

*Plutarco, entre dioses y astros.
Homenaje al profesor Aurelio Pérez Jiménez
de sus discípulos, colegas y amigos*

VOL. II

J. F. MARTOS MONTIEL, C. MACÍAS VILLALOBOS &
R. CABALLERO SÁNCHEZ (eds.)
Con la colaboración de Carlos Alcalde Martín, Marta González
González y Jorge Bergua Cavero

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PROFESOR DR. AURELIO PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ

Sección III: Magia, astrología y adivinación

MAGICAL MILK STONES?

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Abstract

In the Roman imperial period, a large series of so-called magical stones are carved with the image of the lion-headed snake Chnoubis. The figure is often associated with the order *pesse*, or *pepte* “digest!”, and seems to avert stomach ailment. This paper investigates other possible competences which focus on the protection of children in the form of an alternative type of milk stone, because milk was believed to come from the digestion of blood. Chnoubis could thus promote breastfeeding and suckling. It suggests also that Chnoubis, as “crusher of snakes”, could act on a very widespread disorder, intestinal parasites, like a warrior, but fighting an invasion of worms. The power of Chnoubis for the survival of children as well as against a very common stomach ailment which represented a societal disease, could explain the high number of extant stones carved with this figure.

Keywords

Chnoubis, magical stones, milk stone, breastfeeding, digestion, stomach, worms, pediatrics, gigantomachy.

Resumen

En el período imperial romano, muchas de las llamadas piedras mágicas están talladas con la imagen de la serpiente con cabeza de león Chnoubis. La figura se asocia a menudo con la orden *pesse* o *pepte* “¡digiere!”, al parecer para evitar dolencias estomacales. Este trabajo investiga otras posibles funciones que se centran en la protección de los niños bajo la forma de un tipo alternativo de piedra de leche, porque se creía que la leche provenía de la digestión de la sangre. Chnoubis podría así estimular la lactancia materna y el amamantamiento. También sugiere que Chnoubis, como “tritadora de serpientes”, podría actuar en un trastorno muy generalizado, los parásitos intestinales, como un guerrero, pero luchando contra una invasión de gusanos. El poder de Chnoubis para la supervivencia de los niños, así como contra una enfermedad estomacal muy común que representaba una enfermedad social, podría explicar el alto número de piedras existentes talladas con esta figura.

Palabras clave

Chnoubis, piedras mágicas, piedra de leche, lactancia materna, digestión, estómago, lombrices, pediatría, gigantomaquia.

Ancient authors mention many recipes that ensure an abundance of quality milk for infants. Among their recommendations were stones, called interchangeably “galactite” or “milk stone”, from the Greek word *gala* for “milk”. Pliny differentiated several kinds of stones, *galaxias*, “galactite”, *leucogaea* (from the Greek word *leukos* for “white”), *leucographitis* and *synechitis*, depending on their colour, white or veined with red¹. Several treatises on stone properties describe this stone’s many virtues. Damigeron-Evax specified that it was also called *synechitis*, from the Greek word *sunecho*, because it combined all qualities. Just like the *Orphic Lapidary*, he added other names, *anactite*, which meant “indomitable” and *lethargos* for it made one forget one’s ailments².

Its magical agency was “sympathetic”. The crumbly white or ashen-grey mineral was pulverized and mixed with water to turn it into a kind of milk. The *Orphic lapidary* describes the process: “by crushing it, one expresses a liquid with the whiteness of milk”³. According to Pliny, its flavour was similar to milk: “It is noteworthy for the fact that when rubbed between the fingers it exhibits a milky smear (*sucum*) and flavour”⁴. Dioscurides noted that it had a sweet taste, *dulcis*⁵. Damigeron-Evax listed the most precise recipe: after fasting, the woman had to drink “the ground stone with mead, grape puree (or *raisiné*), or with water”⁶. Pliny mentioned an alternative, sucking on it, because “when placed in the mouth it melts”⁷. Children also wore galactites around their necks⁸, possibly because the fact of salivating induced an unresponsive infant to suckle: “Moreover, when tied to babies’ necks as an amulet, it is said to make their saliva flow”⁹. Galactite provided total protection: “When hung from toddlers’ necks, it was thought to ward off the evil eye and protect them from diseases”¹⁰. According to lapidary treatises, its virtues extended to goats and sheep¹¹.

