

# Amethystus: Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection

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# CONTENT

<b>PRESENTATION</b> .....	15
<b>NECROLOGY: NORMAN HERZ (1923-2013) by Susan Kane</b> .....	17
<b>1. APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC ARCHEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – USE OF MARBLE</b>	
Hermaphrodites and Sleeping or Reclining Maenads: Production Centres and Quarry Marks <i>Patrizio Pensabene</i> .....	25
First Remarks about the Pavement of the Newly Discovered Mithraeum of the Colored Marbles at Ostia and New Investigations on Roman and Late Roman White and Colored Marbles from Insula IV, IX <i>Massimiliano David, Stefano Succi and Marcello Turci</i> .....	33
Alabaster. Quarrying and Trade in the Roman World: Evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum <i>Simon J. Barker and Simona Perna</i> .....	45
Recent Work on the Stone at the Villa Arianna and the Villa San Marco (Castellammare di Stabia) and Their Context within the Vesuvian Area <i>Simon J. Barker and J. Clayton Fant</i> .....	65
Marble Wall Decorations from the Imperial Mausoleum (4 <sup>th</sup> C.) and the Basilica of San Lorenzo (5 <sup>th</sup> C.) in Milan: an Update on Colored Marbles in Late Antique Milan <i>Elisabetta Neri, Roberto Bugini and Silvia Gazzoli</i> .....	79
Sarcophagus Lids Sawn from their Chests <i>Dorothy H. Abramitis and John J. Herrmann</i> .....	89
The Re-Use of Monolithic Columns in the Invention and Persistence of Roman Architecture <i>Peter D. De Staebler</i> .....	95
The Trade in Small-Size Statues in the Roman Mediterranean: a Case Study from Alexandria <i>Patrizio Pensabene and Eleonora Gasparini</i> .....	101
The Marble Dedication of Komon, Son of Asklepiades, from Egypt: Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning <i>Patricia A. Butz</i> .....	109
Multiple Reuse of Imported Marble Pedestals at Caesarea Maritima in Israel <i>Barbara Burrell</i> .....	117
Iasos and Iasian Marble between the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Eras <i>Diego Peirano</i> .....	123

Thassos, Known Inscriptions with New Data <i>Tony Kozelj and Manuela Wurch-Kozelj</i> .....	131
The Value of Marble in Roman <i>Hispalis</i> : Contextual, Typological and Lithological Analysis of an Assemblage of Large Architectural Elements Recovered at N° 17 Goyeneta Street (Seville, Spain) <i>Ruth Taylor, Oliva Rodríguez, Esther Ontiveros, María Luisa Loza, José Beltrán and Araceli Rodríguez</i> .....	143
<i>Giallo Antico</i> in Context. Distribution, Use and Commercial Actors According to New Stratigraphic Data from the Western Mediterranean (2 <sup>nd</sup> C. Bc – Late 1 <sup>st</sup> C. Ad) <i>Stefan Ardeleanu</i> .....	155
<i>Amethystus</i> : Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection <i>Luigi Pedroni</i> .....	167
<b>2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)</b>	
Unraveling the Carrara – Göktepe Entanglement <i>Walter Prochaska, Donato Attanasio and Matthias Bruno</i> .....	175
The Marble of Roman Imperial Portraits <i>Donato Attanasio, Matthias Bruno, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i> .....	185
Tracing Alabaster (Gypsum or Anhydrite) Artwork Using Trace Element Analysis and a Multi-Isotope Approach (Sr, S, O) <i>Lise Leroux, Wolfram Kloppmann, Philippe Bromblet, Catherine Guerrot, Anthony H. Cooper, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, Dominique Vingtain and Noel Worley</i> .....	195
Roman Monolithic Fountains and Thasian Marble <i>Annewies van den Hoek, Donato Attanasio and John J. Herrmann</i> .....	207
Archaeometric Analysis of the Alabaster Thresholds of Villa A, Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy) and New Sr and Pb Isotopic Data for <i>Alabastro Ghiaccione del Circeo</i> <i>Simon J. Barker, Simona Perna, J. Clayton Fant, Lorenzo Lazzarini and Igor M. Villa</i> .....	215
Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy) <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Elisabetta Roffia</i> .....	231
Calcitic Marble from Thasos in the North Adriatic Basin: Ravenna, Aquileia, and Milan <i>John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	239
Characterisation of White Marble Objects from the Temple of Apollo and the House of Augustus (Palatine Hill, Rome) <i>Francesca Giustini, Mauro Brilli, Enrico Gallochio and Patrizio Pensabene</i> .....	247
Study and Archeometric Analysis of the Marble Elements Found in the Roman Theater at Aeclanum (Mirabella Eclano, Avellino - Italy) <i>Antonio Mesisca, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Stefano Cancelliere and Monica Salvadori</i> .....	255



Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli: Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania <i>Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	267
Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16 <sup>th</sup> And 17 <sup>th</sup> Centuries): the Church of <i>Santi Severino e Sossio</i> <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito</i> .....	275
Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy: Ostia and Siracusa <i>Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	281
Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi 'Church Wreck' Cargo <i>Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly</i> .....	291
The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia <i>Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić</i> .....	301
Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly) and Thessaloniki (Macedonia) <i>Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	311
Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora's Porticoes at Iasos <i>Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	321
The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods <i>Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier</i> .....	331
Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete) <i>Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno</i> .....	337
Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina <i>John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	345
Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany) <i>Vilma Ruppinić and Ulrich Schüssler</i> .....	351
Stone Objects from Vindobona (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Provenance of Local Stone in a Historico-Economical Setting <i>Andreas Rohatsch, Michaela Kronberger, Sophie Insulander, Martin Mosser and Barbara Hodits</i> .....	363
Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France): Preliminary Results <i>Elsa Roux, Jean-Marc Mignon, Philippe Blanc and Annie Blanc</i> .....	373
Updated Characterisation of White Saint-Béat Marble. Discrimination Parameters from Classical Marbles <i>Hernando Royo Plumed, Pilar Lapeunte, José Antonio Cuchí, Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin</i> .....	379

Grey and Greyish Banded Marbles from the Estremoz Anticline in Lusitania <i>Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate, Hernando Royo Plumed, Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin</i> .....	391
New Data on Spanish Marbles: the Case of <i>Gallaecia</i> (NW Spain) <i>Anna Gutiérrez García-M., Hernando Royo Plumed and Silvia González Soutelo</i> .....	401
A New Roman Imperial Relief Said to Be from Southern Spain: Problems of Style, Iconography, and Marble Type in Determining Provenance <i>John Pollini, Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate and Jerry Podany</i> .....	413
Reuse of the <i>Marmora</i> from the Late Roman Palatial Building at Carranque (Toledo, Spain) in the Visigothic Necropolis <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M. and Sergio Vidal Álvarez</i> .....	427
Imperial Porphyry in Roman Britain <i>David F. Williams</i> .....	435
Recycling of Marble: Apollonia/Sozousa/Arsuf (Israel) as a Case Study <i>Moshe Fischer, Dimitris Tambakopoulos and Yannis Maniatis</i> .....	443
Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya) Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos <i>John J. Herrmann and Donato Attanasio</i> .....	457
Marble on Rome's Southwestern Frontier: Thamugadi and Lambaesis <i>Robert H. Tykot, Ouahiba Bouzidi, John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	467
Marble and Sculpture at Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya): a Preliminary Study Concerning Origin and Workshops <i>Luisa Musso, Laura Buccino, Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	481
The Pentelic Marble in the Carnegie Museum of Art Hall of Sculpture, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania <i>Albert D. Kollar</i> .....	491
Analysis of Classical Marble Sculptures in the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta <i>Robert H. Tykot, John J. Herrmann, Renée Stein, Jasper Gaunt, Susan Blevins and Anne R. Skinner</i> .....	501
<b>3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: (OTHER STONES)</b>	
Aphrodisias and the Regional Marble Trade. The <i>Scaenae Frons</i> of the Theatre at Nysa <i>Natalia Toma</i> .....	513
The Stones of Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad, Serbia) <i>Bojan Djurić, Divna Jovanović, Stefan Pop Lazić and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	523
Aspects of Characterisation of Stone Monuments from Southern Pannonia <i>Branka Migotti</i> .....	537

