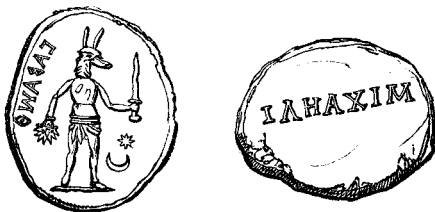


IX.—*On Gnostic Gems.* By JOHN YONGE AKERMAN, *Esq., F.S.A.* In a Letter to JOHN PAYNE COLLIER, *Esq., Treasurer.*

Read, 16th November, 1848.



MY DEAR SIR,

Lewisham, May 18, 1848.

I BEG to submit to the Society of Antiquaries some impressions and drawings of Gnostic Gems, chiefly bearing the usual figures and characters, on the former of which I venture to make a few observations. I think we shall not err much in assigning the origin of these amulets to Alexandria, in Egypt, the hot-bed of Gnostic superstition, and the birth-place of more than two of the leaders of this abominable sect. As far as we can judge from the style of their workmanship and the form of the characters, the greater part belong to a period later than the days of the Antonines.

What renders these objects the more interesting is, the great probability that they furnished to the Gentile defamers of the early Christians the grounds of much scandal and invective. It is well known that the idea, that the God of the Jews was worshipped under the figure of an ass, prevailed so universally among the Romans, that Pompey, when at Jerusalem, made strict search in the temple for such an idol. This belief, coupled with the appearance of the long-eared figure so often occurring on these amulets, must have tended greatly to extend the popular rumour against the Christians. The figure in question, in all probability, was originally that of the Anubis of the Romano-Egyptian Pantheon, a conjecture which will be admitted on a comparison of the impression No. VI. with the drawing. On the first, Anubis

appears with his characteristic attributes ; on the other, is a figure evidently suggested by the Pagan divinity. One side of the stone bears the word LABAΩΘ (Sabaoth) in rudely-formed Greek characters : the other, which is without device, has the name MIXAHAI. The words *Michael* and *Sabaoth* consort well with each other : the one being the usual epithet of the Almighty as God of battles, while to the angel Michael was assigned the marshalling of the Angelic hosts. The execution of the figure is of the most barbarous description, but it is curious as shewing that the Pagans had in such representations of the Gnostic sect apparent grounds for their absurd scandals, the monstrous impieties of these worse than heathens being imputed to those who worshipped the true God in secret, whose orisons, addressed to an invisible divinity, perplexed the worshippers of idols as much as the service of the Jews had perplexed them in former ages. This is shewn by Tertullian, (Apologet. c. xvi.) and the same author states, that the vulgar in his days still believed that the Christians worshipped an ass. At the very time that he penned his famous apology, a picture, representing a figure with cloven feet and the head of an ass, holding a book intended for the Bible, was exhibited by a popular gladiator to the people, with the inscription “ *This is the god of the Christians, of the race of an ass !* ” I need not remark that this fighter with beasts had good reason to hate the Christians vehemently, since they studiously avoided the heathen spectacles, as shewn by the same authority (See Tertullian, *De Spectaculis, passim*) ; nor will it be necessary to follow the indignant upholder of the true faith in his refutation of this monstrous calumny, my object being solely to shew that, while the foul orgies of the Gnostics were imputed to the early Christians, the slander was probably fed by the innumerable gems and talismans of the former, on which were engraved the brute figures of the demons they worshipped, but especially by those bearing the long-eared figure, as on the amulet represented in the drawing.^a

It seems extremely probable that the adoption and consequent frequent occurrence of Anubis on this class of engraved stones may be explained by the passage in Tertullian (*Ad Nationes*, lib. ii. c. 8) in which he shews that the worship of this divinity, who, it should be remembered, is not mentioned by Herodotus, originated in the Egyptian deification of the patriarch Joseph.

There is abundant reason for supposing that these talismans were in great repute and much valued in the middle ages. Mr. Wright's paper in Vol. XXX. (page 438) of the *Archæologia* is curious, as shewing in what estimation antique engraved gems were held by Christians as late as, if not much posterior to, the thirteenth century, while the example of a Gnostic gem, set as a ring, and found some years

^a The original, in *pietra dura*, is in the possession of George Richard Corner, Esq., F.S.A.

since on the finger of the skeleton of an ecclesiastic in the cathedral of Chichester, affords undeniable evidence that these relics were cherished in the middle ages even by those whose express duty it was to reprove and check such gross superstition.

I am, my dear Sir,

Very faithfully yours,

J. Y. AKERMAN.

To John Payne Collier, Esq., Treasurer S.A.
&c. &c. &c.