¹ Plin., *nat.* 37.162.

² Damig., 34. For the references to the lapidaries, see the edition and commentary by R. HALLEUX & J. SCHAMP, 1985: 191 ff.

³ Orph., *L.* 2, 221-223.

⁴ Plin., *nat.* 37.162 (transl. D.E. Eichholz, Loeb).

⁵ Dsc., 5.132.

⁶ Damig., 31. In Orph., *L.* 2.221-223, the liquid is mead.

⁷ Plin., *nat.* 37.162.

⁸ Of a woman: Damig., 34.

⁹ Plin., *nat.* 37.162. See also Orph., *L.Ker.*, 2.

¹⁰ Orph., *L.Ker.*, 2.

¹¹ Orph., *L.*, 2.221-223; Orph., *L.Ker.*, 2.

All these recipes were intimately associated to magical processes, like using the wool of a pregnant ewe¹² to tie the stone around the neck or purifying a flock by spraying it with galactite mixed with water¹³. Damigeron-Evax referred to the magical authority of the Egyptians and Ostanés, “the master of all *magi*”, and to ancient knowledge founded not only on hearsay, but on written accounts of repeated magical practices¹⁴.

The mineralogical identification of these milk stones is based on the following clues: as the stone was brittle and produced a white-coloured fluid, researchers have suggested it was a kind of chalk, as indicated by the name *leucographitis*, from *leukos* and *grapho* “to write”¹⁵, but there are other possibilities.

Chnoubis and magical glyptic

A special category of milk stones can be identified among the so-called “magical” intaglios which form a particular class of the Imperial Roman glyptic production¹⁶. Their function was essentially therapeutic and protective, with specific spheres of action. They often involve non-visible internal processes or pathologies, like bile, gout, or uterine pain. Chnoubis, one of the most common deities represented on this type of stone¹⁷, seemed to reign on the belly and digestive processes that also included the production of milk. In melothesic astrology, Chnoubis governed the first decan of Leo where his powers extended to the belly, especially the stomach¹⁸. His skills were described in several medical magical treatises. In his manual of remedies, Marcellus Empiricus (fourth-fifth c. AD) prescribed a stone engraved with the deity’s image against stomach aches: “This is a powerful remedy for stomach ache: on a jasper stone

¹² Damig., 34.11.

¹³ Damig., 34.12-15; Orph. *L.* 2, 205-220.

¹⁴ Damig. *ibid.* See Isid., *Etym.* 16.4.20; 10.

¹⁵ Cf. Jean De Laert, *De gemmis et lapidibus*, Lugduni Batavorum, 1647, p. 140: “*Les tailleurs s’en servent comme de blanc pour tracer la coupe des vêtements*”. Quoted by DE MÉLY, 1890: 108. On the long tradition of “reliques de la Grotte du Lait”, their dissemination and consumption as cakes, pills or in liquid form: DE MÉLY, 1890; BÉTEROUS, 1975; MOREL, in press.

¹⁶ On this category of stones, DASEN & NAGY, 2019.

¹⁷ His representations form the most important group among magical gemstones after those of the Anquiped (ca. 400 stones); DASEN & NAGY, 2012.

¹⁸ This figure originated in the Egyptian decans system. Note his presence in Leo decans on Grand’s astrological diptych; DASEN & NAGY, 2012: 296-298, fig. 4a and 4b.

carve a radiant serpent, so that it has seven rays; enclose it in gold and use it on the neck”¹⁹.

Chnoubis is easily identifiable on engraved stones. His name, Chnoubis or Chnoumis, inscribed in the Greek alphabet, is associated to the image of a lion-headed serpent crowned with five to twelve rays, sometimes with a nimbus, the lower part of his body either coiled (Fig. 1), or stretched out (Fig. 2)²⁰. This lion-headed snake is often associated with a sign made of three parallel crooked lines with a crossbar running through them, conventionally referred to as the “Chnoubis sign” (Fig. 1, 2). Chnoubis’ image, name and sign were sometimes engraved together or separately on a variety of coloured stones²¹: most of them were white, translucent like rock crystal, milky like chalcedony (Fig 1, 2), or yellowish like some translucent jasper stones, but a second group included green jaspers, a third group darker colours, from brown to black, jasper, soapstone or onyx and, very rarely, the colour red.