The Budakalász Travertine Production <i>Bojan Djurić, Sándor Kele and Igor Rižnar</i> .....	545
Stone Monuments from Carnuntum and Surrounding Areas (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Quarry Location in a Historical Context <i>Gabrielle Kremer, Isabella Kitz, Beatrix Moshhammer, Maria Heinrich and Erich Draganits</i> .....	557
Espejón Limestone and Conglomerate (Soria, Spain): Archaeometric Characterization, Quarrying and Use in Roman Times <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M, Sergio Vidal Álvarez, María J. Peréz Agorreta and Eva Zarco Martínez</i> .....	567
The Use of Alcover Stone in Roman Times ( <i>Tarraco, Hispania Citerior</i> ). Contributions to the <i>Officina Lapidaria Tarraconensis</i> <i>Diana Gorostidi Pi, Jordi López Vilar and Anna Gutiérrez García-M.</i> .....	577
<b>4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES, METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES</b>	
Grainautline – a Supervised Grain Boundary Extraction Tool Supported by Image Processing and Pattern Recognition <i>Kristóf Csorba, Lilla Barancsik, Balázs Székely and Judit Zöldföldi</i> .....	587
A Database and GIS Project about Quarrying, Circulation and Use of Stone During the Roman Age in <i>Regio X - Venetia et Histria</i> . The Case Study of the Euganean Trachyte <i>Caterine Prevato and Arturo Zara</i> .....	597
<b>5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY</b>	
The Distribution of Troad Granite Columns as Evidence for Reconstructing the Management of Their Production <i>Patrizio Pensabene, Javier Á. Domingo and Isabel Rodà</i> .....	613
Ancient Quarries and Stonemasonry in Northern Choria Considiana <i>Hale Güney</i> .....	621
Polychromy in Larisaeon Quarries and its Relation to Architectural Conception <i>Gizem Mater and Ertunç Denktaş</i> .....	633
Euromos of Caria: the Origin of an Hitherto Unknown Grey Veined Stepped Marble of Roman Antiquity <i>Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i> .....	639
Unknown Painted Quarry Inscriptions from Bacakale at <i>Docimium</i> (Turkey) <i>Matthias Bruno</i> .....	651
The Green Schist Marble Stone of Jebel El Hairech (North West of Tunisia): a Multi-Analytical Approach and its Uses in Antiquity <i>Ameur Younès, Mohamed Gaied and Wissem Gallala</i> .....	659
Building Materials and the Ancient Quarries at <i>Thamugadi</i> (East of Algeria), Case Study: Sandstone and Limestone <i>Younès Rezkallah and Ramdane Marmi</i> .....	673

