

GYÖRGY NÉMETH – ISABEL CANÓS I VILLENA

ΟΡΩΠΙΟΥΘ IN VILABERTRAN

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 130 (2000) 139–142

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

ΟΡΩΠΙΟΥΘ IN VILABERTRAN

The age-old chapter-house of Vilabertran (locus villae Bertrandi) lies in northern Catalonia, about three kilometers from the railway line connecting Barcelona with Perpignan. The Romanesque church and monastery, still standing, were dedicated in 1100, and, until the sixteenth century, were in the care of canons living by the Rule of Saint Augustine.¹ It is now a parish church. Nothing remains of the medieval furnishings of the church except one ornate crucifix, overlaid with plates of gilded silver, 1.95 m. tall and 0.99 m. wide, 0.33 m. thick. The crucifix was made between 1326 and 1358. Aside from the fourteenth-century Christ-figure and four relief plates (1. angel holding moon and sun; 2. the Virgin; 3. Saint John; 4. Adam rising from the grave), fourteen ancient gems, probably from the ancient Emporion (today's Empúries) adorn the cross² (Fig. 1). The gems were published, with precise drawings, exactly one hundred years ago by E. Roulin, who also remarked that a Greek inscription can be read on the gem under the feet of Christ: "Scarab and sun-disk surrounded by rays. The stone is remarkable for the Greek Gnostic inscription surrounding the central figure, which has, however, proved impossible to decipher. Certainly a Gnostic gem of Egyptian origin, but of the Roman imperial period. Jasper, dark grey."³ The inscription can be neatly made out on Roulin's sketch and on an enlarged photograph of the gem; it has not yet been published (Fig. 2). A possible solution is to read the inscription from left to right on the right side of the scarab as well, and take account of the long vertical stems of the rhos in the word ΟΡΩΠΙ. Following the proper direction of reading and taking the correct letter-forms into account, we obtain the following text:

OYΘ IAΩ

AI

At the end of line one, we see the name IAΩ, well-known from magic inscriptions; originally the Greek form of Yahwe, it came to represent, in the magical texts, any god or demonic being.⁴ This deity had, however, close ties to the sun, and, on the other hand, to Abrasax, who represented the unity of the world: whose name, or rather the numerical value of its letters, added up to 365, the sum of days in the year. The scarab holding a radiant sun-disk strengthens the reading IAΩ. IAΩ occurs, however, as a simple magic word, and also, in fact, transformed in magic rituals into a palindrome:⁵

IAΩ ΩAI.

¹ Eugène Roulin, *Monuments et mémoires* 6, 1899, 206–207; see 201. P. Corominas, *Les grâces de l'Empordà*, 1919, 83. N. de Dalmasas, *Orfebreria Catalana medieval: Barcelona 1300–1500*. I–II, Barcelona 1992, 94–95, Fig. 21.

² J. Goudiol: Les creus d'argenteria a Catalunya, *Anuari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans* 6, 1915–1920, 287–296; see esp. p. 287.

³ Roulin, 207: "Scarabée et globe solaire surmonté de rayons. Pierre curieuse par l'inscription gnostique grecque qui entoure le sujet, et qui, cependant, n'offre pour nous aucun sens. Nous avons là une gemme gnostique d'origine Égyptienne, mais de l'époque impériale romaine. Jasper gris foncé."

⁴ Cf., in Hungarian, most recently Árpád Nagy, *Antik tanulmányok (Studia Antiqua)* 37, 1993, 115–116: "The mode of thought characteristic of the time, which strove to break down the barriers separating various religious traditions, identified Yahwe with a number of gods. Usually with a supreme deity, or with the Sun, which was at the center of the religious thinking of the day. The Creator is redefined as the maker of a world understood by Gnostic tradition as Satanic, or as one of its viceroys. In magic the name can also be part of a formula of incantation, as the secret name of a demon, divorced entirely from the figure of Yahwe."

