

Ancient Magic

Then and Now

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CONTENTS

<i>Giacomo De Angelis</i> Preface	9
<i>Hans-Christian Günther</i> Foreword	15
<i>Marianna Scapini and Joseph E. Sanzo</i> Introduction.....	19
SECTION 1. MAGIC AS A CATEGORY: VOICES FROM THE PAST, VOICES FROM THE PRESENT	25
<i>Joseph E. Sanzo</i> Deconstructing the Deconstructionists: A Response to Recent Criticisms of the Rubric “Ancient Magic”	27
<i>Antón Alvar Nuño, Jaime Alvar Ezquerra</i> “Pure Magic” and its Taxonomic Value	49
<i>Orietta D. Cordovana</i> Pliny the Elder between Magic and Medicine	63
SECTION 2. INTERPRETING MAGICAL TEXTS AND OBJECTS	81
<i>Silvia Salin</i> Anti-Witchcraft Rituals Against Depression in Assyro-Babylonian Therapeutic Texts.....	83
<i>Attilio Mastrocinque</i> A Lamella from Vinkovci (Croatia) and the Jewish Necromancy	97
<i>Celia Sánchez Natalías</i> Seth in the Fountain of Anna Perenna? A New Interpretation of the Container.....	113

<i>Francisco Marco Simón</i> Domino Neptuno corulo pare(n)tatur: Magic and Law in the Romano-Celtic world	123
<i>Francesca Diosono</i> Lamps as Ritual and “Magical” Objects in Archaeological Contexts	139
<i>Juan Ramón Carbó García</i> Magia y cultos “orientales” en la Dacia romana	159
<i>Véronique Dasen</i> Play with Fate	173
<i>Christopher A. Faraone</i> The Use of Divine Images in the Dream-Divination Recipes of the Greek Magical Papyri.....	193
<i>Emilio Suárez de la Torre</i> Women as Users of Erotic Spells: Evidence Provided by Papyri and Defixiones	211
<i>Isabel Canzobre Martínez</i> Remarks on the Categorisation of the Divine in the PGM	233
<i>Miriam Blanco Cesteros</i> The Paradox of a “Magical Hymn”: Reviewing the Poetic Compositions of the Greek Magical Papyri.....	257
<i>Giulia Pedrucci</i> On the Use of Breast Milk and Menstrual Blood in the Greek and Roman Worlds.....	287
<i>Aurelio Pérez-Jiménez</i> Importancia de la oposición derecha/izquierda en la magia y la astrología	315
SECTION 3. THE TRANSMISSION OF ANCIENT MAGIC.....	333
<i>Franco Ferrari</i> Filosofía e teurgia negli Oracoli Caldaici	335
<i>Laura Mecella</i> Guerra e magia nei Cesti di Giulio Africano	349

<i>Raquel Martín Hernández</i> The Transmission of the Sortes Homericæ. A Papyrological Approach to the Texts	375
<i>Salvatore Costanza</i> Dottrina magica nei manuali divinatori greci, bizantini e metabizantini	387
<i>Marina Foschi Albert</i> Magic Potions, Homeric Cunning and Jason's Charm: Magic Motifs in Gottfried von Strassburg's Middle High German version of the Tristan Legend	405
<i>Tiziano Dorandi</i> Considerazioni sull'ecdotica dei testi magici antichi alla luce del PLeid. J 395 (PGM XIII)	415
<i>Carlo Martino Lucarini</i> La prima apparizione di Circe nella letteratura greca e il fantasma dell'epos argonautico pre-odissiaco	425

PLAY WITH FATE

Véronique Dasen, University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

A gemstone made in the Roman imperial period, now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, displays the dynamic of *tyché* (“luck”), which is managed by divine and human will.¹ The scene combines Egyptian and Graeco-Roman elements and creates an original visual discourse. The rectangular intaglio is carved in lapis lazuli. The shape and the design date on stylistic grounds to the 2nd century CE.² The ancient silver setting is preserved, with a loop showing that the piece was used as a pendant. The piece is of unknown provenance; however, it was most likely produced in Egypt or in the eastern Mediterranean since it belonged to the collection of Henri Seyrig (1895–1973), director of the *Institut français d’archéologie* in Beyrouth. Henri Seyrig acquired several antiquities in Syria, including possibly this one.³



Fig. 1a–b. Lapis lazuli in a silver setting (19,7 x 18 x 4 mm, including the setting). Paris, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, Collection Seyrig, AA.Seyrig.81. © Photo A. Mastrocinque.

On one side (fig. 1a), two male figures are sitting on folding chairs, face to face, playing together on a board put on their knees. The man on the left is jackal-headed, naked, with a *chlamys* on his left shoulder; he raises his right hand, the left one resting on the left upper corner of the board. On the right, a naked, muscular, ram-headed

- 1 First published by Mastrocinque 2014, 52, no 120; CBd-3288. This research is part of the ERC Advanced Grant project *Locus Ludi. The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity* (741520) based at Fribourg University. Many thanks to Salvatore Costanza, Anne Dunn-Vaturi, Árpád M. Nagy, Ulrich Schädler, Erika Zwierlein-Diehl, and above all to Attilio Mastrocinque for reading this paper in earlier drafts and making comments.
- 2 For the dating and the description of this gem, Zwierlein-Diehl 2019.
- 3 On the biography of Henri Seyrig (with bibliography), Mastrocinque 2014, 17.

young man touches the board with his left hand, as if ready to move a piece; his right arm is hidden behind the board. Over twenty round counters are placed on the board, including ten ones in line on its lower end. The gesture of the left player suggests that the play is soon completed. Yet it is unclear whether he is announcing his victory or that of his opponent; his posture could also just express the strong emotion aroused by play.