The Local Quarries of the Ancient Roman City of <i>Valeria</i> (Cuenca, Spain) <i>Javier Atienza Fuente</i> .....	683
The Stone and Ancient Quarries of Montjuïc Mountain (Barcelona, Spain) <i>Aureli Álvarez</i> .....	693
<i>Notae Lapidinarum</i> : Preliminary Considerations about the Quarry Marks from the Provincial Forum of <i>Tarraco</i> <i>Maria Serena Vinci</i> .....	699
The Different Steps of the Rough-Hewing on a Monumental Sculpture at the Greek Archaic Period: the Unfinished Kouros of Thasos <i>Danièle Braunstein</i> .....	711
A Review of Copying Techniques in Greco-Roman Sculpture <i>Séverine Moureaud</i> .....	717
Labour Forces at Imperial Quarries <i>Ben Russell</i> .....	733
Social Position of Craftsmen inside the Stone and Marble Processing Trades in the Light of Diocletian's Edict on Prices <i>Krešimir Bosnić and Branko Matulić</i> .....	741
<b>6. STONE PROPERTIES, WEATHERING EFFECTS AND RESTORATION, AS RELATED TO DIAGNOSIS PROBLEMS, MATCHING OF STONE FRAGMENTS AND AUTHENTICITY</b>	
Methods of Consolidation and Protection of Pentelic Marble <i>Maria Apostolopoulou, Elissavet Drakopoulou, Maria Karoglou and Asterios Bakolas</i> .....	749
<b>7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE</b>	
Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence <i>Véronique Brunet-Gaston and Christophe Gaston</i> .....	763
The Use of Colour on Roman Marble Sarcophagi <i>Eliana Siotto</i> .....	773
New Evidence for Ancient Gilding and Historic Restorations on a Portrait of Antinous in the San Antonio Museum of Art <i>Jessica Powers, Mark Abbe, Michelle Bushey and Scott H. Pike</i> .....	783
Schists and Pigments from Ancient Swat (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Pakistan) <i>Francesco Mariottini, Gianluca Vignaroli, Maurizio Mariottini and Mauro Roma</i> .....	793
<b>8. SPECIAL THEME SESSION: „THE USE OF MARBLE AND LIMESTONE IN THE ADRIATIC BASIN IN ANTIQUITY”</b>	
Marble Sarcophagi of Roman Dalmatia Material – Provenance – Workmanship <i>Guntram Koch</i> .....	809

Funerary Monuments and Quarry Management in Middle Dalmatia <i>Nenad Cambi</i> .....	827
Marble Revetments of Diocletian's Palace <i>Katja Marasović and Vinka Marinković</i> .....	839
The Use of Limestones as Construction Materials for the Mosaics of Diocletian's Palace <i>Branko Matulić, Domagoj Mudronja and Krešimir Bosnić</i> .....	855
Restoration of the Peristyle of Diocletian's Palace in Split <i>Goran Nikšić</i> .....	863
Marble Slabs Used at the Archaeological Site of Sorna near Poreč Istria – Croatia <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i> .....	871
Ancient Marbles from the Villa in Verige Bay, Brijuni Island, Croatia <i>Mira Pavletić and Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i> .....	879
Notes on Early Christian Ambos and Altars in the Light of some Fragments from the Islands of Pag and Rab <i>Mirja Jarak</i> .....	887
The Marbles in the Chapel of the Blessed John of Trogir in the Cathedral of St. Lawrence at Trogir <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar and Daniela Matetić Poljak</i> .....	899
The Use of Limestone in the Roman Province of Dalmatia <i>Edisa Lozić and Igor Rižnar</i> .....	915
The Extraction and Use of Limestone in Istria in Antiquity <i>Klara Buršić-Matijašić and Robert Matijašić</i> .....	925
Aurisina Limestone in the Roman Age: from Karst Quarries to the Cities of the Adriatic Basin <i>Caterina Previato</i> .....	933
The Remains of Infrastructural Facilities of the Ancient Quarries on Zadar Islands (Croatia) <i>Mate Parica</i> .....	941
The Impact of Local Geomorphological and Geological Features of the Area for the Construction of the Burnum Amphitheatre <i>Miroslav Glavičić and Uroš Stepišnik</i> .....	951
Roman Quarry Klis Kosa near Salona <i>Ivan Alduk</i> .....	957
Marmore Lavdata Brattia <i>Miona Miliša and Vinka Marinković</i> .....	963
Quarries of the Lumbarda Archipelago <i>Ivka Lipanović and Vinka Marinković</i> .....	979

Island of Korčula – Importer and Exporter of Stone in Antiquity <i>Mate Parica and Igor Borzić</i> .....	985
Faux Marbling Motifs in Early Christian Frescoes in Central and South Dalmatia: Preliminary Report <i>Tonči Borovac, Antonija Gluhan and Nikola Radošević</i> .....	995
<b>INDEX OF AUTHORS</b> .....	1009

# 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 Neptunus' 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. *Garrul.* 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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