

# Amethystus: Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection

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**Pedroni, Luigi**

*Source / Izvornik:* **ASMOSIA XI, Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone, Proceedings of the XI International Conference of ASMOSIA, 2018, 167 - 171**

**Conference paper / Rad u zborniku**

*Publication status / Verzija rada:* **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.31534/XI.asmosia.2015/01.15>

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:123:361886>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-04-24**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

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# ASMOSIA XI

Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone

## PROCEEDINGS

of the XI ASMOSIA Conference, Split 2015

Edited by Daniela Matetić Poljak and Katja Marasović



Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone  
Proceedings of the XI ASMOSIA Conference (Split 2015)

Publishers:

ARTS ACADEMY IN SPLIT  
UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

and

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT  
FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING,  
ARCHITECTURE AND GEODESY

Technical editor:  
Kate Bošković

English language editor:  
Graham McMaster

Computer pre-press:  
Nikola Križanac

Cover design:  
Mladen Čulić

Cover page:

*Sigma shaped mensa of pavonazzetto marble from Diocletian's palace in Split*

ISBN 978-953-6617-49-4 (Arts Academy in Split)

ISBN 978-953-6116-75-1 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

e-ISBN 978-953-6617-51-7 (Arts Academy in Split)

e-ISBN 978-953-6116-79-9 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

CIP available at the digital catalogue of the University Library in Split, no 170529005

Association for the Study of Marble & Other Stones in Antiquity

# ASMOSIA XI

## Interdisciplinary Studies of Ancient Stone

Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of ASMOSIA,  
Split, 18–22 May 2015

Edited by  
Daniela Matetić Poljak  
Katja Marasović



Split, 2018

**Nota bene**

All papers are subjected to an international review.

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# AMETHYSTUS: ANCIENT PROPERTIES AND ICONOGRAPHIC SELECTION

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the amethyst, a popular stone in Roman jewelry. In order to investigate the intentionality of the artists in the selection of the iconographies carved on them, some amethysts bearing artist's signature are analyzed. The stone had a strong connection with wine and, consequently, with the Dionysiac *thiasos*, for its violet/purple color. Its use for marine subjects is not surprising: the choice originates from the old tradition that connected the sea, Aphrodite and the wine.

Furthermore, some amethysts could be interpreted in antiquity as hyacinths, purple stones probably connected with mourning.

In conclusion, in the case of the *amethystus*, the study of the relationship between gemstones and images provides some interesting results. Four groups of iconographies, in various ways interconnected, have been identified: Dionysian/vinous subjects; those associated with Mercury or skill in oratory; marine themes; Venus/Eros iconographies.

## Keywords

amethyst, hyacinth, Pliny

Amethyst is a purplish/pinkish-violet variety of quartz, which owes its particular color to iron impurities, in some cases in conjunction with other trace elements.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek word ἀμέθυστος may be translated as “not drunken”, from Greek ἀ - μεθύω (literally: “do not intoxicate”). For this reason, amethyst was considered by a long and widespread tradition to be a strong antidote against drunkenness<sup>2</sup> and one of the earliest references

to the amethyst as a symbol of sobriety is in a poem by Asclepiades of Samos at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>3</sup>

The main ancient source on amethyst is the thirty-seventh book of the Natural History of Pliny (*NH* 37.121-124), which places it among the purple gems. The Roman naturalist provides us a list based on the quality of the stones: the best would originate from India, to which should be added those of Petra, Armenia Minor, Egypt and Galatia; of poor quality, those from the islands of Thasos and Cyprus.

A second Plinian list deals with the color of the *amethystus* according to the origin: Indian stones were of Phoenician purple color; another variety would have been very similar to the stone called *hyacinthos*; those of lighter color, from Arabia. Then there were the wine-colored varieties; finally, the very pale *amethystus*, similar chromatically to *crystallus*, the rock crystal, was the less valuable. Closing the list of the colors of the *amethystus*, Pliny adds that the stones, in which violet faded to pink, were called *paederotas*, a name that was attributed also to a kind of acanthus, or *anterotas*, mutual love, or simply, the eyelids of Venus.

According to some false beliefs of the Magi, rejected with his usual derision by Pliny, the *amethystus* might aid people wishing to speak to a king. This information could be a simple corollary of that about the main properties of the stone, which would have prevented drunkenness: a sober person, in fact, would not only hypothetically have had the chance to argue more clearly, avoiding speaking under the influence of alcohol that loosens inhibitions,<sup>4</sup> but also would have avoided annoying their interlocutor with particularly heavy breath. Moreover, according to the Magi, with the addition of certain magical formulas, the amethystus would have prevented hail and locusts; finally, worn around the neck, hung with hairs from dogs' heads and dove feathers, it would have guarded against evil.