Stomach pains: digestion, gestation...

In the *Lapidary of Socrates and Dionysius*, a white stone ensures an easy digestion: “Another onyx stone, white and entirely transparent [...] Engrave on it, then, a serpent coil with the upper part of a head of a lion and rays. If worn, this stone completely prevents pain in the stomach, and you will even digest easily however many foods you make us of”²².

The stones themselves are sometimes engraved with a prescription. A yellowish chalcedony preserved in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris shows on the obverse the lion-headed snake and on the reverse the inscription “for the stomach”, *stomachou*, circling a Chnoubis sign²³. Chnoubis’ agency also touched on pregnancy and childbirth. On the obverse of a series of stones, Chnoubis sits on top of a suction cup symbolising the uterus, surrounded by other

¹⁹ Marcell.Emp., 20.98 (transl. FARAONE, 2018). See also Gal., *De simplicium medicamentorum*, 9.2.19.

²⁰ London, British Museum G 169 (EA 56169); CBd-89; MICHEL, 2001: n° 333; MICHEL, 2004: n° 46.1.b5.

²¹ See DASEN & NAGY, 2019: 418. On the relationship between colour and bodily fluid, MASTROCINQUE, 2011.

²² *Lapidary of Socrates and Dionysius*, 35 (transl. FARAONE, 2018).

²³ Calcedony, Paris, Cabinet des Médailles Reg.M.8420; CBd-367; MASTROCINQUE, 2014: n° 238.

protective deities (Anubis, Osiris, Isis, Nephtys). The reverse bears an inscription in the imperative form, *pesse*, or *pepte* “digest!”, often associated to the Chnoubis sign²⁴ or three kappas, KKK, probably an abbreviation of the word *kolike*, referring to stomach or uterine pain, either linked to menstruation or childbirth²⁵. The deity’s versatility is evident from a hematite in the Skoluda collection: the lion-headed snake stands erect next to a uterus while the inscription indicates that it will soothe an upset stomach²⁶. The extended reach of the deity’s powers finds a counterpoint in Greek and Latin lexical fields. *Stomachos* / *stomachus*, *uenter*, *aluus* may refer to a pregnant belly or digesting belly²⁷. In Galen, the uterus and the stomach share the same properties: “For the stomach retains the food until it has quite digested it, and the uterus retains the embryo until it brings it to completion, but the time taken for the completion of the embryo is many times more than that for the digestion of food”²⁸.

...lactation

The digestive function also includes a very important additional field, that of lactation, intimately linked to pregnancy. In *Socrates and Dionysius*, another onyx stone, in this case a black one, ensures the whole process runs smoothly: “onyx stone, completely black in its aspect. This stone is useful to women who carry a child in their belly or who are nursing. Engraved upon it is Chnoubis with three heads”²⁹. The three-headed snake in the description may correspond to the engraving of a chalcedony preserved in Cologne even though it is white in colour (Fig. 3)³⁰. The three-headed figure in Cologne is

²⁴ P. ex. CBd-780, -781, -136, -108; MICHEL, 2001: n^{os} 409-412.

²⁵ The three *Kappas* were also associated to birthing pain, see the red jasper in the Skoluda coll.; CBd-1631; DASEN, 2015: 94-96, fig. 3.9a, b.

²⁶ Haematite, Skoluda coll.; CbD-1752; “Chnoubis, stop the pain of the stomach, Abrasax”; MICHEL, 2004: n^o 11.3e.4; DASEN, 2015: 49, fig. 1.8.

²⁷ On this lexical field, ROURA, 1972, esp. 320-321; GOUREVITCH, 1976; DASEN, 2015: 50. On the extensive field linked to the protection of the belly in the modern era, see GÉLIS, 2018 on the agency of the “Saints des entrailles” in the eighteenth century.

²⁸ Gal., *Nat.Fac.* 3, 2 (transl. Brock, Loeb).

²⁹ *Lapidary of Socrates and Dionysius*, 36 (transl. FARAONE, 2018).

³⁰ Köln, Institut für Altertumskunde der Universität 18; CBd-1892; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL, 1992: 79-80, n^o 18, pl. 14.

unique, but several stones are engraved with three Chnoubis signs (Fig. 4)³¹ which might have had a similar value for a magician.

