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Signum and self: engraved gemstones and the expression of identity at Herculaneum

Abstract

The replication of conventionalised motifs on engraved gemstones of the Roman imperial period has often prompted their dismissal by scholars who deem them too frivolous, too plentiful, and too small to be taken seriously as image-bearing objects, or else prioritise their workaday capacity as seals. Foregrounding gems’ function as personal adornment, this paper uses examples excavated from Herculaneum to argue that the repetition of certain images was in fact central to their agency as markers of identity, signalling the gender, age, and in some cases social status of their wearer through the propagation of easily recognisable visual paradigms. Where other studies have emphasised the ways in which Roman jewellery communicated identity publicly, this paper also brings the material properties of gemstones into play to consider alternative, more intimate modes of viewing and suggest how engraved gems enabled the private self-bolstering and imaginative negotiation of identity as much as – or perhaps even instead of – its outward expression.

Introduction: incising identity, embodying belonging

Engraved gemstones have long been acknowledged as bearers of identity in the ancient Mediterranean. Used in administrative contexts to seal documents and identify property, they acted like signatures – or, better, like fingerprints – transferring their owner’s individual authority to the documents and objects they marked (Fig. 1). We need only think of Sopho-

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1 This paper revises a chapter of my doctoral thesis (Allen 2016). I thank the (as was) Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei for originally granting permission to study the material from Herculaneum, and to Francesco Sirano and the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attivita’ Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano for continuing to support that research in its current iteration. I am grateful to Courtney Ward for the opportunity to present at the Adornment as Expression of Everyday Identity conference at the Norwegian Institute in Rome, and to the other participants for their insights on the day. Thanks, too, to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their generous and constructive comments, and to Kenneth Lapatin for kindly reading a previous draft and for the many illuminating conversations that preceded its writing. All remaining errors are my own.

2 For a detailed survey of scholarship, see Golyźniak 2020, 2-10 and Tassinari 2011.

3 Intaglio-carved gems were being used as sealstones as early as the seventh millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. For recent approaches, see Ameri et al 2018.
icles’s Electra, who recognises her brother Orestes by the signet ring he wears, or recall the alarm Pliny the Elder tells us was elicited by letters bearing the imprint of Maecenas’s gemstone, to appreciate the perceived and embodied relationship that existed in antiquity between a gem, the device it carried, and its owner.

And yet by the time that Pliny was writing, gem-ownership had extended far beyond such exclusive circles in response to the demands of an expanding ‘non-elite’ clientele. Most first-century AD gems were mass-produced and likely not bespoke commissions, repeating the same iconographies across multiple stones rarely distinguished by the owner’s name. This has prompted some to conclude that it was the act of sealing that was important in antiquity and not the image – or, by extension, the gemstone itself – and that generic gem-motifs held no particular significance to their individual wearers. But such conclusions not only deny agency to non-elite gem-wearers, for whom even the selection of a ready-made gem from an engraver’s workshop might still constitute an assertion of individuality, they also fail to recognise the potential of replication as a mode of representation in antiquity. Indeed, plentiful literary evidence suggests that generic gem-motifs could work as emblems of collective rather than individual identity in the Roman world, and important studies in recent decades have shown how gems might signal various types of group belonging, from familial lineage, to political loyalty, to philosophical adherence. Henig, Marshman, and others have also pointed to the ways in which the propagation of classical iconographies on gems helped es-

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1 Sophocles Electra 1222.
2 Pliny Hist. Nat. (HN) 37.10. The implication is that Maecenas’s seal accompanied a demand for money. Maecenas was known for his love of precious stones, amongst other luxuries, for which Augustus seems to have lampooned him (apud Macrobius Sat. 2.4.12); see Griffin 1985, 12-13. He is cited by Pliny as a source (HN 1 ad. fin.) and even appears to have written poetry on the subject (fr. 2 apud Isidore Etym. 19.32.65). On the relationship between Maecenas’s poem and Augustus’s letter, see Courtney 1993, 276-277, no. 2; Petrain 2005, 344-349.
3 The term is used throughout this paper as a catch-all to describe those outside the upperordo of Roman society, i.e. those without aristocratic birth, inherited land and wealth, or political office. It does not presume a monolithic group-identity and recognises the potential tensions that existed between formal rank, wealth, and actual social position; see e.g., Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 191; D’Ambra, Métraux 2006, viii; Petersen 2006, 10.
5 The so-called Felix Gem is an exception, though far from non-elite. It is inscribed with the name of its owner, a Roman official called Calpurnius Severus: Oxford, Ashmolean Museum inv. no. AN1966.1808.
6 E.g., Boardman 2001, 13; Stewart 2008, 37. Others prioritise the seal-impression as the primary site of engagement with a gem’s device; e.g., Platt 2006, 238. This is in many ways a consequence of the long history of studying ancient gems via impressions; Boardman 2001, 10.
7 Rutledge 2012, 63. The repertoires of gem workshops serving non-elite buyers were likely limited by the establishment of iconographic trends influenced by elite gem types, often with political symbolism; Golyńiak 2020, 295-297. On the identification of a possible workshop at Herculaneum, see Guidobaldi 2004a and 2004b; for three at Pompeii, see Pannuti 1975; Sodo 1992; Cerato 2000, 120-124.
8 E.g., Crummy et al. 2016, 13; Golyńiak 2020, 36.
9 E.g., Longus 1709, 40; cf. Lapatin 2015, 114. For gems as vehicles for political propaganda and the self-presentation of Rome’s political elite, see Vollenweider 1966 and 1972-1974, and most recently Golyńiak 2020. For gems as symbols of political allegiance and partisanship, see also Kleiner 2005, 180-181; Yarrow 2018, 37-44. Gems may even have declared the wearer’s support for a political faction through the colour of the stone: Savay-Guarrez, Sas 2002.
10 E.g., Cicero De fin. 5.3. For Greek philosophers on Roman gems, see Lang 2012.
tablish Roman identity across the empire – or at least allowed the owners of gems to make claims to such status.\footnote{Henig 1970; Marshman 2015. See also Peleg 2003; Kousser 2008, 63; Gagetti 2009.}

This asks us to reconsider the semantic dexterity of the Latin word *signum*, which might mean ‘signet’ or ‘seal’ but in its more supple deployment as ‘mark’ or ‘indication’ could also describe collectivity and group belonging.\footnote{OLD s.v. *signum*.} whether denoting the ensign of an army division,\footnote{E.g., Livy 33.7.} an individual cohort,\footnote{E.g., Sallust Cat. 59, 2.} or even a constellation of stars.\footnote{E.g., Lucretius 1, 2.} Arguing that engraved gems might therefore be used to create a defining and collegiate ‘look’ for their wearer – stamping or incising identity onto their person rather than (only) onto a wax or clay sealing – this paper explores how the selection of formulaic motifs might have communicated other aspects of their owners’ social identities, specifically gender, life-stage, and socio-economic status, by propagating iconographies that embodied collective values.\footnote{For Roman social relations, see MacMullen 1974; Garnsey, Saller 1987.}

Of course, there is nothing new in suggesting that Roman jewellery or even gems could express identity on these terms,\footnote{See e.g., Stout 1994; Calinescu 1996; Berg 2002; Olson 2008, 98; Ferencz et al. 2013 and supra nn. 12-15. For gems and non-elite status, see Yarrow 2018.}

and we are already familiar with the ways in which finger-rings in particular rendered different statuses legible on the bodies of their wearers, distinguishing male from female and patrician from plebeian through the restricted use of different metals.\footnote{HN 33.4. For discussion, see Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 350-353.}

Focusing on material from Roman Germany, Swift has also explored the relationship between device-type, ring size, and gender in her recent analysis of finger-ring design, pointing to the ways in which the images engraved on gemstones might have spoken of gender and age.\footnote{Swift 2017, 150-202.}

Absent from her discussion, however, is consideration of stone type, and this paper consequently nuances her work by asking how the material and aesthetic qualities of the gemstone may have worked with and enhanced the descriptive potential of its motif.