1 PARASCANDOLA 1969, 352; MOTTANA-CRESPI-LIBORIO 1977, n. 71.

2 Theophr. *Lap.* 31; Plin. *NH* 37.124: “*Magorum vanitas ebrietati eas resistere promittit et indea appellatas*”. In general: Isid. *Etym.* 16.9.1: “*Inter purpureas gemmas principatum amethystus Indicus tenet. Amethystus purpureus est permixto violacio colore; et quasi rosae nitor, et leniter quasdam flammulas fundens. Alterum eius genus descendit ad iacinthos. Causam nominis eius afferunt quia sit quiddam in purpura illius non ex toto ig-*

*neum, sed vini colorem habens. Est autem sculpturis facilis: genera eius quinque*”; Beda *Explan.* 3.21.20; Psell. *Lapid.* 4; Cecco *Acerba* 3.18.51-56.

3 Asklep. 9.752 AP = 44 G-P. Cf. GUTZWILLER 1995.

4 Well known effect in antiquity: Eschil. *apud* Athen. 10.427f; Theogn. 499-500; Plat. *Leg.* 649d-650b.





Fig. 1. Amethyst with Mark Antony's portrait  
(photo: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/131459/signed-by-gnaios-engraved-gem-set-into-aring-greco-roman-gem-about-40-20-bc-ring-19th-century-ad-or-later/>)



Fig. 2. Amethyst with Sextus Pompeius' portrait  
(photo: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digitalcollection/18.+Carved+Stones/1069159/?lng=it>)

Easy to carve (Pliny says: "*sculpturis faciles*"), the *amethystus* was quite popular in Roman times, in jewelry and carvings.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, by combining the study of Roman gems and the Plinian passage it is possible to present some ideas about the selection of the images carved in amethysts.

In order to investigate the intentions of the artists in the selection of the stones and the iconographies, some amethysts bearing the artist's signature will be analyzed. In fact, consideration of originals and not ancient copies appears at the moment the only way to be sure that the relationship between iconography and the stone on which it is carved is hypothetically uncorrupted.

The easiest interpretation deals with Dionysus. Actually, the explanation of some images of a Dionysian character (the bust of a Satyr signed by Epitynchanos,<sup>6</sup> a Maenad's head signed by Solon<sup>7</sup>) seems rather automatic: the *amethystus*, in fact, was a stone with a strong direct connection with wine and consequently with Dionysus. For the same reason, the high number of amethyst and purple glass paste artefacts decorated with Bacchus / Dionysus and his *thiasos* is not surprising. Among gems with very evocative relationships among image, color and stone are those with oinochoe from Herculaneum and Pompeii.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the connection with wine and the Dionysian context, it seems possible, moreover, to include in this group another very famous gem, signed by Gnaios, and representing the portrait of Marc Antony (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> As is well known, Antony deliberately likened himself to Dionysus<sup>10</sup> and, according to Plutarch, entered in Ephesus with women dressed like Bacchantes, men and boys like satyrs, in a real Dionysian *thiasos*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the choice of the amethyst for the representation of a new Dionysus was quite natural.

Marine scenes and mythical personages are frequently represented on amethysts;<sup>12</sup> among the signed gems, it is sufficient to consider the Nereid carved by Dalion.<sup>13</sup> The use of a purple stone for marine subjects

GUIDOBALDI 2003, 109, I.29. Pompeii: PANNUTI 1983, 177, n. 339.

9 BOARDMANN 1968, 27-28 and 93-94, n. 18; ZAZOFF 1983, 289; Paul Getty Museum 2010, xix, fig. 10; RAMBACH 2014, 36, note 13; HURWIT 2015, 166 note 52, who mentions doubts of authenticity.