On the other side of the gem (fig. 1b), a series of Greek letters are carved in three lines:

ΘΕΝ | ΘΕΝ | ΝΕΡΘΩ.

These letters represent a secret word that was intended to be read from the stone itself, not from a print. These features suggest that the pendant belongs to the category of so-called “magical gems” produced in the Roman Imperial period, and characterised by a number of formal elements.⁴ Like them, the lapis lazuli is carved on both sides, and it was not meant to be used as a seal. It bears an inscription in Greek letters of a *uox magica*. The place of production of this specialised type of amulet is still debated. Most likely several workshops were active. The visual and verbal idioms combine elements from Graeco-Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish traditions, reflecting the hellenisation of Egyptian priestly tradition, as well as the globalisation of activities implying “magical gems” in the imperial period. These practices circulated widely in the Roman Empire, and such amuletic devices could be made anywhere in the Roman Empire, so long as ritual experts were available to direct the production.⁵ The interpretation of the inscription on the Seyrig stone is difficult to determine because ancient experts intentionally manipulated and distorted scripts in order to display their authority. The frequent use of pseudo-writing, or *caractères*, was also used to convey a specialised knowledge of secret divine names and entities.⁶ On the lapis lazuli, the reading of the inscription is uncertain. Did it order a god to appear?⁷ ΘΕΝ may also be a transliteration in Greek letters of the Hebrew imperative form *ten* (“give!”), ordering, for example, the divinity to provide luck. That said, a *uox magica* was not written to be deciphered.⁸

4 On this category of ancient glyptic, see Dasen and Nagy 2019; on dating and reception, Zwierlein-Diehl 2014, 87-130.

5 On the circulation of handbooks and of practitioners, see the black stone in Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, CBD-4, with the indication “...as is prescribed,” instead of the formula written in the handbook. On allusions to a handbook on gemstones, as well as on the use of gemstones as a handbook, see Faraone 2010, 79–102, and 2012, 63–74.

6 On *caractères*, see Frankfurter 1994, 198–221; Mastrocinque 2004, 90–98; Dzwiza 2013; Gordon 2014.

7 In Greek *vépθe* means “below,” “from below.”

8 I thank Joachim Quack for this suggestion; he adds that ΝΕΡΘΩ may also be associated to ΝΕΘΩ, to be understood as “great god” in Egyptian, but all these proposals “mainly demonstrate once again how tricky it is to establish clear etymologies for such sequences of short words with little context.”

1. A GAME FOR THE DEAD: AN EGYPTIAN JOURNEY TO THE AFTERLIFE?

This board game scene combines Egyptian and Graeco-Roman elements. This fusion allows for a bilingual reading with different, but similar, metaphoric meanings depending on the respective culture of the Egyptian or Greek viewer. The figure on the left depicts the jackal-headed Anubis. The god is best known in Egyptian religion as *psychopompos*, conducting the mummification and rejuvenation of Osiris, and hence of all dead. In Egyptian funerary iconography, Anubis appears in judgment scenes accompanying the deceased to Osiris and attending the weighing of his/her heart. On Roman period coffins, mummy shrouds or labels, Anubis is also holding a key because he leads the dead in his journey to the afterlife, and acts as the opener of the doors or gates of the underworld.⁹ On the Seyrig stone, the god wears the *chlamys* of Hermes and can be more specifically identified with Hermanubis, a Roman period creation.¹⁰ In the 2nd and 3rd century CE, military attire often stressed the invincibility of the god. On a “magical gem” in the British Museum, Hermanubis stands, wearing armour and a cloak or *paludamentum*, holding the *kerykeion* and the palm of victory.¹¹ The opponent of the god is a curiously ram-headed muscular young man, who may represent the Egyptian god Khnum, the creator of life, or a form of Amun.¹²

Does the presence of two Egyptian gods on the Seyrig gem imply that the game is the well-known *senet* or “passing” game?¹³ Peter A. Piccione proposed a convincing reconstruction of this traditional race game going back to the Predynastic period.¹⁴ Two players each have a set of seven or, in later periods, five pawns, on a board composed of three rows of ten squares. The goal of the game is to move all the pieces

9 On the keys of Anubis, see Parlasca 2010, 221–232; Dasen 2015a, 71.

10 Zwierlein-Diehl 2019. On Hermanubis, Grenier 1977, esp. 39–40.

11 Carnelian, London, British Museum G 420 (EA 56420); CBd–438. See also heliotrope, London, British Museum, G 31 (EA 56031); CBd–439; Yellow jasper, Paris, Cabinet des Médailles; Mastrocinque 2014, 51, no 113; CBd–1301. About the haematite, London, British Museum G 38 (EA 56038); CBd–421, with Anubis supporting a mummy above his head, and surrounded by a vegetal crown and a palm branch, see Michel 2001, 27, no 42: “Anubis ist in seiner Rolle als Psychopompos und Totengott angesprochen und somit der Regenerationsgedanke artikuliert. Den Ewigkeitssymbolen Palmzweig und Kranz oder Vollmondscheibe ist noch der Ouroboros hinzugefügt, – das Symbol für Ewigkeit schlechthin.”

12 Identification first made by Zwierlein-Diehl 2019. Ram-headed figures occur on magical gems, e.g. Standing, naked, holding a thunderbolt and a sceptre; red jasper, formerly Peter Paul Rubens coll.; CBd–2160 (post-antique?). Standing, naked or in a kilt, holding a branch: haematite, London, British Museum G 447 (EA 56447); CBd–716. Magnetite, London, British Museum G 30 (EA 56030); CBd–717. Three ram-headed figures standing in a kilt: jasper, Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 9805; CBd–2112.