This ultimately is to take engraved gemstones seriously as items of personal adornment rather than viewing them only as administrative tools. Such emphasis is warranted by the wealth of literary and archaeological evidence from the first centuries BC-AD that demonstrates the increasing prioritisation of gems’ ornamental capacity over their sealing function.\footnote{E.g., Henig 1994, xii; Henig 1997, 93; Plantzos 1999, 23, 73.}

Engraved gems were worn in ways that enhanced their decorativeness, whether backed with gold or set into brooches and pendants, and even in some cases adorned clothing, armour and shoes (FIG. 2);\footnote{For engraved gems on shoes, see *Hist. Aug. (SHA) Elagabalus* 23.3-5. For uncut gems on clothing, see e.g. HN 37.17; 9.114; see also CIL IV.1598 and CIL VI.2.9437; cf. Sena Chiesa 1966, 5. A gilt-iron parade helmet from the Berkasavo Treasure is encrusted with glass gemstones; Lapatin 2015, 119, fig. 26.}

many Roman intaglios were also cut too deeply, rendering their value as signets “seriously weakened.”\footnote{Henig 1994, 91. Cameos, carved in relief and intended for display, also increased in number during the Augustan and Julio-Claudian periods, with numerous glass examples recovered from sites like Pompeii and Herculaneum testifying to their widespread appeal; Plantzos 1999, 101. There is, however, evidence from preserved sealings that cameos were in some instances used as seals; cf. Boussac 1988, 326; Marest-Caffey 2017, 132.}

Some even promote their status as adornment with images of...
craftsmen applying finishing touches to works of art, suggesting that gem-wearing might be an equivalent means of crafting the body and finessing one’s surface (Fig. 3).27

Added to this, it is clear that gem-images were examined and admired on the stone as well as in impression. Plutarch’s φιλολίθος (“lover of precious stones”), for example, is delighted when a friend longs to look at the engraved gemstone that he wears, advising that it would be best to see the stone ὑπ’ ἀογάζω (“in the sunshine”).28 Writing much earlier, the Hellenistic poet Posidippos of Pella similarly delights in gems’ material splendours, in their colour and shine, and the incredible lifelikeness of their miniature devices that seem to move in changing light.29 Hinting at a different kind of viewing pleasure, he describes several gems in relation to the female body parts they adorn,30 not only allowing his reader to imagine caressing the hand or neck that each gem decorates but also establishing a conceit that figures gemstone as flesh and that reiterates the significance of the stone as a site for sensory encounter.31 This is later exploited by Tibullus, who uses the excuse of examining the device on his lover’s ring-stone to embrace her hand in public,32 and by Ovid who longs to be transformed into an intaglio so that he can be pressed in secret to his lover’s lips.33 It is perhaps no surprise that Clement of Alexandria warns Christians not to wear images on their ring-stones that might lead them into temptation.34

It is clear from these sources that gems’ translucency, small-scale, and proximity to the body favoured discreet – at times eroticised – viewing,35 helping us to understand that gem-devices might be looked at (and handled) both on the stone and in the context of their wearers’ bodies – and hence that stone and motif may have worked together to communicate identity. Many gems even exploit this compulsion to look intently by depicting lone figures that are themselves looking at something closely (Fig. 4). The texts also suggest that this communication could, at times, be self-reflexive as well as outwardly directed. Clement’s admonition certainly implies the private contemplation of gem-motifs, while the potential for this to reinforce the wearer’s own sense of self (as well as inform his or her public persona) is demonstrated by Cicero, who rebukes Lentulus Sura for his involvement in the Catiline conspiracy when he ought to have been restrained by the portrait of his ancestor Cornelius Lentulus engraved on his ring-stone.36 This encourages us, therefore, to think of gem-wearing as a means of signalling identity to oneself as well as – or, at times, instead of – an external view-

27 For an alternative view of these images, see Platt 2006. On adornment as self-craft, see Wyke 1994, 137; Olson 2008, 95; Shumka 2008, 173.
28 Plutarch De coh. 462d. See also Ovid Ars 1.251-2; HN 37.198.
30 Elsner 2014, 163-164.
31 Kuttner 2005, 143; see also Pointon 2009, 98.
32 Tibullus 1.6.25. Compare SHA Commodus 11.
33 Ovid Amores 2.15.16. A graffito from Pompeii repeats the sentiment (CIL IV.10241). On the practice of wetting the surface of an intaglio to stop the wax from sticking, see HN 31.221 and Nassau 1984, 23.
34 Clement of Alexandria Paed. 3.12.
35 On the enchantment of the miniature, see Stewart 1984; of gems, see Pointon 2009.
36 Cicero In Cat. 3.5.10; cf. Golyźniak 2020, 25.
Implicit in this is the potential for gem images not only to bolster identity and reinforce ideal social categories but also to create space for the reimagining of status as well.

Gem-wearing at Herculaneum

To explore how this may have worked for real gem-wearers, this paper focuses on the gems excavated along the ancient beachfront of Herculaneum, many of which were found in association with the bodies of their (presumed) owners inside boat bays located along the shore. Analysis undertaken by Bisel in the 1980s and more recently by Capasso and Petrone has determined the age and gender of many of these individuals. It has also given indication of their health and nutrition, allowing us to see in basic terms, at least, who these people were – and hence to think more directly about the resultant interaction of stone, image, and individual identity.

Of course, the interpretation of paleopathological data is not straightforward and at Herculaneum is further complicated by the history of the excavation, storage, and study of the skeletal material. Nor do we know if the patterns of gem-wearing evident at the beachfront are representative of daily habits. It is plausible that at least some of the individuals were carrying more – or less – than they would normally have worn as they attempted to escape the city: two male skeletons, for example, were found in arch 12 on either side of a wooden casket containing an assemblage of different types of jewellery, including engraved gemstones, that may represent the possessions of a nuclear family, or perhaps the stock of a jeweller; the presence of three earrings implies that at least some of the contents belonged to a woman. At our most skeptical, we cannot even be certain that all of the jewellery in fact belonged to the individuals found wearing or carrying it. Nevertheless, the Herculaneum material gives insight into the kinds of gem-motifs that were in play in a Roman town of the second half of the first century AD, as well as possible indication of who was wearing them. Scatozza Höricht has already demonstrated how the beachfront material relates to gender and age, while Ward has suggested a more nuanced relationship between jewellery-type, choice

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37 So Crouch has argued that the iconography of seals used by medieval noblemen were symbols of the self, representing to the individual owner what it was that gave them their status and prestige: Crouch 1992, 170.
38 The beachfront gems were partially published by Scatozza Höricht in 1989 (Monili Ercolano), D’Ambrosio and De Carolis in 1997 (Monili Vesuviana), and by D’Ambrosio et al. in 2003 (Storie). For other gems from Herculaneum, see also Pannuti 1983.
39 Arches 1 and 2 contained no skeletons. Arches 4-12 contained between three and 40 skeletons each; cf. Torino, Fornaciari 1995b, 101; Ward 2014.
41 For overview and critique, see Ward 2014, 125-126; Lazer 2009, 30-35.
42 Ward 2014, 169.
44 Monili Ercolano, 82; Ward 2014, 165.
45 Pers. comm. Marina Caso 05/02/2020.
47 It is not improbable that looting occurred during the chaos of escape; Lazer 2009, 30. Following excavation, some jewellery was also repositioned for publicity photographs; Ward 2014, 129.
of metal, and the quality and amount of personal adornment and the gender and probable social status of its wearer.\textsuperscript{49} This paper suggests that gemstone and gem-image were constructive of identity in similar ways.