10 On this subject there is a large bibliography; among others: MARASCO 1987; CRESCI MARRONE 1993, 16-17.

11 Plut. *Ant.* 24.4.

12 PANNUTI 1994, 106 n. 76; TONDO – VANNI 1992, 171, n. 68.

13 ZAZOFF 1983, 321.

5 DEVOTO - MOLAYEM 1990, 97.

6 VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 76 s.; ZAZOFF 1983, 316.

7 VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 47-56; ZAZOFF 1983, 319.

8 Herculaneum: PANNUTI 1983, 177, n. 340 =





Fig. 3. Amethyst with Eros tied to a trophy  
(photo: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=79615&partId=1&people=91617&peoA=91617-1-8&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=79615&partId=1&people=91617&peoA=91617-1-8&page=1))



Fig. 4. Amethyst (hyacinthos ?) with Artemis  
(Photo: PANNUTI 1994, 102)

is not surprising: the choice originates from the old and well documented tradition - already admirably emphasized, for example, by Francois Lissarague - that connected the sea, Aphrodite and wine.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, it is easy to attribute to this group a superb amethyst - not signed, but surely engraved by a famous gem cutter<sup>15</sup> - with the portrait of Sextus Pompey preserved at the Hermitage Museum (Fig. 2). In fact, Pompey the Great's son, between 40 and 36 BC ruled the waves and his propaganda clearly represented him as Neptune's son.<sup>16</sup>

In many ways, the subjects referred to Venus are associated with marine themes too. Purple was considered particularly distinctive of Venus, as she was born in a shell, thus suggesting the color that originated from the *murex*. Moreover, the verb πορφύρω meant frothing, bubbling, concepts that might recall the sea foam from which Venus arose, but it also could indicate the flowing wine.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the sea could poetically be purple the wine, according to an ancient Homeric image.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, since it is stone with a strong connection to Venus, it is quite understandable that there should be a couple of signed gems with erotic subject; for example, Eros tied to a trophy by Aulos<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 3) and Hercules with a Nymph by Teukros.<sup>20</sup>

It is unclear, however, whether the Achilles with lyre signed by Pamphilos<sup>21</sup> could fall in the group of the marine iconographies (Achilles was son of the sea nymph Thetis). Nevertheless, interpreting the stone not as an amethyst but as a hyacinth, it would be possible to suggest another explanation for the choice of this particular subject. This confusion was not impossible in antiquity, since Pliny affirms that some varieties of the two stones, both purple, were very similar and consequently difficult to

14 LISSARRAGUE 1989, 95, who recalls the old adage: no Aphrodite without Dionysus. Cf. *Corpus Paroemiograph. Graec.* 2.320-321. In Aristoph. *apud* Athen. 10.444d the wine is called: milk of Aphrodite. Sea and excess of wine, as it is well known, could cause similar effects, such as nausea and vomit.

15 The State Hermitage Museum n. inv. GP-21665.

16 Appian. *BC* 5.98; Cass. Dio 48.31.5. POWELL 2002.

17 Theocr. 5.125.

18 Hom. *Il.* 1.482; 16.391; 21.326. *Od.* 2.428; 11.243; 13.85; cf. Alcman. 58 D. (= 89 P.); Eurip. *Troian.*, 124; Arat. *Phoen.* 158.

19 VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 41; ZAZOFF 1983, 285; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2007, 412-413.

20 VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 43; ZAZOFF 1983, 288; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2007, 113.

21 ZAZOFF 1983, 285.

distinguish.<sup>22</sup> Traditionally,<sup>23</sup> the flower, which derived its name from the beautiful Spartan youth beloved by Apollo, was strictly connected to mourning and lamentation; therefore, it is possible that the homonym stone was used for engraving funerary themes. Moreover, like Hyacinth, the centaur Chiron, who taught Achilles to play the lyre, was killed by accident (by his former pupil).<sup>24</sup> In this way, the relationship between the stone (hyacinth) and the subject represented on it (Achilles *chitaroedus*) appears more comprehensible.

The famous Artemis with torch of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples signed by Apollonius could sustain this hypothesis (Fig. 4).<sup>25</sup> There an overturned torch, a clear symbol of mourning, or more in general a funerary attribute, frequently appearing on sarcophagi, characterizes the goddess. Consequently, interpreted as hyacinth, the choice of the gemstone could be easily explained and Artemis would appear in her chthonian counterpart, Hekate.

Finally, there are some signed amethysts that are difficult to interpret.

Firstly, a head of Medusa signed by Pamphilos.<sup>26</sup> It may be recalled, but it is just a suggestion, that in the legend Medusa is called son of Phorkos, a marine god, and Ketos, a marine monster.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Medusa could be used as a clear funerary symbol for her well-known terrifying characteristics.