13 So does Mastrocinque 2014, 52, no 120: “Il s’agit du jeu du *senet*, que les défunts faisaient dans l’au-delà pour gagner la survie de leur âme ou un sort meilleur: on les voit jouer tout seuls au *senet* dans les papyrus du *Livre des Morts*. On a d’ailleurs trouvé des tables à jeu dans des tombes égyptiennes.”

14 Piccione 2007; Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016, 41–80. The oldest depiction of the *Senet* equipment is found in the tomb of Hesy-Ra in Saqqara (3rd Dynasty c. 2686–2613 BCE); Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016, 23, fig. 2.5.

off the board. The progression along the path is determined by the throw of four sticks or knucklebones. Beside slab-like and graffito-boards, the standard type of board is a rectangular box during the New Kingdom (fig. 2; 1400 BCE–1200 BCE).



Fig. 2. Ivory game-board/box for Senet with game pieces, sticks and knucklebones (4.5 cm x 28 cm). The twenty squares game is on the underside of the box. London, British Museum EA66669. © Trustees of the British Museum.

In the introduction of chapter 17 of the *Book of the Dead* (*Book of Coming Forth by Day, or Emerging Forth into the Light*) the play is part of the transfiguration process of the deceased who wishes to become the living *ba* of Osiris and to return to the land of the living.¹⁵ In the New Kingdom, the funerary dimension of *senet* is displayed by the decoration of the board indicating good or bad spaces. The game starts on square 1 with the House of Thoth, alluding to the judgment scene of the dead, ending on square 30 with Re–Horakhty, the sun god, symbolising eternal rebirth. According to P. A. Piccione, the passing of the soul through gates may be equated with the movement of the gaming pieces on the board.¹⁶ The agonistic dimension of the play itself could have a ritual dimension. In *The Great Game Text*, preserved in New Kingdom sources, the deceased struggles against an opponent in order to access rejuvenation.¹⁷

15 *Book of the Dead*, introduction of chapter 17: “Formulae for elevation and transfiguration, for going out from the necropolis, for being in the following of Osiris, and being content with the food of Wennefer, going out by day, taking any form desired to be taken, playing the board-game *senet*, being in the pavilion, a living soul, the Osiris N among the revered before the great Ennead which is in the west, after he moors. This is good for the one who does it on earth”; transl. R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London 1989) 44. On the wishes of the deceased, see Smith 2017, 237.

16 On the symbolism of the decoration of the squares of the *senet* board, Piccione 2007, 58.

17 The *Great Game Text* and the designs of the P.Turin 1775 (20th dynasty) depict gods and events in the netherworld, also with pitfalls such as square 16 “House of Netting” or square 27 “Waters of

He or she is sitting in a pavilion before a table facing an invisible player, as on the Papyrus of Hunefer (fig. 3; Dynasty 19, ca 1280–1270 BCE).¹⁸



Fig. 3. Papyrus of Hunefer. London, British Museum EA9901,8. After Rossiter, E. 1979. *Le Livre des morts, Papyrus d’Ani, Hunefer, Anhai*. Fribourg, Genève: Liber, Minerva, fig. on 85.

2. A GAME FOR THE LIVING: ROMAN *ALEA* AND *TURRICULA*?

The reading of the scene as displaying the funerary *senet* can be challenged for at least two reasons. First, because of the media: “magical gems” did not aim at protecting the dead, but the living. Most gemstones were used as amulets to repel evil and heal various diseases, provide divine protection and success.¹⁹ Second, the game is not *senet*. The shape of the board is square, not rectangular. It is placed on the knees of the players, suggesting that it was made of wood, as in a lively wall-painting scene in the tavern of Salvius in Pompei (fig. 4; 1st cent. CE), or on a panel of the *xenia* mosaic decorating the *triclinium* of a wealthy house in Thysdrus (3rd cent. CE).²⁰

2.1. Playing *polis*?

The structure of the board is hardly visible on the miniature surface of the gem, but the range of possible games is not very large. A grid would allow a capture game

Chaos”; Piccione 2007, 60–62; Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016, 55–56. Playing pieces are often jackal-shaped, perhaps alluding to the role of Anubis as protector of the deceased; Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016, 64–67, fig. 3.6 and 3.7.

18 Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016, 55–56, fig. 3.4. An unusual opponent appears on a New Kingdom satirical papyrus from Deir el Medineh (1295–1069 BCE) in London, British Museum, showing a lion and an antelope, unequal adversaries, but the game may that of *Twenty squares*; Dunn-Vaturi 2016, 14–28.

19 Dasen and Nagy 2019.

20 Dunbabin 2003, 157–158, fig. 91.

called *polis*, πόλις, “city” or “cities,” described by Pollux in the 2nd century CE.²¹ This game is played with counters, called “dogs,” in two distinct colours for each player. No die is used; the counters are seized by being encircled.



Fig. 4. Pompei, VI.14.36, *caupona* of Salvius. Naples, National archeological museum. Inscription: *Exsi, Non trias duas est*. After Lambrugo Cl., Slavazzi F., and A. M. Fedeli (ed.). 2015. *I materiali della Collezione Archeologica “Giulio Sambon” di Milano I. Tra alea e agòn giochi di abilità e di azzardo*. Firenze: All’insegna Del Giglio, pl. 2b.

