

A Victorian gold ring set with an agate-sardonyx intaglio of a bear

Intaglio 14 × 12 mm

9ct gold; ring size EU 52 – US 6 – UK L½; gross weight 10.69 g.

Intaglio: 19th century

Mount: Victorian, circa 1860–1880.

Condition: a small hole in the shank, repairable; wear consistent with age.

An oval agate-sardonyx, engraved in intaglio and set in a heavy Victorian gold signet ring with broad tapering shoulders.

A bear walks to the left along a ground line, one forepaw raised mid-stride. The engraver renders the thick fur in fine parallel strokes, the heavy paws and claws with care. Held to the light, the stone glows a deep, warm red.

Historical context – 19th-century Glyptics

Engraved gems remained the gentleman's seal throughout the 19th century, worn on the hand and pressed into wax. Animals, often drawn from heraldry or personal emblems, were favoured subjects. The 9ct standard, made legal in Britain in 1854, brought such rings within reach of a wider public.

Iconography and symbolism

For the Greeks the bear belonged to Artemis: at Brauron young girls "played the bear" before marriage. Ovid tells how Callisto, turned into a bear, was raised to the sky as the Great Bear, the constellation that never sets (Metamorphoses II). Pliny writes that the bear withdraws through winter and licks its

shapeless newborn into form (Natural History VIII). Strength turned inward, patience before the return of spring.