Another puzzling case is Demosthenes' portrait carved by Dioscourides,<sup>28</sup> the famous engraver of Augustus' seal.<sup>29</sup> The use of the Greek orator could find an explanation in the period of the civil wars, when Cicero, his admirer,<sup>30</sup> also wrote the *Philippicae*, an invective against Antony. The choice of amethyst, in this case,

could appear extremely significant based on the properties mentioned by Pliny: the stone would have generally helped orators and, in particular, those who desired to address a king. For the same reason, the great presence of amethysts bearing the iconography of Mercury cannot be accidental. Amethyst, therefore, would have amplified the discursive skills typical of Mercury<sup>31</sup> and traders. Moreover, the relationship between wine and loquacity, or freedom of speech, too well known,<sup>32</sup> may have contributed to the spread of stones of dark red or purplish color for the iconographies of Mercury.

The use of amethyst for the representation of Emperor Claudius' portrait engraved by Skylax<sup>33</sup> still waits a convincing explanation. Actually, it is hard to find a connection between Claudius and the sea, unless the celebration of a naval triumph were imagined. Suetonius,<sup>34</sup> nevertheless, recalls that among the emblems of his victory in Britannia, he set a naval crown on the Palace *fastigium*, as a sign that "he had crossed and, as it were, subdued the Ocean". In this case, Skylax's amethyst should be included in the marine themes group.

On the other hand, the same biographer<sup>35</sup> recalls that the emperor had a reputation as a drunk. Since amethyst was believed to have the power to mitigate the effects of alcohol, the gem could have been worn with this purpose; however, it is hard to imagine anyone commissioning an amethyst artwork with Claudius' portrait for such a purpose.

Even less possible is an explanation based on the magical ability of the stone to assist oratory. It is true that Suetonius relates that the young Claudius, despite stuttering, surprised even Augustus with his speech.<sup>36</sup> However,

22 Plin. *NH* 37.41: "Multum ab hac distat hyacinthos, ab vicino tamen colore descendens".

23 Ov. *Fast.* 5.222 ff; *Metam.* 10.162; 13.395 ff.; Plin. *NH* 21.38; Nonn. 3.53ff. The flower is identified nowadays with the larkspur.

24 Ovid. *Fast.* 5.397; Hygin. *Poet. Astr.* 2.38.

25 Vollenweider 1966, 43; Pannuti 1994, 101-103, n. 72; Zazoff 1983, 206; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 113.

26 Vollenweider 1966, 27; Zazoff 1983, 285 with doubts on the authenticity.

27 Hesiod. *Theog.* 270; Apollod. 1.10; cf. Aesch. *Prom.* 794; Paus. 2.21.5; Nonn. 24.270.

28 Zazoff 1983, 317.

29 Plin. *NH* 37.8; Suet. *Aug.* 50. Cf. Vollenweider 1966, 56-64.

30 Cic. *Opt. Gen. Orat.* 6: "Nemo est orator, qui se Demostheni similem nolit esse". Wooten 1977.

31 Macrobius. *Sat.* 1.19.7-11; Isid. *Etym.* 8.11.45-49 from Varro; Serv. *Aen.* 4.242; 8.138. Combet-Farnoux 1980, 63-65; 71-78 and 83-86.

32 Sources (with direct or indirect allusions) and bibliography are extensive. Explicit: Hor. *Sat.* 1.4.89; Plin. *NH* 14.141; Macrobius. *Sat.* 7.1 that recalls an old adage; cf. without exhaustiveness: Alc. fr. 366 V; Plat. *Symp.* 217e; Teocr. 29.1; Plut. *Artas.* 15.4; Philoc. 328 F170 Jacoby; later: Diog. 4.81 and 7.28; Phot. 321.25. On the subject already Hom. *Od.* 14.463ss.; Theogn. 500; Aesch. fr. 393 R.; Plat. *Leg.* 649b; Hor. *Carm.* 1.18.11 and 16; Plut. *Garul.* 503f and 504; Athen. 10.427f. Women who drink and talk too much abounds Latin theater: Plaut. *Cistell.* 126-129. Citti 1994, 186-187 and 194.

33 Vollenweider 1966, 79; Zazoff 1983, 321; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 122.

34 Suet. *Claud.* 17. Braund 1996, 106; Osgood 2011, 93.

35 Suet. *Claud.* 5; cf. 40.

36 Suet. *Claud.* 4.

no emperor would have used such an amulet displaying his portrait on it, as an admission of speech problems.

In conclusion, in the case of the *amethystus*, the relationship between gemstones and images, read in the light of the Plinian text, seems to lead to interesting results. In particular, four groups of iconographies, in various ways interconnected, have been identified: the Dionysian/wine subjects; those associated with Mercury or with the ability to speak; marine themes; Venus/Eros iconographies. Thus, not surprisingly, ideal or mythical links with the sphere of wine and purple (the sea participates in both elements) were at the base of the original selection of images.

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