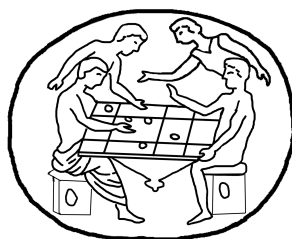


Fig. 5. Amethyst set in a gold ring (7 x 9 mm). Paris, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, Luynes 115. Author’s drawing after Lafaye 1900, 994, fig. 4368.

The Roman period *ludus latrunculorum* is a variant that applies the same method of capture.²² An amethyst gem set in a gold ring may depict this kind of game (fig. 5; 1st century BCE/CE).²³ Two men are sitting with a board on their knees. The counters are scattered on its surface as in a capture game. The man on the left raises a hand, as

21 Pollux, *Onomasticon*, 9.98; Cratinus cited by Zenobius (Zenob. Ath. III 16 = vulg. V 67 = 61 Kassel–Austin). Cf. the grid in a reused marble block in the sanctuary of Hera on the island of Samos. On this game, see Schädler 2002.

22 Schädler 1994, 47–67.

23 Minervini 1853, 192, pl. VIII, 5; Lafaye 1900, 994, fig. 4368; Dasen 2019, 18–19, fig. 3.

if indicating a number. Two onlookers surround them and seem to comment the course of the play. The animation of the scene alludes to the public dimension of the performance. The 4th century scholion of the *Praise of Piso* thus tells us that a crowd gathered when C. Calpurnius Piso displayed his strategic skills.²⁴ The anecdote may not relate to the historical Piso, but it is based on the observation of daily life scenes. A similar show may be recalled in the miniature stone.

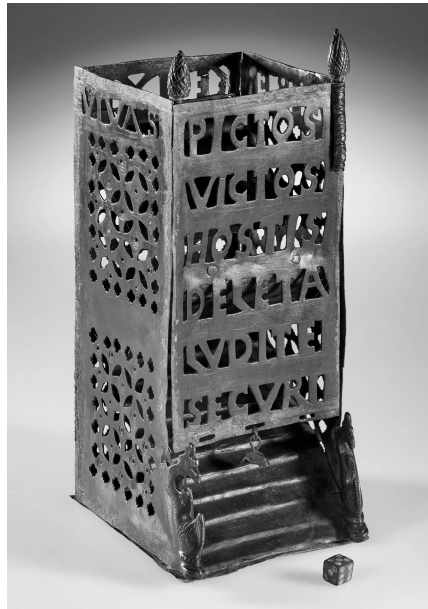


Fig. 6. Bronze dice tower (H. 22.5 x 9.5 x 9.5 cm), from a Roman villa, Wettweiss Froitzheim. Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum 85.0269. Photo J. Vogel, LVR–LandesMuseum Bonn.

2.2. Playing *Ludus duodecim scripta* or Alea?

On the Seyrig gem, however, another game takes place. The players are using dice as a detail reveals. The vertical structure engraved beside Anubis on the upper left corner of the board looks like a *turricula* or *pyrgos*, a miniature tower used for rolling dice in board and dice games. Dice towers are well known in ancient literature, archaeology, and iconography. The earliest mention is literary. The poet Martial (1st century CE) provides a description of its use which he associates with the prevention of cheating: “Little tower. If the shameless hand that knows how to throw the bones prearranged has thrown them through me, it does nothing but pray.”²⁵ This type of

24 *Schol. Iuv., Sat.* 5.109: *in latrunculorum lusu tam perfectus et callidus, ut ad eum ludentem concurreretur*. For a description of the game, see Ps. Calp. Piso, 5.190–208. Peirano 2012, 153 underscores that the text attributed to Calpurnius Siculus was written after the death of Piso, with a possible parodic tone, subverting the expected panegyrics of Piso’s military skills.

25 Mart. 14.16: *Quae scit compositos manus improba mittere talos, si per me misit, nil nisi uota feret* (transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb). See also Isid. *Etym.* 18.61 (600 CE): “The dice tumbler is so called because dice pass through it or because it is shaped like a tower; for the Greeks call a tower *pyrgos*.” *Pyrgus dictus quod per eum tesserae pergant, siue quod turris speciem habeat. Nam Graeci turrem πύργον uocant* (transl. St. A. Barney *et al.*, Cambridge, CUP).

object also exists in the extant material record.²⁶ A well-preserved one, made in bronze, comes from a 4th century Roman villa near Froitzheim in Germany with an inscription celebrating the victory of the Romans over the Picts: “The Picts defeated, the enemy wiped out; play without fear” (fig. 6; 370–80 CE).²⁷



Fig. 7. Panel of the Horses mosaic (60 x 60 cm). Carthage, Antiquarium. After C. Lambrugo, F. Slavazzi, and A. M. Fedeli (eds.). 2015. *I materiali della Collezione Archeologica “Giulio Sambon” di Milano I. Tra alea e agòn giochi di abilità e di azzardo*. Firenze: All’insegna Del Giglio, pl. 1a.

In iconography, however, the item is rarely depicted. Most representations date to Late Antiquity, usually associated with the display of status, leisure, and pleasure. In the House of the Horses in Carthage, a large mosaic depicts fifty circus horses and related scenes distributed in small panels. One of them shows two men playing with two large dice and white counters; a *turracula* stands on the edge of the board (fig. 7; early 4th century CE).²⁸ The Seyrig gem is thus the earliest extant iconographic testimony of this device in the second century CE.