The relationship between pregnancy and lactation clarifies Chnoubis' central role. In ancient medicine, milk was not a humour because it was thought to originate in the blood, regardless of its specific qualities. For Aristotle, it came from menstrual blood "since milk is concocted"³². The uterine blood, which fed the embryo during pregnancy, turned into milk after birth, but Aristotle wrote that this process began already in the final phase of pregnancy and compared it to a form of digestion, *pepsis*³³: "And this material, in the case of blooded animals, is the bloodlike liquid, since milk is concocted, not decomposed, blood"³⁴.

The descriptions of this process invite us to reconsider the function of Chnoubis on white or milky stones ordering their recipient to digest. Indeed, an opaque white chalcedony shows on the obverse the image of the lion-headed snake associated with the Chnoubis sign and on the reverse the injunction *digest!*, repeated on two lines, *πέσσε, πέσσε*³⁵. The stone's milky colour suggests that the command related to digestion as a process of blood concoction, not to relieve an upset stomach.

The veined chalcedony bearing the triple Chnoubis sign (Fig. 4) also corresponds to one of the kinds of milk stones described by Pliny, the *galaxias*, characterized by the presence of coloured streaks: "*Galaxias*, or milk stone, which is sometimes known as galactite is similar to the stones next mentioned, but is traversed by blood-red or white streaks"³⁶. For Aetius, galactite could also be greenish in colour, like the second group of stones engraved with the figure of Chnoubis³⁷.

³¹ Calcedony; CBd-1181, WAGNER & BOARDMAN, 2003: n° 570 (fig 4). See also the veined steatite, Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 26761/393; CBd-39; MASTROCINQUE, 2007: n° Na 6; MICHEL, 2004: n° 11.3.b.14.

³² Arist., GA 777a, (transl. Peck, Loeb).

³³ Arist., GA 776a-777a, (trans. Peck, Loeb) On the transformation of uterine blood into milk, see for example Plut., *Moralia*, 495E-496A.

³⁴ Arist., GA 777a (trans. Peck, Loeb). On milk, brother of menstruation, see also Hp., *Epid.* 2.3.17.

³⁵ Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology 26020; CBd-1041; BONNER, 1950: D. 83; MICHEL, 2004: n° 11.3.e.5.

³⁶ Plin., *nat.* 37, 162, (transl. Eichholz, Loeb).

³⁷ Aët., 2, 17, p. 167, l. 6-7 (ed. Teubner): greenish in colour, *subiridis*.

Infant stomach disorders

Pliny and the lapidaries mention that infants wore milk stones around their neck. The protective powers of the lion-headed snake may have extended to infant stomach pains. They were particularly fragile, and serious colics could prevent them from sleeping or eating properly, which could jeopardise their very survival. Two inscriptions seem to confirm this. While the name of the recipient or owner of magic stones is very rarely indicated, two gems engraved with the Chnoubis snake also include the name of the child to be protected. A green stone formerly in Istanbul includes a named mother's prayer for her son, inscribed around the image of the risen serpent: "Avert all tension, all indigestion, and all pain from the stomach of Julian, whom Nonna bore"³⁸, while a dark coloured jasper bears the following injunction on its reverse: "Keep Proclus' stomach healthy!"³⁹

Stomach ache and worms

The identity of the snake could help us pinpoint which stomach ailment it was supposed to soothe. On several stones (e.g. Fig. 4)⁴⁰, Chnoubis is called *gigantorektes*, *barophites*, "I am Chnoubis, giant-slayer, crusher of snakes". To search for a myth recounting the deity's fight against these monsters is uneasy⁴¹. The attribution of exceptional feats to magical figures was a common rhetorical means to guarantee their effectiveness. A heroic feat often corresponds to a struggle against very intimate pains⁴². In the case of giant snakes, the monsters fought by Chnoubis could be internal. The stomach aches caused by parasitic infections were ubiquitous in ancient times. The lion-headed snake, protector of this mysterious inner-world

³⁸ Previously in Istanbul, priv. coll.; BONNER, 1954: 149, n° 36, pl. 36.

³⁹ Serpentine, Paris, Cabinet des médailles 58.2189; CBd-2943; MASTROCINQUE, 2014: n° 259.

