

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Two Intaglios from the Gloucester Area

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2002, Vol. 120, 229-232

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Notes

TWO INTAGLIOS FROM THE GLOUCESTER AREA

In September 1999 two intaglios were brought into Gloucester City Museum and Art Gallery for identification. They had been discovered by a metal detectorist some months earlier, but were not examined closely and were placed in his ‘eyes only’ finds bag (those non-metal objects found without the aid of a metal detector). By the time the detectorist examined the bag’s contents he could no longer remember where the intaglios were found. The bag contained finds from a number of sites.

The most precise provenance that can now be assigned to the two intaglios is a findspot within a five-mile radius of the centre of Gloucester, the regular detecting ground of the finder. While it is unfortunate that no better provenance can be attributed to the intaglios, their importance as objects, in particular the jasper gem, warrants their publication.

1. The more significant of the two intaglios is of red jasper and is cut to the shape normal for this material (i.e. ovoid, with a flat upper surface and sides bevelled inwards—Henig 1978, fig.1 shape F1). The gem is 12 mm from top to bottom, 8 mm across and 2 mm thick. It is in good condition apart from a chip on one side, and it preserves large areas of high polish within the cut areas.

The device (Fig. 1) is the head of a middle-aged to elderly man in profile to the left (reversed in impression). He is bald on top, but the hair on the back of his head falls in longish locks and he has a full, rich beard. With regard to physiognomy he has a well defined, piercing eye, stubby nose and a mouth partly open. The top of his mantle is indicated, draped around the base of the neck.



Fig. 1. Socrates intaglio from near Gloucester (photograph Robert Wilkins, F.S.A., copyright Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).

There is no doubt that the subject, which resembles a Silenos (see Plato, *Symposium* 215a and b), is Socrates, the most commonly represented of all Greek philosophers in Roman times. It belongs to the earlier of two types of representation of Socrates (type A) as depicted by a marble head in the Vatican (Richter 1965, 110 no. 1, figs. 456, 457, 459). Comparison may be made with other gem portraits, amongst them a red jasper in Paris inscribed in Greek with the name of the owner of the stone (Markos Livia) (Richter 1971, no. 416); a cornelian from Stabiae in Naples (Pannuti 1983, no. 184); a cornelian (broken) in Berlin (Richter 1965, 119, fig. 567; eadem 1971, no. 418); a nicolo from Gadara in Palestine (Henig and Whiting 1987, no. 277); and a black clay sealing, probably from Asia Minor, in the Getty Museum (Spier 1992, no. 472).

Only one other representation of Socrates has been attributed to a Roman site in Britain. This is a portrait bust on a cornelian presented to South Shields museum by Dr. H.M.S. Blair, much of whose collection was local though the gem was not recorded by him amongst finds from the area of the Roman fort at South Shields, and is thus without any firm provenance. This intaglio (Henig 1978, no. 480) is not really analogous to the Gloucester gem, but to the later, probably Lysippan, type of Socrates portrait (type B, cf. Richter 1971, no. 428).

The execution of the gem is careful and classicising, with detail correctly delineated. The hair is rendered in a realistic and convincing manner, and the face is shown as dignified and harmonious. In this it contrasts with the much more schematised cornelian portrait gem of Socrates from Novae in Bulgaria, in the National Museum at Sofia (Dimitrova-Milcheva 1981, no. 245), which, with its patterned hair and beard, can be attributed to the late 2nd century or the beginning of the 3rd. The Gloucester intaglio, by contrast, is unlikely to have been cut much later than the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117–138).

The presence of a gem depicting a philosopher at a colonia such as Gloucester is very significant. It exemplifies the importance of *paedeia* amongst the ruling class. Even men of action, like the governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola, were often in part Greek educated (in the case of Agricola, at Marseilles, described by Tacitus as ‘a blend and happy combination of Greek refinement and provincial simplicity’. Here ‘he was inclined to drink more deeply of philosophy than is permitted to a Roman and a Senator . . .’ [Tacitus, *Agricola* 4, 2]). A portrait of Socrates, effectively the founding father of Platonism, as a signet device would have exemplified the choice of those philosophic attributes which enabled the good Roman, here an early colonist of Glevum, to play his full part in society, probably as a politician in the local town council. In a sense the portrait imparted a message opposite to that of a gem portrait of Epicurus, which according to Pomponius in Cicero (*De Finibus* v, i, 3) was the badge of the Epicurean of his time—‘the members of our body not only have pictures of him, but even have his likeness on their drinking-cups and rings’. The quality of the new Gloucester gem certainly suggests it belonged to a man of consequence, and it is a very important addition to the list of gems from Britain.