The presence of the *turracula* is important because it implies playing with at least one die. Most likely the two men concentrate on a popular Roman game of the Backgammon family, played on a board of three rows of twelve fields, each row being divided by a symbol or space forming two series of six fields, as on the mosaic board from Antioch (fig. 8).²⁹

26 For a list of *turriculae*, all dating to 4th century archaeological contexts, see Horn 1989; Cobbett 2008; Cobbett 2013 (Qustul, Nubia, wooden *turracula* with silver and ivory engraving, from a tomb with boardgame, dice, counters; bronze *turracula* in baths, Chaves, Portugal; fragments in a Roman fort, Richborough and a Roman villa, Dorchester, GB).

27 *Pictos uictos hostis deleta ludite secure*; Horn 1989; Schamber 2009, no. 112.

28 Dunbabin 1999, 116, fig. 119. See also the tower with two dice on three 16th and 17th century manuscripts illustrating the *Saturnalia* of December on the *Calendar of 354 AD* or *Calendar of Filocalus*; the player, dressed in a tunic with fur, is standing, holding in his left hand a torch alluding to the nocturnal setting, and pointing two fingers of the right hand. The text addresses the slave (*uerna*), who is now allowed to play with his master; Salzman 1990, 74–76, figs. 23, 43 and 52.

29 Levi 1947, 295, fig. 123; Kondoleon 2000, 160, cat. 44.

Two variants are known. One was played with two dice (*Ludus duodecim scripta*), the other with three dice (*Alea*).³⁰ In both variants counters are lined during the course of the play, as depicted on the Seyrig gem.



Fig. 8. Mosaic board, *Alea* (96 x 122 cm). Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of the Committee for the Excavation of Antioch (y1965–616).

The popularity of *Alea* is suggested by the high number of literary allusions to the game,³¹ as well as by over two hundred inscribed *Alea* board games recorded in the Roman Empire.³² This type of game was often played in public spaces, as depicted on the *Megalopsychia* (“Magnanimity”) mosaic from a Late Roman wealthy villa at Yakto, near Antioch (fig. 9 a, b; mid-5th cent. CE).³³ The border surrounding a large hunt scene depicts a town and its buildings and monuments. A scene of play is repeated twice with variants: on the southern side (fig. 9a), two men play sitting on folding stools, like those on the gem, under a building designated by an inscription, *ho peripatos* (“the portico”).

The board, however, does not rest on their knees but on a table where counters and a dice tower are depicted. The men on the left touches the top of the tower as if throwing the dice, whereas his opponent lifts a hand, throwing fingers in the air, as if indicating a score. On their left, food is being prepared, possibly near public baths (*dêmosion [loutron]*). On their right, a servant pours wine to a client lying on the

30 Non. 170.22 explains *scripta* as “*puncta tesserarum*”; thus the name of the game should be understood as “the game of twelve points,” referring to the highest possible throw with two dice. See Schädler 1995, 73–98.

31 Purcell 2007, 90–97; Roueché 2007.

32 For a catalogue of inscribed *Alea* boards, Ferrua 2001 (200 items); Schamber 2009 (113 items).

33 See the description of the topographical border by Levi 1947, 326–337, esp. 330–331, fig. 136, pl. LXXIX, b, c; Dunbabin 1999, 180–183, fig. 194; Kondoleon 2000, 8, fig. 6, colour plate on 114.

floor in a tavern.³⁴ In the second scene of play (fig. 9b), two men play with similar gestures before a house, but their roles are reversed. The man on the right is throwing dice in the tower; the left one lifts the finger as if announcing a number. The presence of board games in two parts of the urban scenery suggests the visual importance of such activity in a late antique town.³⁵ Their gestures also contribute to the display of an animated social life. In the central medallion, the bust of *Megalopsychia* personifies generosity; she holds coins in her open palm, most likely to distribute them, but possibly alluding to the well-off status of citizens who often played for money.³⁶



Fig. 9 a–b. *Megalopsychia* mosaic, topographical border. Antioch, Hatay Archaeological Museum, Antakya 1016. Photo Antioch Expedition Archives, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

34 Levi 1947, 330.

35 On late antique sociability, Schädler 2002; Goncalvez 2013.

36 Levi 1947, 339–340.

3. HERMANUBIS AND DIVINATION

On the Seyrig gem, the jackal-headed Hermanubis sheds light on the meaning of this scene. In ancient Greece, Hermes is not restricted to the role of *psychopompos*; the god presides over games, often associated with cledonancy, a specific form of divination produced by involuntary motion or words. For example, the random motion of the spinning top could be interpreted as a divine message (like the spontaneous speech of children).³⁷ The image of the *mastix* beating the top is also associated with Anubis. In the *Greek Magical Papyri*, the victim is whipped like a top by the god in order to make her lose control and obey her lover:

Anubis, god on earth and under earth and heavenly; dog, dog, dog, assume all your authority and all your power against Tigerous, whom Sophia bore. Make her cease from her arrogance, calculation, and her shamefulness, and attract her to me [...], until she is scourged by you and comes desiring me [...]. Aye lord, attract to me Titerous, whom Sophia bore, to me, Hermeis, whom Hermione bore, immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly-driven by your whip, *mastix*.³⁸

The relation of Hermes to divinatory games also appears on a series of “magical gems” where play is associated with luck and divination. On a green jasper gem in the British Museum, the god plays with a hoop that looks like the wheel of Nemesis (fig. 10).³⁹ The meaning may be erotic. On a series of “magical gems,” the wheel of Nemesis is associated with Psychê and love. A green jasper gem in the Skoluda collection in Hamburg⁴⁰ thus depicts Psychê standing to left, bound to a column, her hands tied behind her back. On the top of the column a griffin holds the wheel. Eros stands before Psychê with bow and arrow; behind him, a burning torch alludes to the torture of passion.