⁴⁰ γιγαντορήκτα βαροφίτα. See also for ex. CBd-349; CBd-350; CBd-359; CBd-1327; CBd-1693.

⁴¹ On Chnoubis and the god of Israël, "Giant-slayer", DASEN & NAGY, 2012: 303-304. On a possible role in the battle of the Egyptian gods against the giants, see QUACK, 2019, who mentions that in the Tanis-family of the decans, Chnoumis is identified with the elder Horus, so with a role in this war. I thank J. F. Quack for this information. For BONNER, 1950: 168-169, these gemstones may have been used as protection against serpents; a number of dark-coloured ones were serpentines.

⁴² On Hercules' fight against the lion that symbolised bile, or Perseus against Medusa, gout, see DASEN, 2019.

represented by the belly, was the right warrior to fight off an invasion of serpents, albeit miniature ones, maybe pinworms, white in colour, like so many stones.

Stones to suck on?

Pliny mentions the fact that the milk stone melted in the mouth⁴³. This indication may explain the morphological specificity of gems engraved with Chnoubis, their oval, rounded shape like a seed or a sweet (Fig. 1, 2)⁴⁴. The isolated Chnoubis sign also appears on chalcedonies with a similar shape (Fig. 5)⁴⁵. Were these stones designed to be sucked on to express their virtues? Galen mentions several times remedies called ὑπογλωσσίδες to be placed under one's tongue⁴⁶. He lists two recipes from Scribonius against voice loss; the pellet, made up of different products, melted under the tongue. Wet nurses made them with brittle minerals, perhaps also with Chnoubis-engraved stones, which were thought to have similar properties. A stone worn as a pendant by a toddler might also have ended up in his or her mouth and one cannot rule out the possibility that toddlers sucked on the stones⁴⁷.

Conclusion

The prominence of the stones engraved with the name or sign of Chnoubis, the lion-headed snake, could be explained by the wide-ranging magical reach of this figure over the lactation process, conceived at the time as a kind of digestion, and more broadly over infant nutrition, upset stomachs and fighting intestinal parasites. Like galactite which was used to ease difficult births⁴⁸, Chnoubis' power began in uterine life. These engraved stones testify to both the common vulnerability of women and toddlers, protected by the same amulets, and the importance of the means deployed daily to ensure their survival. Like many other female skills typical of this stage of life, the use of these stones and the motif of Chnoubis is

⁴³ Plin., *nat.* 37.162.

⁴⁴ See also London, British Museum G 154 (EA 56154); CBd-692, and commentary in DASEN & NAGY 2012: 309.

⁴⁵ White calcedony; Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, Classical Collection 62.21.A; CBd-152.

⁴⁶ GUARDASOLE, 2015.

⁴⁷ See a greyish-white calcedony pendant, Ex-CNG 88, Art market (Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.); CBd-1905.

⁴⁸ Damig., 34.24.

clearly a long-term process, constantly redefined and with tangible evidence of its use through different amulets produced in a wide variety of materials⁴⁹.

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⁴⁹ See the description in the *Apocalypse of John*: 12 and from the sixteenth century the way in which the nursing Virgin is also associated to a snake which she tramples. See also nineteenth century amulet necklaces from Brittany made of amber, glass and stone pearls, for wearing at weddings, to ease breastfeeding, and more generally to ward off evil spells and snakebites. I thank Marie-France Morel very much for this information (in press).

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Blue chalcedony, 14 x 10 x 5 mm. London, British Museum, G 154 (EA 56154). Drawing after MICHEL, 2001.



Fig. 2. Grey-white translucent chalcedony, 11 x 8 x 4 mm. London, British Museum G 173 (EA 56173). Drawing after MICHEL, 2001.



Fig. 3. Yellowish white chalcedony, 27 x 22.3 x 9.9 mm. Köln, Institut für Altertumskunde der Universität 18. © Köln, Institut für Altertumskunde der Universität (Photo Isolde Luckert).



Fig. 4. Chalcedony, 20 x 14 x 5 mm. Private collection. © Photo Magdalena Depowska.



Fig. 5. Chalcedony, 10.1 x 8.6 x 4.9 mm. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, Classical Collection 62.21.A. © Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: László Mátyus.

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