GREEK GEMS AND THE ANIMAL WORLD

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Greek gems are sealstones, of course; the figures on them are seldom an inch long and are cut in intaglio. Gem-engraving and the cutting of coin dies are twin arts which by their minuscule nature have escaped into the modern world in some measure. But by their very smallness they do not readily yield up their wealth, which must be wrested from them by one device or another. Not all observers have the eyesight, and few the opportunity, to hold a great series in the hand one by one and to besiege each gem with a magnifying glass. But if relief impressions of them are photographically enlarged, then he who runs may read. Through recent accessions displayed with such aids, it has become possible for the Museum visitor to see, among other things, the Greek animal style unfold itself in glyptic art, and so to understand afresh its character.

Brought thus within our sight, gems are seen to have many of the attributes of sculpture, and it is not always necessary to think of them apart from it. Animal subjects appeared in the eighth century, when Greek art was still geometric in character, and were reinforced in the seventh by monstrous heraldic cohorts from the East; then, through the archaic period and onwards, the animal style followed the main stream of tendency toward naturalism, until under Rome it became eclectic. When a gem-cutter needed a subject to carve on colored quartz and make an instrument whereby a man might seal his word, he—or his client—had the current artistic types to choose from, and often the choice fell on an animal subject. The plates of Furtwängler’s Antike Gemmen, which everyone ought to look through at least once in his life, show about what the frequency was.

The visitor may well be so made that when he sees a living thing—be it lion, horse, goat, hare, dog, pig, or swallow—his whole heart goes out to it. Well he knows that the furry and feathered tribes of antiquity went their way as now, with their immortal graces and absurdities, each more endearing than the last. And Greek artists, who belonged to the race of Hesiod and Aristotle, observed each creature with shrewd, recording gaze. What patterns they saw, to dazzle the mind, the gems will show as well as any form of art. As for humor in the Greek animal style, the visitor must be his own guide, no one can smile for him. He will keep in mind that the Greeks did not really bend their powers to portraiture until after the city states had waned; that the bones wrapped in fat, the precarious gestures of infancy, did not soon engage their genius. So that he will not expect, in the earlier centuries, many excursions into the particular or quick responses to the fatuous. When at length the portrait impulse seeks out the infantilism of animal nature, the results are endearing, or a little pawky, or both, according to the observer’s mind.

Lions are everywhere in the story, from first to last; only a few from the great number can be illustrated here. On a pale green steatite, one of these is attacking his prey, a man who has fallen and whose head is literally in the lion’s mouth (fig. 1). Man and beast are anatomically little else than an arrangement of sticks, but ferocity somehow underlies the arrangement. Lions were no rumored menace of the African plains. They were known in Greek lands as late as the sixth century B.C. Here in the geometric period, before the great carnivores of Eastern art had fixed the attention of the Greeks, they appear in the treasury of types. Oriental influence put flesh on their bones, and we have the quick and terrible creature in figure 2. In figure 3 he also stands
Fig. 1. About three times actual size

Fig. 2. About three times actual size

Fig. 3. About 2\(\frac{1}{3}\) times actual size

Fig. 4. About 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) times actual size

Fig. 5. About twice actual size

Fig. 6. About twice actual size
Fig. 7. About 2½ times actual size

Fig. 8. About three times actual size

Fig. 9. About twice actual size

Fig. 10. About three times actual size

Figs. 11 and 12. About 2½ times actual size
alone, a heraldic, badgelike figure to fill a certain space. In the group illustrated in figure 4 we see the archaic style established; it has again the attack motif and shows what the generations made of it. In the onslaught, the victim’s extremity, are glimpsed a thousand upland nights where forest edges pasture. All that whirl of frantic motion is abridged and made to flow into a pattern of hatched dewlap and stippled mane, a linear scheme of legs, with tails as side scrolls to the picture. The lion is thoroughly understood as feline. But the Greeks presently lost touch with this king of beasts, and not having domestic cats but only dogs to help them, they remembered him less and less feline, more and more canine, a mastiff-like guardian. But the series goes on, until the end of antiquity, of lions standing alone, attacking herbivores, or, thirdly, wrestling with Herakles, who seizes and throws them with the well-known holds of the wrestling ring—gruesomely impossible if the hero’s flesh were truly mortal.

No less frequent on the intaglios are horses and the immemorial excitement of the turf. The impression which belongs most of all to horseflesh, of great weight sustained and swept along by aerial hoofs, was a thing the artist greatly desired to seize. A seventh-century, orientalizing, fantastic attempt to do this results in the Pegasos of figure 5, with reversed hindquarters, a modified tetraskelion of speed. But most closely touching is the two-horse or four-horse chariot. The order and variety of the composition in figure 6 are the flower of several centuries of unremitting work on this theme. Figure 7 shows a horse quietly at pasture, his mettle evident only in his nervous ears.

Besides the great dying bull in figure 4, there is room to illustrate one other (fig. 8) and at the same time to explore a bypath of Greek glyptic art, the Etruscan globolo style of the fourth and early third centuries B.C., which reduced all to sticks and pellets, yet retained a measure of liveliness.

In figure 9 we see the splendor of the wild boar: his unwieldy and altogether unlikely swiftness, the tusks and great shoulders which make his charge so feared, the lesser hindquarters which render his flight so vulnerable. The gem was perhaps produced for Persian taste, like many scenes of game animals and the chase, in the fifth or fourth century B.C. The late fifth century, when the gem-cutters knew all they needed to know about representation, produced a number of gems in which fallow deer stand like nymphs. Figure 10 is one of these.

There are two eagles of the seventh century which are especially to be looked at (see fig. 12). The aerodynamics of eagle flight are not for intaglios but for slow-motion pictures, such a multifarious complex of movements is even one beat of a wing. But these frozen attitudes have more flight in them than those people think who—heaven knows why—have never looked much at birds in the air. Of the passerine birds only the eagle and the pigeon lend themselves well to sculpture. But the waterfowl and big waders have suitable bulk, and here (fig. 11), in ludicrous majesty, is a heron.

In Gallery E 15 are exhibited thirty-odd purchases made in 1942 from the collection of the late Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos, together with several hundred gems bequeathed in 1941 by W. Gedney Beatty. A selection of them has been published by the Museum in Ancient Gems, a picture book with an introduction and descriptions by Gisela M. A. Richter. A few of the many animal subjects among them are illustrated here. The reader will be aided in the identification and enjoyment of the others by the illustrated work Tier- und Pflanzenbilder auf Münzen und Gemmen des klassischen Altertums by Imhoof-Blumer and Keller (1889).