\textit{Herculaneum’s skeletons}

On first glance, the beachfront data seems far from promising. Of the 296 skeletons recovered from the arches, only 19 individuals – of which ten are male,\textsuperscript{50} six female,\textsuperscript{51} and three are children of undetermined sex\textsuperscript{52} – have been associated with a total of 25 engraved gemstones.\textsuperscript{53} As already mentioned, seven of the gems were contained in a single box with other jewellery items found alongside two skeletons. An additional seven gems excavated on the beachfront have not been associated with specific bodies. This means that just seven percent of the total skeletal sample can be said to have been in possession of an engraved gemstone at the moment of death, and the majority of those with just one.\textsuperscript{54}

Although this may look disappointing, it is potentially illuminating in itself, indicative perhaps of the ‘non-elite’ status of these people who lived (at least in comparison to their wealthier counterparts), jewellery-light. As Ward has discussed, analysis of the bones in terms of health, nutrition, and other life-style indicators supports this picture, suggesting – albeit with important exceptions – that a majority of the individuals in question were of broadly moderate to low socio-economic status and had at some point in their lives been engaged in moderate to high levels of physical labour over extended periods of time.\textsuperscript{55} As well as indicating that engraved gems were worn by men and women and across a range of ages, therefore, these skeletons offer us a glimpse of how those outside the highest echelons of society used gems to signal and perhaps negotiate their non-elite identity – and how this may have intersected with and informed the expression of gender and age.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Wearing non-elite status}

One way in which the beachfront gems do this is through the choice of material. Fifteen are mounted in rings, of which nine are gold, one silver, one bronze, and four iron.\textsuperscript{57} We have already mentioned how the ancient sources describe a world in which different metal rings signaled different social rank,\textsuperscript{58} and we can at least assume a hierarchy of relative cost

\textsuperscript{49} Ward 2014; also, this volume.
\textsuperscript{50} PA-Erco, inv. nos. E61, E62, E35, E56, E18, E69, E36, E7-2, E121, E1.
\textsuperscript{51} PA-Erco, inv. nos. E7-8, E8-13, E8-11, E8-18, E65, E60.
\textsuperscript{52} PA-Erco, inv. nos. E8-12, E8-21, E132. All three are sub-adult; see Lazer 2009, 30; Ward 2014, 98.
\textsuperscript{53} See Table 1 for an overview of the gems, their associated skeletons, and find contexts.
\textsuperscript{54} The beachfront gems represent a third of the total number of engraved gemstones recorded from Herculaneum as a whole; Allen 2016, 54.
\textsuperscript{55} Ward 2014, 184; following Capasso 2001. Added to this, six of the 19 skeletons were found in or just outside arch 8. This raises the question of whether they were related, perhaps by family or by neighbourhood, and if this shared status is reflected in the fact that they were all wearing gems.
\textsuperscript{56} On intersectionality as a critical methodology, see Crenshaw 1989. On gems as markers of non-elite status, see Yarrow 2018.
\textsuperscript{57} See Appendix 1.
\textsuperscript{58} Supra n. 22.
amongst the individual owners, with gold the most expensive, followed in order by silver, bronze, and finally iron. But as Ward notes, even some of the gold rings may have been affordable to less wealthy buyers: E3664 and E3665, for example, are much lighter than the average from the site and are set with glass gems, presumably making them less expensive than similar rings made from solid gold – or solid silver – and set with precious stone.

The beachfront material in fact contains several glass stones (12%), second only to cornelian in frequency (56%). Glass gems, coloured to imitate a variety of precious stones and mass-produced across the empire, were associated by Pliny and others with Rome’s lower classes and surely represented an affordable substitute for more costly hardstones; cornelian, meanwhile, was the most commonly used gemstone across the empire in this period, widely abundant both in Italy and the provinces, and plausibly commanded a lower price as a result. Pliny tells us it was the best stone for signets because it lefts a crisp impression. Although the sample size is small, it is worth noting that none of the glass gems from Herculaneum imitate cornelian, perhaps suggesting that the stone was affordable enough already, or that glass and cornelian stones served different functions – the one decorative, the other spheragistic. The same is true of the gems recovered from the jeweller’s workshop in the house of Pinarius Cerialis at Pompeii (III, 4, b): the majority are cornelian, along with a few agates, sardonyxes, amethysts, and one “prase.” The numerous glass gems imitate a range of stones including garnet, nicolo, amethyst, sardonyx, and banded agate but not cornelian. This implies that cornelian at least served a broader market than the other hardstones, the cost or rarity of which precipitated demand for cheaper alternatives.

We might assume from this that the selection of a cornelian stone or an iron ring was a

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59 In terms of prestige, Pliny ranks gold the highest (HN 33.19), then silver, bronze, and iron (HN 33.31, 34.1, 34.43). On the associated economic and cultural values, see e.g., Williams, Ogden 2004, 14; Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 412.
60 Ward 2014, 184. The Diocletian Edict on Maximum Prices indicates that a goldsmith’s work was charged according to weight; see Ogden 1992, 58.
61 On the production of glass gems, see Plantzos 1999, 38; for their association with non-elite wearers, see also Yarrow 2018. Pliny makes frequent reference to imitation gems, either made from glass or from cheaper stones dyed to look like more expensive jewels; e.g. HN 37.51, 37.79. The fourth-century AD Stockholm Papyrus contains 154 recipes for dyeing imitation precious stones and enhancing the brilliance of their colour; see Caley 1927.
63 On the classification and possible provenance of cornelian in antiquity, see Gliozzo 2019, 39-45.
64 According to Theophrastus (De Lap. 33), a stone's value was directly proportional to its rarity. HN 37.88.
65 Red glass ring-stones are found elsewhere: a group of gold jewellery from the House of Menander in Pompeii (I.10.4) includes two rings with red glass gems; Allison 2006, 96, nos. 472 and 474. Six more are set with green glass gems: ibid., 95-96, nos. 466, 471, 476-479.
66 Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (MANN), inv. nos 158750-158760;
68 Naples, MANN, inv. nos. 158770; cf. Pannuti 1975, no. 14. “Prase,” “chrysoprase,” and “plasma” are non-scientific terms frequently used in catalogues of ancient gems to describe translucent green chalcedony and quartz. For discussion, see Platz-Horster 2010.
69 The same pattern emerges at Caesarea Maritima: the majority of gems now in the Hendler Collection in Tel Aviv are cornelian and none of the glass gems are red. Moreover, only iron, bronze, and silver rings have been recovered from the site; cf. Hamburger 1968; Amorai-Stark, Hershkovitz 2015.
passive choice, determined by wealth, availability, and perhaps even sumptuary regulation. Many of the beachfront gems are also cursorily carved, articulating relative prosperity on an even narrower scale. But what is striking about the Herculaneum sample is that apart from E3128, all of the iron rings set with an engraved gem, as well as the one silver and one bronze ring, were found with male skeletons and all of the gold rings apart from E3088b were found with female skeletons. This is in line with Swift’s findings, which reveal a similar division based on ring diameter, and hence presumed gender: the largest rings she surveys are all made of iron, bronze, and silver, and the smaller of gold. Likewise, a hoard discovered beneath the floor of a house in Colchester destroyed during the Boudican revolt contained male and female jewellery types distinguished similarly by material: two pairs of gold earrings, a blue glass intaglio, and five gold rings – of which three are set with green stones – were stored together in a wooden box, separate from three military armillae made of silver. The grouping of the rings and the intaglio with the earrings suggests they all belonged to the same woman.

