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The Colours of Roman Gems

A ‘Semantic System’ of Precious Stones

Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, Book 37 offers unique insights into the attitude towards precious stones in early Imperial Rome. From a thorough analysis of Pliny’s discussion (Fig. 1) emerges a complex ‘semantic system’ according to which some gemstones were preferentially meant for specific customers and uses. This ‘system’ was rooted in the physical, chemical, and aesthetic qualities of the minerals themselves. Among them, colour and suitability for engraving were the most important features.

‘Improper’ gems

The first three materials discussed by Pliny enjoy the *auctoritas* of precious stones, although they are not employed for jewellery and seals as gemstones: *murra* and crystal were cut into drinking vessels, while according to Pliny amber was useless and appreciated by wealthy *matronae* only for its pointless luxury.

Gems for women, gems for men

Among the gemstones *stricto sensu* (*gemmarum confessa genera*), the most valuable are those approved by the *mulierum senatusconsultum*: diamonds, pearls, emeralds, beryls, opals were unsuitable for engraving, set in jewellery (Fig. 2) and connected to water. On the contrary, the *sardonyx* (Fig. 3) was the most traditional gem for Roman signets since Scipio Africanus. According to ancient science, as living and gendered beings themselves, the sexual dimorphism of gems mirrored that of human beings: pale and watery nuances were suitable for women, while fiery colours reflected the intimate nature of men. The semantics of gemstones are also rooted in the chromatic symbolism of ancient Rome. The green of the emerald (Fig. 4) pointed to exoticism, otherness, and womanhood, while the red, white, and black striped sardonyx featured the principal colours of Roman tradition.

Exoticism and ‘Greekness’

After women’s and men’s gems, Pliny describes many stones that fall outside of this binary system based on gender, namely, gemstones recorded according to their colour. In these groups Pliny includes many stones that were in fashion in Hellenistic glyptics and jewellery, before they spread to Rome with the arrival of Greek jewellers and engravers during the late Republic and early Empire: amethyst, *topazos*-peridot, *carbunculus*-garnet, *sappirus*-lapis lazuli, and *sarda*-carnelian. The *sarda*-carnelian, in particular, is clearly acknowledged by Pliny as a ‘Greek gem’. Although these gems listed by colour are seldom or never mentioned in literary sources and are alien to the Roman ‘gendered system’, they seem to obey another significant cultural dichotomy, that between Greece and Rome. As a matter of fact, in Pliny’s time these gems apparently still evoked an aura of exoticism and suggested a nostalgic link with the Greek past.

Geographical and chronological frames

From a geographical and cultural viewpoint, this ‘semantic system’ of gems seems to be eminently Roman. Pliny and other authors mention emerald signets belonging to male rulers of the Greek world, like Polycrates of Samos, Alexander the Great, and Ptolemy IX: this strongly suggests that within that cultural frame emeralds were not meant only for women’s ornaments as they were in Rome. From a chronological perspective, apparently the Roman ‘semantic system’ of gems did not survive Late Antiquity, when a new ‘system’ was codified. In particular, pearls and emeralds – alongside blue ‘hyacinths’ – marked liturgical equipment, jewellery, and mosaic walls and ceilings of churches and basilicas as imperial gifts.

Fig. 2
Mummy portrait of a woman, 100 CE, Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 81.AP.42
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Fig. 3
Engraved sardonyx inset into a gold ring, 1st-2nd c. CE
© Christie’s 2018

Fig. 4
Gold and emerald necklace, 1st-2nd c. CE, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21.29.2
© Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 5
Sarda-carnelian intaglio, 2nd-1st c. BCE, NY, Metropolitan Museum, 41.160.701
© Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 4

Fig. 2

Fig. 1 PLINY THE ELDER, *NATURALIS HISTORIA*, BOOK 37

‘Improper’ gems *eandemque ... quam gemmae auctoritatem* (NH 37, 18-53)

<i>Murra</i>	Banquet equipment (hot and cold drinks)
Crystal	Banquet equipment (cold drinks)
Amber	<i>Sola deliciarum conscientia</i>

Gemmarum confessa genera ... ab laudatissimis orsi (NH 37, 54-192)

Gemstones for women *mulierum maxime senatusconsulto* (NH 37, 55-84)

1 Diamond	} Not engraved, Jewellery
2 Pearl	
3 Emerald	
Beryl	
4 Opal	

Gemstones for men *de quibus et viri iudicant* (NH 37, 85-91)

5 *Sardonyx* (*Onyx*, *Sarda*) Seals

Gems listed by colour: Exotic Fashion and Greek Allure (NH 37, 92-139)

Red	<i>Carbunculus</i> -garnet, <i>sarda</i> -carnelian, etc.
Green	<i>Topazus</i> -peridot, <i>iaspis</i> -chalcedony, etc.
Blue	<i>Sappirus</i> -lapis lazuli, <i>hyacinthos</i> -sapphire, etc.
Purple	Amethyst, etc.
Gold/Yellow	<i>Chrysolithus</i> , etc.
White	<i>Paederos</i> -opal, etc.

Fig. 5



Fig. 3

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