

GEMSTONES OF ANTIQUITY

Although diamonds were not unknown in the ancient Mediterranean, Greeks and Romans were particularly captivated by colored gemstones. Color – whether in textile dyes, artists’ pigments, or exotic stone – was synonymous with wealth and luxury. Indeed, it was only the elite who could afford opulent textiles, polychromed artwork, and fine jewelry set with colored gemstones. Certain gems were also said to have amuletic properties for the wearer. As today, gems were worn in earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and finger rings. They also adorned crowns, textiles, vessels, sculpture, furniture, and even architecture. Unlike today, they were never faceted, but worn smooth, in cabochon form, or cut with images. There were also counterfeiterers who crafted fake gemstones of glass. Such swindlers prompted the elder Pliny to proclaim that there was “no other trickery practiced against society with greater profit.” Other Roman authors admonished showy displays by flamboyant citizens. Statius criticized a man who “set ablaze with flashing gems” the fingers of his eleven-year-old son, while Quintillian warned orators about distracting their audiences with gem-encrusted fingers. He added that “never should they [gems] encroach upon the middle joint.”

Fine jewelry that survives from antiquity has mostly been recovered from graves, where valued objects were sometimes interred with deceased owners. If an undisturbed cemetery is systematically excavated by archaeologists, it will present us with evidence for standards among residents of a particular town or city. But graves from ancient cemeteries were often robbed of valuables like jewelry, and thus determining how common certain gems were may be skewed by the randomness of preservation.

– Text by Benton Kidd
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Red, Yellow, and Green Gemstones

Surviving evidence tells us that red was a favorite color in gems of antiquity. Rubies, originating from far-flung places such as India, are rare in surviving Greek and Roman jewelry, but there were several other options for lovers of red. Garnet, carnelian, and jasper could all be obtained closer to the Mediterranean. Garnets and carnelian were higher in grade because of their translucency, while jasper was opaque. Jasper, however, had the advantage of also occurring in green and yellow. Roman author Lucan claimed that Cleopatra's golden furniture was also "yellow with jasper" and that her doors were "dotted with plenteous emeralds." The Museum has no ancient jewelry with emeralds, but they are abundantly visible on portraits of Roman ladies from the Faiyum in Egypt.

Earrings

Roman, Mid-3rd c. CE

From Turkey

Gold, glass, and garnet

Weinberg Fund (85.48 a-b)



Gem with Head of Poseidon or Zeus

Roman, 1st c. BCE-1st c. CE

From Near East (?)

Carnelian

(70.203)



**Finger Ring with Gem
with Two Female Figures**

Roman, 1st c. BCE-4th c. CE

From western Iran, Parthia (?)

Iron and red jasper

Gift of Mr. Irwin A. Vladimir (65.93)



**Gem with Helios
in a Quadriga**

Roman, 3rd c. CE

From Near East (?)

Green jasper

(68.317)



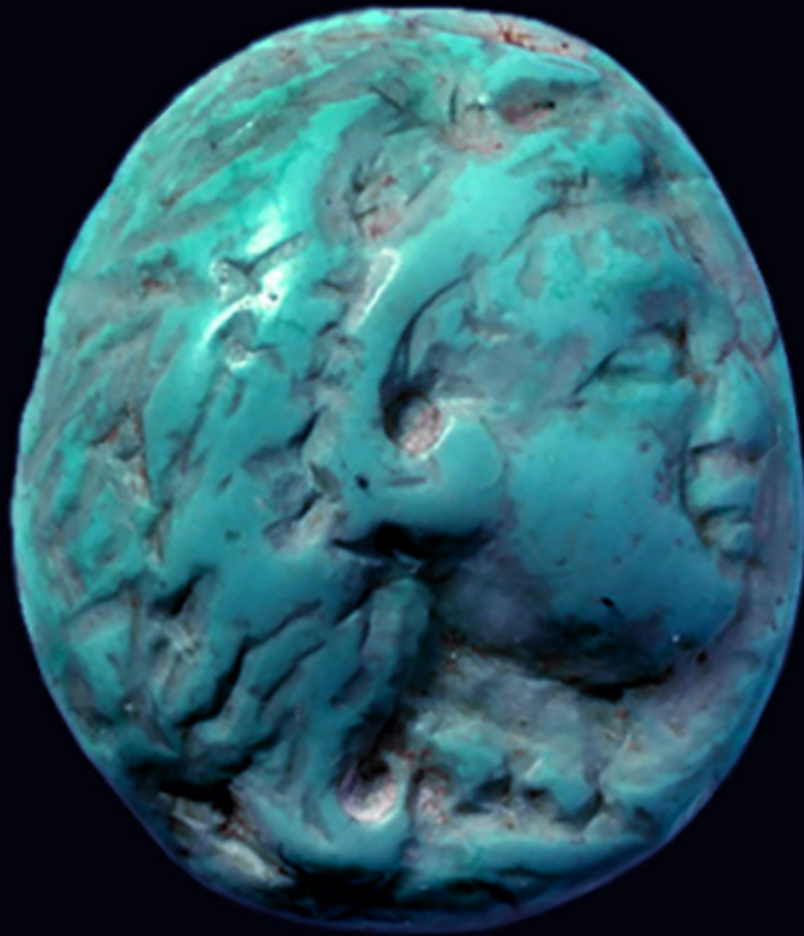
**Finger Ring with Gem
with Animal Scene**