Discounting for now those gems found in the box in arch 12, we also see that six of the eight ‘male’ intaglios are cornelian, in contrast to the wider variety of stones found with the female skeletons, which include garnet, sardonyx, and blue glass. If we can assume that the other gold rings from the beachfront also belonged to women, which their small size would support, then we can add “chrysoprase” and more blue glass to the list. This colour division is not only paralleled at Colchester but also at Lons-le-Saunier, where Guiraud has detected a preference for green stones and green-coloured glass amongst the gems recovered from the drains beneath the women’s baths; perhaps significantly, none of the glass gems from the site are coloured red. As Platz-Horster has noted, the majority of green gems from the early imperial period that survive in their original settings are mounted in gold rings with diameters so small that they could only have been worn by young women or children; as at Colchester, examples from Pompeii, Oplontis, and Herculaneum have generally been found in sets with necklaces, pendants, and earrings. Function may explain this distinction, if we follow the Digest and believe that men wore gems for sealing and women for adornment. This implies that in addition or, indeed, contrary to designating wealth and status, the use of different materials (and colours) may have pointed to the sex of the wearer as well.

We do not know how engraved gems were priced, but as Pliny notes, the quality of carving contributed to their value (HN 33.6.22). A passage from Aelian’s Historia (12.30) also suggests that the price of intaglios was higher than that of uncut stones. We can, therefore, assume that less-finely carved gems were cheaper. For discussion, see Ogden 1992, 58; Plantzos 1999, 105-108.

Ward 2014, 194. E3088b was contained in the box found in arch 12, which also contained women’s jewellery, and so need not have belonged to either of the men who carried it.

Crummy et al. 2016.

Similar assemblages are associated with female skeletons from Herculaneum, Oplontis, and Pompeii; Ward 2014, nos. J31, J33-J34, J36.

Two of the ‘female’ gems are cornelian (E3650-E3651); see below for discussion.

PA-Erco inv. nos E3088b, E3133, E3250.

Guiraud 1995, 361-363. Conversely, of the 640 gems found at Castra Vetera in Xanten, only four are green (three “plasmas” and one chromium chalcedony); Platz-Horster 2010, 183 with fn. 18.


Digest 34.2.25.10.
Wearing male gender

The Herculaneum sample suggests, then, that the combination of cornelian and iron may have communicated male gender – or, perhaps, a specifically lower-class male identity. The evidence of the bones certainly points towards a gem-wearing group of non-elite males of broadly moderate to low socio-economic status who were engaged in varying degrees of physical labour over their lifetimes. And it is perhaps no coincidence that iron and bronze rings with cornelian intaglios are also prevalent in military contexts, suggesting further correlation between gender, economic status, and material.

As well as the functional factors discussed above, this association may in part have been determined by the physical properties and symbolic potential of the materials. Thanks to its durability and strength, as well as its functional association with farming and warfare, iron seems to have been readily elided with a kind of hyper virility: Pliny, for example, mentions iron goblets dedicated in the temple of Mars Ultor in Rome and an iron statue of Hercules made by Alcon as testament to the hero’s endurance. Wearing an iron ring may, therefore, have been a way for these men to claim a similar kind of machismo for themselves. It of course also symbolised appropriate masculine austerity in contrast to the feminine – and feminising – decadence of gold: so Pliny states that Republican senators only wore gold rings on embassy, preferring to wear iron in private.

Cornelian may in certain contexts have done the same. Red stones like jasper and cornelian were referred to as lapis adamas, meaning ‘dark red’ or ‘blood red,’ and we often find them engraved with appropriately hot-blooded iconography. Several of the ‘male’ gems from Herculaneum, for example, are engraved with motifs that are aggressive or martial in tone, including Athena Nikephoros (E3125) and a lion attacking a deer (E3124). The same motifs are common at military sites across the empire, and according to Swift’s analysis appear more frequently on large finger-rings in iron, bronze, or silver that were likely worn by men. Within her sample, these are typically engraved on red, brown, or orange stones.

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81 Ward 2014, nos. H3, H4, H5, H10, H23. This is perhaps not surprising given that only one sixth of the male population listed on Herculaneum’s “album of names” (CIL X.1403) had identifiable freeborn fathers; Wallace-Hadrill 2011, 145.
82 E.g. Henig 2007, 189, no. 27; see also Marshman 2015, 149 who notes that 49 percent of all iron rings from Britain come from military sites. Cornelian is the predominant stone at Castra Vetera; cf. Platz-Horster 1987, 153; 1994, 241; 2009, 132-133.
83 HN 34.39.
84 HN 34.40.141. See also Artemidorus Oneirocritica 1.50, 2.5.
85 HN 33.4.
86 Mastrocinque 2011, 62.
87 The association persists in literature: Posidippos, for example, describes a large cornelian engraved with an image of Darius driving a chariot that is unique amongst the other jewels in the Lithika for its not being worn by a woman (AB 8.1-2). We might instead imagine it mounted as a male pectoral; Kosmetatou 2003, 37; Kuttner 2005, 152-156; Rush 2012, 159.
88 Three loose cornelian intaglios and one red jasper intaglio contained in the box found in arch 12 are decorated with comparable motifs: Athena Nikephoros (E3106), an eagle with palm branch (E3107), Fortuna (E3108), and a mounted equestrian (E3109). On the evidence of the gems more confidently associated with male skeletons, we might assume these belonged to a man too.
including cornelian, jasper, sard, and brown glass.\(^\text{91}\)

It seems from this that the repetition of conventionalised motifs could work in tandem with the material and colour associations of the stone and its metal mount to promote an iconography of ideal masculinity.\(^\text{92}\) But where the materials used might have spoken outwardly about the gender of the wearer, the gem-motifs were necessarily involved in a more intimate, internal dialogue: they are too small to be seen at any distance, their surfaces too reflective, and many too cursorily carved, rendering them most visible to the wearer and to privileged intimates. As well as advertising identity publicly or to a select community of peers, therefore, we should think of these gems as also presenting an image to their wearer that bolstered their sense of self. So skeleton E18, that of a young man in his twenties whose bones reveal the signs of regular heavy labour,\(^\text{93}\) was found with a silver finger-ring set with a cornelian intaglio engraved with a standing nude warrior shown gazing at a helmet in his upraised hand (E3068) (FIG. 5).\(^\text{94}\) The type is usually identified as Achilles deliberating whether or not to join the fight at Troy\(^\text{95}\) and again appears frequently on gems from military contexts.\(^\text{96}\) Far from a straightforward illustration of the Homeric hero, however, this is a labile image that fluctuates between a representation of the mythic and the generic, inviting a double reading as both Achilles and a mortal warrior;\(^\text{97}\) it could even be Mars.\(^\text{98}\) And as the image flickers into and out of focus on the reflective surface of the gem, the viewer’s consideration of the warrior’s identity mirrors the warrior’s contemplation of his armour, allowing the viewer to see himself in Achilles’s image and perhaps prompting a moment of (self-) scrutiny. Rendered desirable by the material seductions of the stone, the warrior provides a masculine standard for the ring’s owner to try on and make their own.\(^\text{99}\)

