

A large Greek Late hellenistic Bloodstone intaglio. Bull with snake.

Intaglio: 18 × 22 x 3 mm - Mounting on request

Late Hellenistic, 3rd-2nd century B.C.E

Possibly repolished later

The oval gem of fine heliotrope — a deep green chalcedony richly speckled with vivid scarlet inclusions of iron oxide — engraved with a powerful bull striding to the left, head lowered and tail raised in a vigorous S-curve, the front hooves rearing to crush a coiled serpent that rises menacingly from the groundline. The animal is rendered with notable anatomical precision: the swelling musculature of the shoulder and haunches, the taut tendons of the legs, the rippling dewlap and the alert, almost wrathful expression of the head are observed with the assured naturalism characteristic of the finest late Hellenistic glyptic production. The reptile, sinuously coiled and rearing in opposition, completes a composition of remarkable narrative tension.

The subject — the noble quadruped triumphing over the chthonic serpent — constitutes one of the most enduring allegories of the ancient world: the victory of virtue (aretē) and courage over the snares of evil, the eternal struggle between the celestial and the terrestrial. The motif draws upon a venerable Near Eastern and Greek iconographic tradition in which the bull, emblem of generative strength and solar power, is opposed to the serpent, embodiment of chaos and deceit.

The choice of bloodstone — *lapis sanguinarius* of the ancients — confers upon the gem an additional apotropaic dimension: the crimson droplets dispersed within the verdant matrix were anciently understood as drops of blood, lending the stone protective and curative virtues, particularly esteemed as a talisman against bodily harm and as a guardian of valour.

The extraordinary chromatic quality of the material, combined with the confident and sculptural treatment of the engraving, place this intaglio among the finest surviving examples of its type.

For a closely related composition, cf. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 81.6.41.

Literature

HENIG, Martin, A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites, n.214