Roman, 3rd-4th c. CE

From Palestine

Iron and yellow jasper

(70.317)



Blue Gemstones

Blue stones were among the rarer gems to Greeks and Romans. The brilliant lapis lazuli, while imported to pharaonic Egypt from central Asia, was seemingly uncommon in the Graeco-Roman world. Turquoise, also common among the pharaohs, came from Persia and the Sinai Peninsula, but is less common in Greek and Roman jewelry. The Museum's turquoise gem, with the head of Herakles, may have been acquired in Persia and carried back to the Mediterranean. Sapphires, likewise infrequent in Greek and Roman jewelry, came from southeast Asia, and were undoubtedly expensive. The Museum's delicate necklace of sapphires and gold filigree must have been owned by a wealthy Roman lady.

Gem with Head of Herakles

Hellenistic period, 3rd-2nd c. BCE

From eastern Iran, Bactria (?)

Turquoise

(65.149)

Necklace

Roman, 3rd-4th c. CE

From Turkey

Gold and sapphire

Weinberg Fund (85.45)



Amuletic Gemstones

Amethyst, occurring in hues from lavender to deep violet, was available in multiple locations around the Mediterranean. The name derives from the Greek *amethystos*, which translates as “not inebriated.” A myth claimed that the stone had once been clear, but the god Dionysus had poured wine over it, causing it to absorb the liquid and turn purple. Thereafter, the stone reportedly prevented inebriation by saving the ambitious drinker from absorbing too much wine.

Another stone with a talisman function was hematite or bloodstone, called as such because of its red veins. It was said to accelerate healing of wounds. The Museum’s example was also religious in nature, illustrating King Solomon vanquishing an enemy, and thus this gem conveyed good fortune to the owner in more than one way.

Gem with Hermes as Shepherd and Impression

Roman, 3rd-5th c. CE

Amethyst

(62.38)

Gem with King Solomon as Warrior

Byzantine, 4th-7th c. CE

From Palestine

Hematite

(70.96)



Pearls

Though not a gemstone, pearls were no less popular, from the Hellenistic period onward. Cleopatra was said to have astonished Marc Antony with her enormous pearl earrings, one of which she crushed and proceeded to drink in her wine. The elder Pliny was scandalized by women who wore them on their sandals, while Seneca lampooned others who dangled "an entire inheritance in one ear." Harvested on distant shores such as the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, the very exoticness of pearls only added to their allure. Rome was apparently a hub for the sale of this lustrous, marine oddity, known as *margarita* in Latin. The *Porticus Margaritaria* is thought to have been a commercial structure where pearls were sold, along with other gems. Their popularity did not wane, and emperors from the later empire and the succeeding Byzantine period are well-known for their pearl-encrusted diadems.



Earring

Byzantine, ca. 6th-7th c. CE

Gold and pearls

Anonymous gift (84.9)

Coin of Julian II ("the Apostate")

Roman, mint of Nicomedia, 362-363 c. CE

Bronze

Weinberg Fund (81.251)



Glass Gems and Beads

Although the elder Pliny dismisses glass gems as something “for the masses,” or relegates the medium to the forger’s workshop, much surviving jewelry from antiquity proves that glass gems were frequently combined with genuine stones (such as the Museum’s garnet earrings). While we might conclude that buyers were duped by the combination, glass could contain valuable components, like silver or gold, as colorants. It was, therefore, not as worthless as we might imagine.

Earrings

Roman, Mid-3rd c. CE

From Turkey

Gold, glass, and garnet

Weinberg Fund (85.48 a-b)