The choice of cornelian, however, may have done more than underline the virility of these images – and hence of their wearers. The stone’s fiery properties made it a popular choice for protective amulets in the Roman world: representations of Herakles fighting the Nemean lion, for example, are common on both cornelian and red jasper, often accompanied by magical inscriptions to form a potent combination of colour, image, and text that was thought to combat colic.\(^\text{100}\) This suggests that the Herculaneum cornelians might also have functioned as protective talismans,\(^\text{101}\) harnessing the powers of ferocious animals, heroes, and warlike gods to safeguard their wearers’ bodies and hence also their masculine identities.\(^\text{102}\) In this context,
the poor legibility of many of the devices would be of less significance than the image being incised on the stone and the wearer’s knowledge of its proximity to their body. Indeed, many of the other cornelian gems found with male skeletons are engraved with images of Mercury and Fortuna, or else with attributes associated with prosperity and luck, and are likely to have been worn as amulets. Fortuna appears on a cornelian and iron ring found with a teenage boy (E3122), and Mercury on two more cornelians (E3301 and E3304), one of which is set in an iron ring (Fig. 6). A loose cornelian intaglio is engraved with a hand holding poppy heads and ears of grain (E3512) (Fig. 7). This was a popular device on Republican gems and was likely worn as an amulet guaranteeing sustenance, glory, and wealth. The Mercury and Fortuna device-types are also common, repeating standard representations in various media: as Swift notes, they are especially evident in domestic and commercial settings in Pompeii and Herculaneum – as bronzes in private lararia or painted on the walls of bakeries and tablina – where the gods are invoked in their roles as bringers of good luck and financial prosperity. Their presence in these spaces suggests their special relevance to ordinary, working Romans involved in commerce and craft, and we might want to characterise the beachfront gem-wearers similarly. The replication of imagery certainly points to a replication of function, albeit on a reduced scale: the gems become portable lararia, not only multiplying the gods’ presence but also making it personal and mobile on the reflective surface of the stone. As a result, the wearer’s ability to handle the representations – to rotate the gems in the light, as Posidippos instructs – empowers them to animate the gods’ images and literally turn fate and fortune around in their hand.

Of course, neither deity was depicted on gems worn exclusively by the middle and lower classes. But at Herculaneum, the quality of carving and, in some cases, the use of iron would have indicated the economic reality of the wearer, making these rings as much a statement of economic status as anything else. It is consequently hard not to explain Mercury’s popularity, in particular, in terms of his appeal to merchants and businessmen, and to see these gems as giving voice and protection to a specifically male non-elite identity. We might think of the painted frieze that depicts Trimalchio’s rise to prominence in Petroni-

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103 Hamburger 1968, 3. For rituals of consecration used to activate magical stones, see e.g., Nagy 2008, 35.
104 Fortuna also appears on a cornelian found in the arch 12 box (E 3108) and on another associated with a female skeleton (E3650). Fortuna and Mercury are in fact the first and third most popular deities on gems from Herculaneum as a whole, for the most part carved on cornelian intaglios and set into iron rings; Allen 2016, 73.
105 Golyżniak 2020, 125. A similar gem was found in Pompeii; cf. Pannuti 1983, 175, no. 336.
106 Swift 2017, 176.
107 Molesworth, Henig 2011, 184.
108 Bailey has emphasised how the physical sense of control afforded by holding small objects could be both reassuring and empowering; Bailey 2005, 33.
109 Augustus, for example, appears as Mercury on a sard intaglio attributed to Solon: London, British Museum, acc. no. 2001,0301.1; cf. Boardman 1968, no. 19.
110 Although dating to the second century AD, the so-called Snettisham Jeweller’s Hoard contained 110 unmounted cornelian intaglios and another 20 set into silver rings, for the most part engraved with images of Fortuna, Mercury, and Bonus Eventus. The assemblage likely represents a stock of ready-made jewels intended for customers not wealthy enough to commission bespoke pieces – though of course still of above average means; Maaskant-Kleibrink 1992; Henig 1997; Johns 1997.
111 Henig 1970, 249. According to Artemidorus (Oneirocritica 2.37), Mercury is a helper to all people involved in commerce. He appears on the walls of numerous shops in Pompeii: e.g., VI.7.8-11, IX.7.1, IX.7.6; see Clarke 2003, 106-109.
112 Mercury was patronised as a god of young men; Swift 2017, 176.
us’s *Satyricon* for comparison, where Mercury and Fortuna symbolise the importance of work – and of wealth derived from work – to Trimalchio’s sense of his own social identity. In a similar vein, these images constituted an acknowledgement, as well as guarantor, of the fact that the wearer’s status rested on work and relied, to an extent, on good fortune.

This asks us to recognise the ways in which those outside of the political elite may have worn gems to signal and safeguard their non-elite identity as such – not to outdo or imitate their superiors, as so much ancient literature would have us believe. Other gem-devices negotiated status differently, however, offering their viewers alternative identities to try on. Dionysus and his entourage are conspicuous across the Herculaneum gems, not just at the beachfront (E3299) (Fig. 8), but also on examples found throughout the city, especially in contexts that we might characterise as non-elite. A cache of seven loose gems, for example, was found inside the remains of a wicker basket on the mezzanine above a bakery at *insula or. II*, 8, including a glass cameo depicting the bust of a laughing satyr, a rock crystal intaglio engraved with a tiny *thyrsus*, and an agate cameo with a scene of satyrs and maenads making a sacrifice (Figs 9-11).

Representations of the Dionysiac *thiasos* are amongst the most frequently depicted devices on early imperial gems, typically replicating well-known statue types. Many scholars ascribe the popularity of these images to an uncomplicated Roman desire for all things ‘Greek looking,’ but such a view is limiting. We have accepted how the replication of Dionysiac imagery in larger-scale media – with its themes of partying, sleeping, and sexual pursuit – created spaces of Dionysiac leisure and pleasure in Roman domestic settings, and might think of their replication on engraved gems as being similarly constructive of Dionysiac persona. Examining the bakery gems permits their viewer to take up the maenad’s *thyrsus* for real, or in the case of the glass cameo, to become the satyr’s body and legs, releasing the image from its material and themselves, perhaps, of inhibition, to revel like the satyrs seen in other media (Fig. 12). By providing a more liberated personality to put on and perform in this way, we can see how such images may have allowed their viewers not only to imagine themselves part of Dionysus’s retinue but also to dance free of society’s constraints altogether.

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113 On non-elite art patronage, see e.g., D’Ambra, Métraux 2006; Petersen 2006; Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 436. On gems in particular, see Yarrow 2018.

114 Counted collectively, Dionysiac images are the second most frequent device-type on gems from the town; Allen 2016, 117.


118 Naples, MANN, inv. no. 155868; cf. Pannuti 1983, 34, no. 43. Despite the location, the stone types indicate significant wealth, reminding us that non-elite rank did not always equate to limited financial means.

119 An overview is provided by Overbeck, Overbeck 2005.

120 Plantzos 1999, 91; Zanker 2004, 125; Boardman 2009, 9.


122 Dionysus was a god whose capacity to subvert society’s strictures made him popular with Rome’s most powerful and least enfranchised inhabitants alike; e.g. Tibullus 1.7.41-42; Plutarch *Moralia* 613c; Aelius Aristides 2.331.
Wearing female gender

Turning to the female skeletons from Herculaneum, we find a set of gemstones that are similarly in dialogue with their wearer’s gender. As mentioned, the female jewellery is characterised by the prominence of gold rings and of blue, purple, and green stones, both hardstone and glass. If women’s gems were worn for decoration and not for sealing, it follows that women’s jewellery may have made more frequent use of delicate, less practical materials like glass and gold foil. But the colour choice is also significant. We have noted the gendered preference for green gems at Lons-le-Saunier and the frequency with which green stones are mounted in gold rings, typically of small size and often associated with other items of female jewellery. Appropriately, intaglios made from green stones tend to be engraved with bucolic or erotic subjects, suggesting that these gems were symbolic or protective of fertility. Cleopatra was also thought to be fond of emeralds, giving the stone – or its glass imitations – the potential to lend its wearer equivalent charisma. Purple and blue stones may have had the same effect: a series of blue gems, usually of lapis lazuli or blue glass, are engraved with Aphrodite Anadyomene, often with an accompanying inscription that confirms their use as love charms, the goddess seems also to have worked her magic with amethysts.