Another association with Egypt may be at work too. For the Greeks, Hermes was also assimilated to the god Thoth who was regarded as the inventor of games. Plato reports this Egyptian tradition:

I heard, then, that at Naucratis, in Egypt, was one of the ancient gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis, and the name of the god himself was Theuth. He it was who invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also games with counters and dice, and, most important of all, letters.⁴¹

37 E.g. Pittacus of Mytilene advises to observe children playing with tops in order to choose a wife; Callim. *Epigr.* 1.8 (= *Anth. Pal.* 7. 89, *On Pittacus*). On games associated with love magic, Dasen 2016.

38 PGM XVIIa, transl. Betz 1992, 253–254.

39 Green jasper, London, British Museum G 1986,5–1,126; CBd 441. With *charactères* on the back: Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum, CBd–2013 (hoop); green jasper, London, British Museum G 382, EA 56382, CBd–440. Nemesis is holding a similar wheel on a haematite, London, British Museum G 43 (EA 56043); CBd–486.

40 Dark green jasper, Skoluda M02; CBd–1725. Inscription: δικάίως, “Justly.” Similar scene on a green jasper without Eros: Skoluda M027; CBd–1726. London, British Museum G 116 (EA 56116); CBd–488.

41 Pl. *Phdr.* 274 c–d: ἤκουσα τοίνυν περὶ Ναύκρατιν τῆς Αἰγύπτου γενέσθαι τῶν ἐκεῖ παλαιῶν τινα θεῶν, οὗ καὶ τὸ ὄρνειον ἱερὸν ὃ δὴ καλοῦσιν Ἰβίην· αὐτῷ δὲ ὄνομα τῷ δαίμονι εἶναι Θεῦθ. τοῦτον



Fig. 10. Green jasper (12 x 10 x 3 mm). London, British Museum G 1986,5-1,126. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 11. Nicolo (13 x 11 x 3 mm), from Karanis, Egypt. Ann Arbor, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Maurice Nahman, 1932. KM 26068. © Photo Randal Stegmeyer, University of Michigan Library. Inscription: τύχη.

In the byzantine period, Eustathius repeats the tradition that Hermes invented board games whereas Thoth invented dice.⁴²

4. AGÔN AND TYCHÊ

Most likely, however, a love spell is not the concern of the lapis lazuli. The scene displays the divinatory as well as the agonistic value of play. Many *Alea* board games are carved with inscriptions, each of six words of six letters, composing short sen-

δὴ πρῶτον ἀριθμὸν τε καὶ λογισμὸν εὐρεῖν καὶ γεωμετρίαν καὶ ἀστρονομίαν, ἔτι δὲ πεττείας τε καὶ κυβείας, καὶ δὴ καὶ γράμματα.

42 Eust. 1397,28.

tences where play is a metaphor for successful competition. Often they refer to the board as an allegory for the battlefield; the player is compared with a soldier, win with victory over enemies: “The Empire’s strength! The enemy is in chains; let the Romans play,” or “Italy, you rejoice in the defeat of the enemy!,” “The Parthians have been killed, the Briton conquered; Romans, play on.”⁴³ Other inscriptions teach how to manage the reversal of roles, winning and losing: “The conquered stand up, the beaten withdraw. You don’t know how to play.”⁴⁴

In the *Greek Anthology*, a poem develops the comparison between the board and the battlefield:⁴⁵

On a Game-Board. Your bones, O Palamedes, should have been sawn up and made into instruments of the art that is derived from war. For being in the wars you did invent another war, the war of friends on a wooden field.

The gods are also at play. The use of dice reflects the fact that the issue of the game, as well as of war, is partly determined by divine will, as stated by Aeschylus: “Ares will decide the issue with his dice, *kuboi*.”⁴⁶ Throwing dice or knucklebones could also be performed to draw lots (*kleroi*), in order to obtain an answer from the gods about future.⁴⁷ The Greek Palamedes invented dice, (*kuboi*), and dedicated them in the temple of the goddess Tychê in Argos.⁴⁸ This vision of lots, however, is not fatalist. Play is also a way of negotiating with the divine. Lucian thus describes how a bad throw could reveal a disaster, but that it was allowed to have a second one that could reverse it.⁴⁹ Personal competences operate as well. Terence expresses the idea: “Life is like a game of dice. If you don’t get the exact throw you want, you have to use your skill and make the best of the one you do get.”⁵⁰ Some inscriptions on board games convey similar messages. When throws are bad, victory can still occur thanks to strategic qualities: “If the die favours you, I will beat you with skill.”⁵¹

43 *Parthi occisi Britto uictus ludite*; Ferrua 2001, no 2; Schamber 2009, no 111. On this category, see Schädler 1995, 80–81. Ferrua 2001, nos 104–108, 110, 124. On the popular literacy of board games, see Purcell 1995; Purcell 2007; Chaniotis 2015.

44 Rome, Catacombs of St. Callixtus; Ferrua 2001, no 25; Schamber 2009, no 97. See also inscriptions comparing the board with the circus: “The game-board is a Circus: retire when you’re beaten: you don’t know how to play!” (Ferrua 2001, nos 83–103, 109, 179).

45 *Anth. Pal.* 15.18; Εἰς τὴν τάβλαν. Ὅστέα σου, Παλάμηδες, ἔδει πισθέντα γενέσθαι / ὄργανα τῆς τέχνης τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ πολέμου / ἐν πολέμοις γὰρ ἐὼν ἕτερον πόλεμον κατέδειξας, / ἐν ξυλίνῳ σταδίῳ τὸν φιλικὸν πόλεμον.