2. Of the second intaglio only a fragment remains. Moulded in deep blue glass it measures some 15 mm from top to bottom and 10 mm across. It is 3 mm thick.

The fragment shows the wing and three tail feathers of an eagle (Fig. 2). It exactly matches these features on the eagles of two intaglios in green glass, set in bronze disc-brooches found respectively at Richborough, Kent, and Barrington, Cambridgeshire (Henig 1978, nos. 823–4). They are thought to date to the 3rd century. It would appear that blue and green glass was used indifferently in the same workshops. Another example of such an intaglio (Fig. 3), rather decayed but again set in a circular bronze brooch, was found during excavation in Bath Street in Bath in a post-Roman context. It is thought to date to the 3rd century (Davenport 1999, 86 no. 4, fig. 1.68).

Richard Hattatt (1987, 260), after mentioning the Richborough and Barrington gems, cites an unpublished brooch with a blue glass setting depicting Victory, found at Brook Street,



Fig. 2. Eagle intaglio fragment from near Gloucester (photograph Robert Wilkins, F.S.A., copyright Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).



Fig. 3. Eagle intaglio from Bath Street, Bath (illustration copyright Bath Archaeological Trust).

Winchester. This, in its turn, is paralleled by an unset intaglio from Housesteads, Northumberland (Henig 1978, no. 299), which was almost certainly originally part of a brooch.

The use of glass gems in brooches (Hattatt 1987, 254–61) was no doubt in imitation of splendid jewelled brooches which have not survived, at least in Britain. Deep blue glass was presumably meant to imitate amethyst, which was much admired at this time.

We are grateful to the finder, Mr. J. Carter, for bringing these objects to our attention.

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FURTHER THOUGHTS ON A PROBABLE MEDIEVAL PYX

The Revd. Canon P.G. Cobb, in his note in these *Transactions* on the probable medieval pyx formerly in St. Peter's church, Bristol,¹ stated that the description on the reverse of a photograph of the object taken by Fred Little c. 1910 was not in the handwriting of the Bristol antiquary, the Revd. Canon M.A.R.T. Cole (1874–1948), rector of Christ Church with St. Ewen. It has now been possible to check this assertion following the death of the Revd. Charles Maurice Joseph Turner (1913–97), an honorary curate of Christ Church and a life-long friend of Canon Cole. In his will Turner bequeathed to me his joint right of patronage in the living, and I received a box of papers including two notebooks in Canon Cole's handwriting. The last are a record of monuments and gravestones in the church made by him between 1914 and 1922 and a general notebook on the parish kept by him and his father, Canon E.P. Cole, between the 1880s and 1920s. This bequest enabled a comparison of the writing on the back of the photograph of the probable pyx with that in the notebooks, and there is no doubt whatever that both are in the same hand.

The large quantity of photographs of Bristol church buildings and ecclesiastical objects in Canon Cole's collection was dispersed following his death in 1948. The photographs, taken by Fred Little, Mr. C. Dudley Ruding Bryan (the art master at Clifton College and the heraldic artist responsible for the painting of the coat of arms in the Old Council Chamber of the Wills Memorial Building), and S.J. Collins, appear to have once constituted a systematic and complete photographic record of the old city churches in Bristol and their contents.

The photograph of the pyx was published prior to its appearance in our *Transactions* for it was part of a piece on St. Peter's, Castle Green, one of a series of articles published in the *Bristol Evening World* c. 1942–3 under the title 'Lest You Forget—Blitzed Churches'. The photograph was included with a display of objects lost in the air raids and is entitled 'One of the church treasures—an ancient post box'!

Note

1. *Trans. B.G.A.S.* 113 (1995), 179–80.

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