⁵ On the palindrome IAΩ ΩAI cf. R. W. Daniel – F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum I–II*, Opladen 1990–1992, II 129, document 41, A.D. 3–4th c. For the IAΩAI palindrome, D. R. Jordan provides a perfect parallel: Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora, *Hesperia* 54, 1985, 205–255, esp. 251: Inv. No. 1737 against Tyche. "It was found among 3rd-century pottery in well VII, which had been sunk into the courtyard of one of the Roman houses behind the stoa of Attalus along the road from the Greek to the Roman Agora" (p. 253). "Ιαωαι (line 7) is an obvious palindrome on Ιαω; it occurs, for example, in the so-called "planetary" inscription at Miletos: see A. Deismann, *Licht vom Osten*, Tübingen⁴ 1924, 393–399." For -ουθ as a simple ending of magic words see Daniel – Maltomini, II 325–335.



Fig. 1

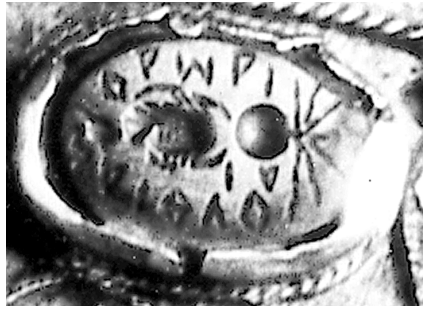


Fig. 2a Detail

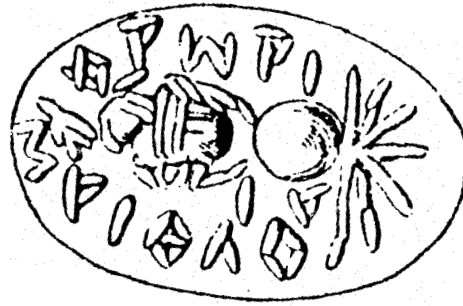


Fig. 2b Sketch

One of the most common magic palindromes is ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ. In this case, the theta in the middle occurs only once; the other letters twice each, standing to the right and left of the theta. On the right side of the scarab we are most likely faced with the formula:

ΙΑΩΑΙ,

the ΑΙ – the second half of the magic palindrome formed from the name ΙΑΩ – was pushed off into the next row for lack of space.

The complete inscription reads:

ΟΡΩΡΙΟΥΘ ΙΑΩΑΙ

According to Campbell Bonner, the word ΟΡΩΡΙΟΥΘ can often be found on amulets showing the womb, either as a magic spell in its own right, or as the name of a demon who helps or hinders pregnancy.⁶ He mentions a gem in the Fouquet Collection, which has the inscription “ΟΡΩΡΙΟΥΘ ΑΥΒΑΧ, Lord of the wombs of women”. In Bonner’s second example we find ΟΡΩΡΙΟΥΘ together with Iao Sabaoth, along with words calling on him to “contract” (στάλητι – correctly: στάληθι – μήτρα).⁷ On the same stone a magical palindrome can also be seen. Bonner distinguishes variant womb figures. One type is similar to an octopus, and is often combined with the Ororiouth inscription.⁸ In some cases, however, the octopus-womb figure can be seen on one side of the gem, while on the other we find a sun-disk placed at the foot of a scarab, from which rays, either straight, or wavy like lightning, flash outwards. According to Bonner, this too is a womb-image.⁹ This iconographic type is remarkably similar to the Vilabertran scarab, at the feet of which we can make out a sun-disk with seven rays. Though the magic word Ororiouth puts the stone’s status as a uterine amulet beyond doubt, one still associates the scarab and Iao with the radiant sun, as Eugène Roulin himself described the gem one hundred years ago. Our supposition appears corroborated, if we accept A. J. H. Vincent’s Hebrew etymology of the word Ororiouth: “Light of Lights”.¹⁰ A. A. Barb has drawn attention to the fact that either of the two sides of an Ororiouth-gem has a different function: the side with the image of the

⁶ C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor 1950, 199: “Ororiouth is almost always engraved on uterine amulets, usually on the reverse of the stone . . . Delatte called attention to a stone in the Fouquet collection which bears the phrase μήτρας γυναικῶν κύριος Ορωριουθ Αυβαχ along with other demonic names, not elsewhere attested, that control the female organ.”

⁷ C. Bonner, *Studies* 84: “One of the Athenian amulets published by him (No. 33) has on its reverse side, in addition to the usual Ορωριουθ Ιαω, Σαβαωθ, one or two other magical words, and a palindrome. Then follow the words στάλητι (for στάληθι) μήτρα . . . The passive of στέλλω must mean here »be contracted«, that is, return to the normal condition after the dilatation caused by pregnancy or the ordinary periodic function.”