It is perhaps significant given the erotic and talismanic potential of the stones that if we look at the ages of the female skeletons, we see a distinct grouping of bodies aged 16-20 and 30-50. This has led Ward to suggest that the jewellery is, in the case of the younger females, linked to marriage or perhaps childbirth, and we are reminded that gold rings were reputedly given to women on their betrothal. The gem-motifs also play on ideals of desirability. Six of the nine ‘female’ intaglios are engraved with birds – a common motif on gems that Henig suggests were used as love-tokens. Most famous from the site is a solid gold ring set with a garnet intaglio engraved with a hen and three chicks (E3058), found still being worn by the skeleton of a woman in her forties, whose bones and jewellery indicate considerable wealth. It is tempting to see this gem as a playful token of the wearer’s (implied) status as materfamilias, but birds seemingly also had a part to play in articulating identities of

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123 Supra n. 79. The association is continued on painted mummy portraits from Roman period Egypt; Borg 1996, 167-172; Platz-Horster 2010, 189.
124 Platz-Horster 2010, 190-191.
125 Berg 2002, 40. Pliny describes the green of smaragdi as hyper-verdant (HN 37.62-63); see Bradley 2009, 102.
126 See Lucan De Bello Civili 10. Most Roman period emeralds came from mines in the Sikait-Zubura region of Egypt, strengthening the association further; Shaw et al. 1999.
127 For Cleopatra as the embodiment of female libidinousness, see Walker, Ashton 2006, 51.
128 Faraone 2011, 54-55.
129 Pliny notes that amethysts were known as ‘eyelids of Venus’ (HN 37.123-124). A Hellenistic epigram also describes a magic wheel dedicated to Aphrodite decorated with amethysts; Gow, Page 1965, no. 35.
130 Ward 2014, 196. See also, Ward this volume.
131 Tertullian Apol. 6.4; HN 33.12. See Stout 2001, 78; Henig 2005, 57-66; Harlow 2012, 149. In the case of the older women, it is likewise tempting to imagine their jewellery marking their married status or even their financial independence as matronae.
134 Hens were symbolic of fertility, maternal instinct, and female libido (HN 10.146, 10.155; Phaedrus Fab. 10). Bisel’s suggestion that the wearer of the ring had given birth to two or three children cannot, however, be substantiated; see Ward 2014, 115 contra Bisel, Bisel 2002, 461-463.
younger women, notably of marriageable age. For example, the two hollow gold rings mentioned earlier are associated with the skeleton of a young woman in her late teens, and are both set with blue glass intaglios engraved with a miniature parrot in left profile. A woman in her thirties was found with a solid gold ring set with an amethyst intaglio, probably of early first-century BC date, engraved with the same motif (E3662) (Fig. 13).

Parrots were closely connected to Dionysus in Roman art, and two of the Herculaneum examples hold miniature cymbals in their beaks as though about to join the Dionysiac procession. Aristotle notes that parrots become less inhibited in their mimicry after drinking wine, suggesting that they may – like other Dionysiac imagery on gems – have symbolised the liberation that was offered by the god’s worship, especially to women. But they also draw the wearer into the world of Hellenistic *tryphe* and elegiac desire: Ovid, for example, gives a parrot to his beloved Corinna as an exotic gift from the East, a literary gesture that is itself modelled on Catullus’s sparrow, famously mourned by his lover Lesbia. By tapping into this language of literary gift-giving, these gems permit their wearers to imagine themselves as desirable as the *puellae* of elegy, perhaps even as Aphrodite herself, not just dressed with jewels (also brought from the East, like Ovid’s parrot) but with their own little bird perched on their finger. The same conceit is played out on a tiny green “plasma” intaglio engraved with a bird and set in a gold ring that was found beneath the floor of the hall at Fishbourne palace in Sussex. The ring’s small size implies that it was worn by a woman, as does the combination of green stone and gold mount.

Two other women from the beach at Herculaneum wore intaglios depicting birds of prey. The first is a horizontally banded sardonyx set in a solid gold ring (E3673) (Fig. 14). The stone shape and ring type indicate a first-century BC date, while the motif suggests Alexandrian production: it shows a hawk wearing the double crown of Egypt, standing with closed wings on a short ground-line. The device is paralleled by a brown cornelian in Oxford of early third-century BC date and has been interpreted as a symbol of Ptolemy I Soter. It

135 Supra, p. 363.
139 The use of amethyst promotes the association further: the stone was thought to prevent drunkenness (*HN* 37.124) and is frequently engraved with Dionysiac imagery.
140 Aristotle *Hist. Anim.* 8.12
141 See Kraemer 1979; Williams, Ogden 1994, 39.
142 *Amores* 2.6.
143 Catullus 3; cf. Hinds 1987, 7. On sparrows and other birds as pets for women, see Henig 1970, 151.
144 On Aphrodite’s association with doves, see e.g., Breitenberger 2013, 15-16.
145 That Lesbia’s sparrow has been read as a phallic metaphor only enhances the latent eroticism of the motif further; cf. Hoover 1985.
146 Henig 2007, 89, no. 671. For “plasma,” see supra n. 69.
147 Ibid., 151.
149 Scatozza Höricht emphasises an Alexandrian influence on the Herculaneum jewellery generally; *Monili Ercolano*, 101.
also resembles the distinctive ‘Ptolemaic eagle,’ shown uncrowned but standing on a thunderbolt, which was the standard reverse type of the vast majority of Ptolemaic coinage from Ptolemy I to Cleopatra VII.\textsuperscript{151} We might assume from this that the ring was an heirloom,\textsuperscript{152} and that its female owner was of significant socio-economic standing;\textsuperscript{153} although the skeleton has only been analysed in terms of sex and age, it was also found with a pair of solid gold snake bracelets,\textsuperscript{154} another solid gold ring,\textsuperscript{155} and a gold ornament.\textsuperscript{156}

Where depictions of eagles on Roman gems have been characterised generally as relating to the Roman army and intended for male wearers,\textsuperscript{157} an association with Ptolemaic Egypt permits a different reading,\textsuperscript{158} not only connoting the material splendours of the Alexandrian court but also the spoils of the Roman empire.\textsuperscript{159} It is not implausible that, following the display and distribution of plundered money during Octavian’s Egyptian triumph,\textsuperscript{160} first-century Roman viewers may have associated the motif specifically with Cleopatra – on whose coins the comparable eagle-type also appears.\textsuperscript{161} As well as styling herself as a collector of gems in the manner of the Ptolemaic queens,\textsuperscript{162} or better yet, as a Roman connoisseur of Alexandrian art,\textsuperscript{163} therefore, the female wearer of the Herculaneum gem perhaps also dared to assume some of Cleopatra’s authority and allure as she placed the ring on her finger.\textsuperscript{164}

The second intaglio is cornelian and mounted in an iron ring (E3128) (Fig. 15),\textsuperscript{165} an anomalous combination amongst the female skeletons that may imply a lower socio-economic status.\textsuperscript{166} The gem depicts a bird perched on a low column pouring water from its beak into a basin. Although catalogued as an eagle by Scatozza Höricht,\textsuperscript{167} it can be identified