46 Aesch. *Sept.* 414: ἔργον δ’ ἐν κύβοις Ἄρης κρινεῖ.

47 On cleromantic use of dice or *astragaloι*, see e.g. Graf 2005, 51–97; Nollé 2007; Bundrick 2017.

48 Paus. 2.20.3: πέραν δὲ τοῦ Νεμείου Διὸς Τύχης ἐστὶν ἐκ παλαιοτάτου ναός, εἰ δὴ Παλαμήδης κύβους εὐρῶν ἀνέθηκεν ἐς τοῦτον τὸν ναόν.

49 Lucian, *Am.* 16. On play as a modality of action that aims at providing luck, see Hamayon 2016.

50 Ter. *Ad.* 4.739–741: *ita uitast hominum quasi quom ludas tesseris. si illud quod maxume opus est iactu non cadit, illud quod cecidit forte, id arte ut corrigas.*

51 Rome, Catacombs of St. Callixtus: *sitibi tessell/afauae tegote/studio uincam*; Ferrua 2001, no 19; Schamber 2009, no 97. On the similar ideology of the *pente grammai* scenes depicting Achilles and Ajax on archaic Greek vases, see Schädler 2009; Dasen 2015b (with earlier bibliography).

The scene depicted on the Seyrig gemstone thus can be interpreted as a ludic metaphor of the Graeco-Roman concept of *tyché* (“luck”), mixing divine protection and personal skill. The stone itself delivers a message about *tyché*. The notion of luck is embodied in the material. Lapis lazuli is associated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor and with the Graeco-Roman Aphrodite/Venus who gives her name to the best throw.⁵²

On the gem, the game is not finished, the issue is uncertain. The *turricula* stands on the side of Anubis who is a powerful provider of luck. In inscriptions dating to the Roman period, Anubis secures victory, listens to prayers and fulfils wishes.⁵³ Like Hermes, he cares for successful passages in the course of life. On a gem in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Anubis is standing, dressed in a short tunic, holding a *situla* and a *was*-scepter, with the inscription $\tau\acute{\upsilon}\chi\eta$ (“luck”) (fig. 11; ca 2nd cent. CE).⁵⁴ The ram-headed man on the right may be identified with Khnum, who is associated with regeneration for the living on “magical gems” of the same period. On a haematite in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (fig. 12; ca 2nd cent. CE),⁵⁵ the ram-headed Khnum displays his power over the beginning of human life. He is sitting, holding in his right hand the uterus in the shape of a cupping-vessel; he protects the growth of the embryo symbolised by Harpocrates crouching on top of the vessel, a hand to his mouth.⁵⁶



Fig. 12. Haematite, partly broken (18 x 11 x 3 mm). Collection Seyrig, AA.Seyrig.7. Paris, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France © Photo A. Mastrocinque.

52 On Venus' throw with knucklebones, see Suet. *Aug.* 71: “We gambled like old men during the meal both yesterday and today; for when the knucklebones were thrown, whoever turned up the ‘dog’ or the six, put a denarius in the pool for each one of the dice, and the whole was taken by anyone who threw the Venus.” See Schädler 1996, esp. 70–71. On anchors with the throw of Venus, see Queyrel 1987.

53 Grenier 1977, 23 and 174.

54 Nicolo, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology 26068; CBd–1031.

55 Mastrocinque 2014, 57, no 133.

56 On Khnum on uterine gems, securing a safe pregnancy and an easy delivery, see Dasen 2015a, esp. 64, 124–136, fig. 2.6 and 4.9. Anubis as a door opener is active too.



Fig. 13. Chalcedony (18 x 16 x 6 mm). Paris, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France 618, Froehner coll. © Photo A. Mastrocinque.

The meaning and function of the Seyrig gem may thus relate to the wish of the owner to safeguard the life course compared with the course of the play, between life (Khnum) and death (Anubis). A similar notion occurs on other “magical gems”. A green chalcedony in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (fig. 13; ca 2nd cent. CE)⁵⁷ is carved with an inscription adapting a Homeric verse: A | KAITO | ΤΕΔΗΧΡΥ | CEIAΠATH | PETITAIN | ΕΤΑΛΛΑ | NTA.⁵⁸ The text refers to the weighing of the fates of Achilles and Hector: “[...] The Father [Zeus] lifted on high his golden scales, and set therein two fates of grievous death, one for Achilles, and one for horse-taming Hector; then he grasped the balance by the midst and raised it; and down sank the day of doom of Hector, and departed unto Hades.”⁵⁹ The up and down motion of the scale refers to the same idea as the play. Philo of Alexandria (1st cent. BCE/CE) uses a ludic metaphor for expressing the uncertainty of fate in war and politics: “So much do human affairs twist and change, go backward and forward as on a board game.”⁶⁰ This vision of the board game as an allegory for the course of life continues in Late Antiquity. Isidore of Seville (560–636 CE) reports that players could regard the distribution of six fields in three rows as the six ages of life associated with past, present, and future:

They maintain that they play with three dice because of the three tenses of the world – present, past and future – because they do not stand still but tumble down. They also hold that the paths on the board are divided into six regions, for the age of a human, and in three lines, for the three tenses. Hence they say that a gaming board is marked off in three lines.⁶¹

57 Mastrocinque 2014, 219, no 618. On the use of Homeric verses against evil, see e.g. Lucian, *Charon or the Inspectors*, 7 (Hom. *Il.* 5.127 for recovering eyesight).