⁸ C. Bonner, *Studies* 79–92.

⁹ C. Bonner, *Studies* 275, 139. gemma: “Below, octopuslike object (tentacles downward), probably another form of uterine symbol.” 276, 145. gemma: “Above, ΚΚΚ, center, scarab, below, round body with seven wavy lines projecting from its bottom. Another form of the uterine symbol.”

¹⁰ A. J. H. Vincent, *Essai d’explication de quelques pierres gnostiques*, *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de France* N. S. 20, 1850, 1–24; 445–456, see esp. 450.

womb represents the feminine; the side with the sun-disk and other images and magic inscriptions associated with sunlight the masculine principle.¹¹ The womb, in this case, symbolizes not only birth, but the chaos that preceded the birth of the world, the cause of many diseases.¹² The scarab of Vilabertran is, therefore, clearly a sun-symbol, and, as such, the masculine side of a uterine amulet, and if the possibility ever arose of removing the gem from the crucifix in which it is mounted, we would find the feminine side underneath, which most likely shows a womb and one or more associated deities.

It is difficult to place the inscription geographically and chronologically. The date could be set, on the basis of the form of the omega, cursive but angular, closely resembling the letter W, at some time in the second to third centuries AD. The place of origin is uncertain, but the deep understanding of Egyptian symbols makes Egypt possible. Still, it may also be possible that the amulet is a copy of an earlier Egyptian gem, made in the second to third centuries AD in Emporion. Part of antique Emporion became the site of the medieval town of Sant Martí d'Empúries (c. 843); the antique gems may have been uncovered at the time of building, and, at some time in the fourteenth century, set in the crucifix at Villabertran.¹³

Budapest
Barcelona

György Németh
Isabel Canós i Villena

¹¹ A. A. Barb, *Diva Matrix*, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16, 1953, 193–238. See esp. 201–202: “Bonner reproduces four specimens with this »octopus type« (as he calls it) of the »uterine symbol«. Now the »octopus type« consists of a round or ovoid ball (globe) »from the bottom of which several wavy lines extend« and is usually surmounted by the scarabeus (which sometimes has added the head of a hawk). But the scarab (as well as the hawk) are solar emblems *par excellence*. There is also a definite similarity between the »octopus type« and the Egyptian hieroglyph for »light«, »sunshine«. All this indicates that the »octopus type« does not represent the uterus but is a solar symbol, expressing »light« . . . Though being aware of the »madness« of these gnostic and magic speculations and amulets, one feels inclined to admit that »there is method in it«, when one finds one side of *all* these amulets devoted to the female principle of the womb (*metra* image, squatting parturient woman, winged uterus idol on Rubens’ and snail with Venus-symbol on Chaduc’s gem) while the other side presents the male principle (the »primeval light« in symbols [Ororiouth], Anubis, Heracles, the phallos on Rubens’ and Priapus on Chaduc’s gem).”

¹² A. A. Barb, *Seth or Anubis?*, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22, 1959, 367–371. See esp. 370: “This, of course, is not the womb in its blessed, childbearing aspect, but the roaming, evil *Hystera*, which according to ancient belief was thought responsible for all kinds of pain affecting bowels, stomach, heart, chest and even suffocation . . .”

¹³ “El període històric que abraça el Baix Imperi romà i l’etapa visigòtica, fins a l’ocupació àrab de l’any 715, significà per a Empúries una profunda transformació. Abandonada definitivament la ciutat romana en el tercer quart del segle III, així com tota l’àrea ocupada per l’antiga ciutat grega, el nucli urbà de l’Empúries tardo-romana es trobarà reduït a l’actual Sant Martí d’Empúries” (J. Tremoleda – M. Santos – X. Aquilè, *Imatges d’Empúries*, Barcelona 1993, 16). We would like to thank Prof. Attilio Mastrocinque, Concetta Aloe Spada and Richard W. Daniel for their useful advice, the FKFP (Higher Education Research Development Fund, 0061/1997) for its support, which gave us the chance to carry on research in Barcelona, the Soros Foundation (FEPP 238/62), and the Universitas Foundation for its help, which made it possible for us to open debate on the question of the inscription at the FIEC Conference at Kavala, in August 1999. Special thanks are due to the Institut Amatller d’Art in Barcelona, for allowing publication of the crucifix’s photograph.