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{151} Mørkholm 1991, 66 with figs. 97-98.  
\textsuperscript{152} Under Roman law, women could stipulate which jewels were to be buried with them and which to be inherited by their survivors; Oliver 2000, 117-120. Most famously, Augustus is said to have worn a ring with an intaglio of a sphinx that had belonged to his mother (HN 37.10).  
\textsuperscript{153} Ward 2014, 191.  
\textsuperscript{154} Monili Vesuviana, 92, no. 279.  
\textsuperscript{155} Monili Vesuviana, 96, no. 298.  
\textsuperscript{156} Monili Vesuviana, 105, no. 349.  
\textsuperscript{157} Swift 2017, 174; Sagiv 2018, 105-107.  
\textsuperscript{158} The Ptolemaic eagle appears on a number of Italian coin issues from the second century BC that may signal Ptolemaic support, indicating how the type continued to connote Ptolemaic power in Italy; Meadows 1998, 128.  
\textsuperscript{159} On Ptolemaic patronage of engraved gems, see e.g., Plantzos 1999, 63-64.  
\textsuperscript{160} See Suetonius Aug. 41.  
\textsuperscript{161} For the coinage of Cleopatra VII, see Svoronos 1904, nos. 1871-1873. Two portraits of Cleopatra have been identified in frescoes from Herculaneum and Pompeii; see Ashton 2009, 193. An association with Isis is also possible. On the goddess’ worship and representation at Pompeii, see Swetnam-Burland 2015, 105-141; see also Heyob 1975 for the cult’s specific appeal to women.  
\textsuperscript{162} See e.g., Kuttner 2005.  
\textsuperscript{163} Juvenal satirises Sertorius’ wife Bibula, desperate to buy an engraved gem that once belonged to Berenice (Sat. 6.156-157).  
\textsuperscript{164} Cleopatra seduces Mark Antony and Julius Caesar in a palace glittering with gems in Lucan’s De Bello Civili 10. For the relationship between Cleopatra’s love of gems and greed for power, see Walker, Ashton 2006, 51.  
\textsuperscript{165} Skeleton E60; cf. Ward 2014, 139-140, no. H12; following Capasso 2001, 537-540.  
\textsuperscript{166} This was also the only item of jewellery associated with the skeleton.  
\textsuperscript{167} Monili Ercolano, 63, no. 94.}
as a raven based on similar motifs on other gems. This invites an association with Apollo and perhaps indicates a religious function for the stone, symbolising the god’s powers of prophecy and inspiration. Yet, the bird was also a troubling symbol of garrulosity and greed: Ovid relates in his Fasti, for example, that when the god ordered the raven to fetch water from a fountain it became distracted by a tree laden with figs and instead waited for them to ripen, gorging itself and then fabricating an excuse to explain its failure to collect the water. Apollo punishes the bird for its mendacity by forbidding it to drink water for the period of time it takes for a fig to ripen. The raven is also punished by Apollo in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, but this time for revealing the truth about his lover Coronis’ adulterer. On the one hand, the seemingly contradictory episodes expose the slipperiness of truth-telling and reported speech, but Ovid’s raven also signals the dangers of intemperance: in both cases, the bird fails to exercise due restraint, either of its tongue or its appetite. Transferred to an item of jewellery, the motif may consequently have cautioned its wearer against excessive self-adornment, even as the basin reinforces the importance of cultus to the definition of ideal femininity, evoking the numerous images of bathing women seen elsewhere on Roman glyptic.

On one level, then, these gems served to bolster their wearer’s sense of her own attractiveness, perhaps securing Aphrodite’s support through the use of blue and purple stones. But they also provided a gendered paradigm – predicated on refinement and physical desirability – that spoke across socio-economic divisions. It is perhaps remarkable given this potential, then, that images of Aphrodite herself are almost entirely absent from the beachfront material, and that her one appearance is on a garnet intaglio set in a solid gold ring found with the skeleton of a child aged between six and ten (E3129) (FIG. 16). Although it can be hard to determine the sex of pre-pubescent skeletons, Capasso has identified the child as female, inviting us to think about the kinds of images that were considered appropriate for young girls.

168 Compare a “chrysoprase” intaglio from the fortress baths at Caerleon: Cardiff, National Museum of Wales, inv. no. 81.79H/4.6. The stone is probably chromium chalcedony, see supra n. 69. See also a banded agate intaglio from Xanten with a long-tailed bird perched on the lip of a basin next to a columnar fountain; Platz-Horster 1987, 137-138, no. 247.
169 A raven accompanies Apollo as he makes a libation on an Attic white-ground kylix in Delphi: Archaeological Museum inv. 8140 (Beazley 5522). The Castalian spring was also considered a source of poetic inspiration (e.g., Virgil Georgics 3.293).
170 Ovid Fasti 2.243-266.
171 Ovid Met. 2.542-632.
172 See Newlands 1991 for discussion.
173 Gems feature prominently on the bodies of problematic women in Roman literature, symbolising female decadence and greed in contrast to idealised values of modesty and restraint: so Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, famously eschewed personal ornament, claiming her sons as decoration enough (Valerius Maximus 4.4); see e.g., Bowditch 2006; Wyke 2002, 42-44; Rimell 2006, 68.
174 Compare a banded glass intaglio from Pompeii: Naples, MANN, inv. no. 158797; cf. Pannuti 1983, 125, no. 207. It was considered a woman’s duty to uphold ideals of beauty and cultivation whilst also maintaining appropriate modesty; D’Ambra 2000, 102. For discussion of Roman cultus and the control of women’s bodies, see also Sharrock 1991; Wyke 1994, 141; Kleiner, Matheson 1996, 13.
175 She appears often on Roman glyptic as a whole, as on other items of jewellery and female toiletry articles; Segal 2011, 76; Swift 2017, 181.
177 Supra n. 52.
178 Op. cit. n. 176. Analysis of her bones and teeth implies that she may have been the daughter of wealthy parents; Bisel, Bisel 2002, 463.
and that might therefore be indicative of childhood identity.\textsuperscript{179} Significantly, though, the motif has also proved difficult to classify in terms of gender. Although catalogued by Scatozza Höricht as the Diadoumenos, the iconography and choice of stone make Aphrodite Anadyomene more likely:\textsuperscript{180} with hipshot pose and upraised arms, the nude goddess meets her viewer’s gaze head-on, inviting a moment of communion that seems to say that all little girls will grow into goddesses, bodying forth in miniature the physical charm that would guarantee this mini adult her future role as wife and mother. Indeed, Plautus’s Epidicus asks the young Telestis if she remembers him giving her a ring and a \textit{lunula} on her birthday,\textsuperscript{181} not only indicating that it was convention for young girls to wear jewellery like this but also hinting that the two objects may have performed similar functions, both as markers of the wearer’s girlhood and guardians of her transition into womanhood. Viewed as an amulet in this way, the potential to rotate the stone in the light and refocus the image as the Diadoumenos in fact gains agency,\textsuperscript{182} protecting the girl’s status as a child – for whom sexuality was not yet, but soon would be, a concern – by rendering gender fluid.\textsuperscript{183} The same mechanism perhaps underlines the popularity of theatre-masks on gems worn by children,\textsuperscript{184} turning their wearer into a mini actor and offering protection by disrupting the legibility of their gender, body, and persona.\textsuperscript{185}

This helps reinforce the evidence of Herculaneum’s adult gem-wearers, which indicates the use of conventional iconographies and stone types to establish, and lay claim to, normative gender identities in ways that spoke to and across the boundaries of social status. We have seen that, for female wearers at least, gems may also have articulated different life-stages, while for others gem-images facilitated fanciful changes of state and the liberation of identity. Most usefully, though, this little girl’s gem-set ring reiterates the importance of taking engraved gems seriously as image-bearing objects whose capacity to stamp or incise identity onto the body of their wearer was enhanced by the physical qualities of the stone and activated through proximity to the body and private contemplation. Aphrodite demands attention in every medium and on every scale, but it is only when transferred to the polished surface of a gemstone that the goddess’ ability to entice hand and eye permits her viewer to try on her \textit{charis} and see their own image reflected in her shimmer.