58 Hom. *Il.* 22.209: καὶ τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατὴρ ἐτίταινε τάλαντα.

59 Hom. *Il.* 22.209–213 (transl. A. T. Murray, Loeb). See the same image in *Il.* 8.69 about the fate of the Achaeans and Trojans. In Greek iconography, Hermes holds the scale with miniature *eidola* of warriors: Vollkommer 1992, 19–21, nos 57–69 (*kerostasia*).

60 Philo, *De Iosepho*, 136–137 (modified transl. of F. H. Colson, Loeb: *petteia* as boardgame instead of draught-board).

61 Schädler 2009, 81. Isid. *Etym.* 18.64, *De figuris aleae*. *Quidam autem aleatores sibi videntur physiologice per allegoriam hanc artem exercere, et sub quadam rerum similitudine fingere. Nam tribus tesseris ludere perhibent propter tria saeculi tempora: praesentia, praeterita, futura; quia*

In the Byzantine period, the interpretation of the *Alea* board becomes cosmic and astrological. The chronicler John of Antioch thus equates the twelve squares to the twelve zodiacal signs, the seven dice to the seven planets, and the *pyrgos* to the sky.⁶²

5. AN AMULET FOR A MAN?

The Seyrig pendant contributes to the on-going discussion about the gendered identity of amulets' wearers.⁶³ It probably belonged to a man at risk. Men also wore amulets, perhaps less regularly than women and children. Men especially wore amulets in health hazards, such as an acute illness,⁶⁴ or when placed in critical situations, such as the battle Plutarch reports about Sulla:⁶⁵

There is a story that he had a small golden image of Apollo from Delphi, which he was always wont in battle to carry about him on his chest, and that he then kissed it with these words, O Apollo Pythius, who in so many battles has raised to honour and greatness the Fortunate Cornelius Sulla, will you now cast him down, bringing him before the gate of his country, to perish shamefully with his fellow-citizens?

Several inscriptions on board games refer to the uncertainties that a soldier had to face, such as “May you win victoriously, make a successful voyage, and come home safely.”⁶⁶ The blue colour of the Seyrig stone could also suggest water and the wish for a safe travel of a war leader.⁶⁷

6. CONCLUSION

The Seyrig gem is the typical product of the cosmopolitan society of Roman Egypt. It demonstrates the diffusion of ludic practices, and the knowledge related to “magical

non stant, sed decurrunt. Sed et ipsas vias senariis locis distinctas propter aetates hominum ternariis lineis propter tempora argumentantur. Inde et tabulam ternis discriptam dicunt lineis.

62 *Excerptum Salmasianum* p. 390, 2 (= K. Müller, *FHG*, IV p. 550); repeated by the *Suda* s.v. τάβλα, ὄνομα παιδιᾶς. Ταύτην ἐφεῦρε Παλαμῆδης εἰς διαγωγὴν τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ στρατοῦ σὺν φιλοσοφίᾳ πολλῇ· τάβλα γάρ ἐστιν ὁ γῆινος κόσμος, ἰβ' δὲ κάσοι ὁ ζῳδιακὸς ἀριθμὸς, τὸ δὲ ψηφοβόλον καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ ζ' κοκκία τὰ ζ' ἄστρα τῶν πλανήτων, ὁ δὲ πύργος τὸ ὕψος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ· ἐξ οὗ ἀνταποδίδεται πᾶσι πολλὰ καὶ κακά. Cf. Three graffito-boards scratched on the roof of the temple of Khonsu in Karnak and of Hathor in Dendera (Late period); Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt, *Ancient Egyptians at Play*, 50 and 61.

63 van den Hoek, Feissel and Herrmann 2015, 309–357.

64 See Pericles during the plague of Athens; Plut. *Per.* 38.2.

65 Plut. *Sull.* 29.11.12; Dasen 2015a, 286.

66 From Rome. *uictor uincas nabiges felix salbus redias*. Ferrua 2001, no 119; Purcell 2007, 21; Schambler 2009, no 12.

67 The emperor Claudius used to play when he travelled: Suet. *Claud.* 33: *Aleam studiosissime lusit, de cuius arte librum quoque emisit, solitus etiam in gestatione ludere, ita essedo alveoque adaptatis ne lusus confunderetur*. Cf. Lambrugo 2015, 25–30.

gems” in the Roman Empire.⁶⁸ To Egyptian eyes, the equation of this game with *senet* is not out of question – and not just because pawns can be in the shape of jackals. *Senet* was also used for gambling and could symbolise mediation between mortals and gods, the living and the dead. In the 3rd century BCE Demotic tale of Setne, the hero, the prince Setne–Khamwas enters the tomb of Nineferkaptah in order to steal the book of magic of Thoth. The deceased comes back to life and engages in gambling with Setne–Khamwas by playing the *Senet* three times.⁶⁹ In the Greek tradition, dice are played with the dead or the gods. According to Herodotus, Rhampsinitus thus went to Hades and played dice (συγκυβεύειν), with Demeter. Plutarch, Hermes/Thot played a board game with Selene and won the five additional epagomenal days of the year.⁷⁰

Abbreviation

CBd: *The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database*, edited by Á. M. Nagy. Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts. (<http://classics.mfab.hu/talismans>).

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68 On evidence of *Ludus duodecim scriptorum* in Roman Egypt, see Haensch in press.

69 Lichtheim 1980, 132–133.

70 Plut. *Mor. De Is. et Os.* 12: “Later, playing with dice with the moon, he won from her the seventieth part of each of her periods of illumination, and from all the winnings he composed five days, and intercalated them as an addition to the three hundred and sixty days.” Contact between mortals and gods, life and death is also reflected in the story of Rhampsinitus told by Hdt 2.122; Haziza 2009, 138–142.

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