaic seals — met the symbolic and administrative requirements of the Persian Empire. The pairing, on a single seal, of a Greek deity (Hermes) with a possibly Oriental motif (master of animals) exemplifies this cultural dialogue.

Technical observations

The hoop displays the soft patina, micro-wear, and suppleness characteristic of unreworked ancient gold. The carnelian bezel — the favoured stone of Achaemenid engravers for its workable hardness and solar chromatism — shows the distinctive traces of wheel and drill work, the signature tools of Greco-Persian glyptics. The pivot setting derives from the Egyptian scaraboid tradition, transmitted to the Near East through Phoenicia and adopted by Greek goldsmiths in Asia Minor from the late archaic period onward.

Literature

See J. Boardman, Greek Gems and Finger Rings (1970/2001), particularly chs. V–VI; Persia and the West: An Archaeological Investigation of the Genesis of Achaemenid Art (2000); M. L. Vollenweider, Deliciae Leonis (1984). Cf. the collections of the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cabinet des Médailles (BnF), and the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), which hold several comparable Greco-Persian swivel rings with prismatic bezels.