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\textsuperscript{180} Compare Plantzos 1999, 75, pl. 40, nos. 247-248. The use of a purple stone also evokes Aphrodite’s material association with amethysts; \textit{supra} n. 129.
\textsuperscript{181} Plautus \textit{Epidicus} 639-640.
\textsuperscript{182} On pictorial ambiguity as a deliberate mode of representation on ancient glyptic, see Çakmak 2009; McGowan 2018.
\textsuperscript{183} See Harlow 2017, 45 on the \textit{toga praetexta}.
\textsuperscript{184} Swift 2017, 171.
\textsuperscript{185} Actors and acting were problematised in elite literary sources on these terms; Duncan 2006, 188. On the etymological slippage in Latin between ‘person,’ ‘persona,’ and ‘mask,’ see Clarke 2007, 34.
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<td>Male; Male</td>
<td>31-40; 41-50</td>
<td>Arch 12; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 6; Monili Vesuviana no. 341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3108</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting Fortuna</td>
<td>E61; E62</td>
<td>Male; Male</td>
<td>31-40; 41-50</td>
<td>Arch 12; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 2; Monili Vesuviana no. 337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3109</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting a mounted equestrian</td>
<td>E61; E62</td>
<td>Male; Male</td>
<td>31-40; 41-50</td>
<td>Arch 12; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 5; Monili Vesuviana no. 338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3114</td>
<td>Blue, white, and brown glass cameo depicting a bust of Victory</td>
<td>E61; E62</td>
<td>Male; Male</td>
<td>31-40; 41-50</td>
<td>Arch 12; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 12; Monili Vesuviana no. 343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3122/ E3127</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio (separated) depicting Fortuna</td>
<td>E36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>Beachfront; on body</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 3; Monili Vesuviana no. 316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3124</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting a lion attacking a deer</td>
<td>E35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Beachfront; on body</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 7; Monili Vesuviana no. 342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3125</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Athena Nikephoros</td>
<td>E56</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>Arch 12; on finger</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 93; Monili Vesuviana no. 317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3128</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio depicting a raven at a basin</td>
<td>E60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>Outside Arch 12; on finger</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3129</td>
<td>Gold ring with garnet intaglio depicting Aphrodite Anadyomene</td>
<td>E132</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>Arch 5; on body</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3133</td>
<td>Gold ring with blue glass intaglio depicting a crow</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Arch 12</td>
<td>Monili Vesuviana no. 319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3155</td>
<td>Bronze ring with black jasper intaglio depicting a hand holding a mouse, with cornucopia and caduceus</td>
<td>E1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Arch 3; on body</td>
<td>Monili Ercolano no. 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3250</td>
<td>Gold ring with blue glass intaglio depicting a cornucopia</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Arch 11</td>
<td>Stori no. I.61; Monili Vesuviana no. 318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3285</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting a running quadroped (hare?)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Beachfront</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Item No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Find Site</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3299</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Dionysus with a panther</td>
<td>E35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Beachfront; near skeleton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3301</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting Mercury</td>
<td>E69</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Beachfront</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3304</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Mercury</td>
<td>E121</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Beachfront</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3300</td>
<td>Iron ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Victory</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Beachfront</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E3512</td>
<td>Cornelian intaglio depicting a hand holding poppy seed heads and ears of grain</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Beachfront</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3650</td>
<td>Gold ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Fortuna</td>
<td>E8-11; E8-12</td>
<td>Female; Unknown</td>
<td>16-20; 6-10</td>
<td>Arch 8; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Storie no. I.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3651</td>
<td>Gold ring with cornelian intaglio depicting Nemesis</td>
<td>E8-11; E8-12</td>
<td>Female; Unknown</td>
<td>16-20; 6-10</td>
<td>Arch 8; inside wooden box</td>
<td>Storie no. I.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3662</td>
<td>Gold ring with amethyst intaglio depicting a parrot with cymbals</td>
<td>E7-8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Arch 7; on body</td>
<td>Storie no. I.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3664</td>
<td>Gold ring with blue glass intaglio depicting a parrot with cymbals</td>
<td>E8-18; E8-21</td>
<td>Female; Unknown</td>
<td>16-20; Unknown</td>
<td>Arch 8; between the skeletons</td>
<td>Storie no. I.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3665</td>
<td>Gold ring with blue glass intaglio depicting a parrot with cymbals</td>
<td>E8-18; E8-21</td>
<td>Female; Unknown</td>
<td>16-20; Unknown</td>
<td>Arch 8; between the skeletons</td>
<td>Storie no. I.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3667</td>
<td>Chalcedony-onyx intaglio depicting Nemesis</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Arch 10</td>
<td>Monili Vesuviana no. 335; De Carolis 1995 no. 57</td>
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<tr>
<td>E3673</td>
<td>Gold ring with sardonyx intaglio depicting a hawk with the double crown of Egypt</td>
<td>E13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Arch 8; on body</td>
<td>Storie no. I.103; Monili Vesuviana no. 307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3834</td>
<td>Banded agate intaglio depicting a cockerel and poppy seed head</td>
<td>E7-2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Arch 7; on body</td>
<td>Storie no. I.191; Monili Vesuviana no. 340; De Carolis 1995 no. 6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4302</td>
<td>Sardonyx intaglio depicting a mask (?)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Arch 10</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table 1** – Engraved gemstones from the beachfront at Herculaneum, with associated skeletons and find sites.
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Photo: © Michael C. Carlos Museum.

Photo: Public Domain.

FIG. 3 – Cornelian intaglio with seated artist painting a portrait bust, first century AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 81.6.48. Gift of John Taylor Johnston, 1881.
Photo: Public Domain.
Fig. 4 – Cornelian intaglio with seated muse (Melpomene) contemplating a mask, first century BC-AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 41.160.702. Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941. Photo: Public domain.

Fig. 5 – Silver ring with cornelian intaglio with standing warrior, first century AD. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3068. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attivita Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 6 – Iron ring with cornelian intaglio with Mercury, first century AD. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3304. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attivita Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.
Fig. 7 – Cornelian intaglio with hand holding ears of grain, second half of the first century BC. Herculaneum, PA-Erco, inv. no. E3512. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 8 – Iron ring with cornelian intaglio with Dionysus, first century AD. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3299. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 9 – Rock crystal intaglio with *thyrsus*, first century BC. From Herculaneum, found in the remains of a wicker basket in the bakery at *ins. or.* II, 8. Naples, MANN, inv. 155872. Photo: author’s own, su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.
Fig. 10 – Glass cameo with bust of a satyr, first century AD. From Herculaneum, found in the remains of a wicker basket in the bakery at ins. or. II, 8. Naples, MANN, inv. 155871. Photo: su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

Fig. 11 – Agate cameo with sacro-Idyllic scene, late first century BC-AD. From Herculaneum, found in the remains of a wicker basket in the bakery at ins. or. II, 8. Naples, MANN, inv. 155868. Photo: author’s own, su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.
Fig. 12 – Detail of dancing satyr from the Borghese Vase, 40-30 BC. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. MR 985. Photo: Public Domain, courtesy of Marie-Lan Nguyen.
Fig. 13 – Gold ring with amethyst intaglio with parrot, first century BC. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3662. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 14 – Gold ring with sardonyx intaglio with eagle, first century BC. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3673. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 15 – Iron ring with cornelian intaglio with raven and basin, first century AD. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3128. Photo: author’s own, sul concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

Fig. 16 – Gold ring with garnet intaglio with Aphrodite Anadyomene, first century AD. Herculaneum, PA-Erco inv. no. E3129 (now missing). Photo: Monili Ercolano.