Sub signo Capricorni. The Image of Capricorn in Glyptics: Literary Sources, Gemstones, Impressions, Drawings

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Abstract

The relationship between glyptics and the circulation of images can be analysed from different perspectives, as seen in the case study of the image of Capricorn. The goat-fish monster entered the European collective imagination during Antiquity, when its image was spread on gems and coins. The popularity of this theme in the Augustan Age is unquestionable but, over time, the political meanings associated with Capricorn seemed to have faded, while others appeared. These meanings were fully recovered by 17th century scholars through the analysis of famous cameos and lesser-known gems. However, the protective and magical value of gems with Capricorn has always been and still remains remarkable. Further insights and comparisons are provided by some unpublished Capricorn intaglios and glass gems housed in the collections of the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano (MATR) in Verona.

Résumé

La relation entre la circulation des images et la glyptique peut être analysée selon différentes perspectives, dont l’exemple, dans le cadre de ce travail, sera fourni par l’étude de l’image du Capricorne. Ce monstre mi-chèvre mi-poisson est entré dans l’imaginaire européen dans l’Antiquité, en partie grâce à sa diffusion sur les gemmes, utilisées par un public intéressé par l’astrologie : les gemmes tantôt résumant tantôt anticipant les images présentes sur les monnaies. Le succès de ce thème à l’époque augustéenne ne fait guère de doute, mais plus tard les significations politiques de ce signe semblent disparaître, tandis que d’autres fleurissent. Ces sens furent redécouverts par les antiquaires du XVIIème siècle grâce à l’étude de camées célèbres et de gemmes moins connues. Toutefois, en association avec les gemmes, la valeur apotropaïque du Capricorne resta invariée. Quelques intailles et pâtes de verre inédites représentant ce sujet, qui se trouvent à présent au Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano de Vérone, offriront d’autres idées pour la recherche et la comparaison.

The relationship between the circulation of images and glyptics can be analysed from different perspectives. A preferred line of research focuses on the different meanings that images on gems may have acquired through space and time: iconographies change or are modified in the same way as their meanings. While the analysis of archaeological contexts and literary sources can help us recognize clear or hidden significances, it does not completely explain why a man or a woman chose a specific gem for sealing and for wearing in a piece of jewellery. We mainly look at engraved gems as little masterpieces, or as mysterious shrines of ancient myths – the same approach that Humanists and collectors and scholars of the Modern Age had. There is in fact a specific and fascinating feature in gems: the engravings create, by impression, other images, which have been and are still one of the most successful ways to learn about and study the spread of classical art, both in ancient and modern times. Nevertheless, for a few centuries, between the 2nd century B.C.E. and the middle of the 3rd century C.E., gems were mostly a commodity, needed for a urban – and globalized – life, worn by men and women, expressing, if possible, the feelings, memories, ambitions of their owners. An undoubtable proof of the practice of sealing is given by thou-sands of clay bullae with gem impressions, which have been found in the ruins of public and private archives of the Hellenistic and Roman Ages in the Mediterranean and Eastern areas. These impressions also offer a faithful picture of which images really circulated in glyptics during antiquity. On the other hand, the gems in the historical collections are mostly removed from their context, and groups from dated findings are few. Only in rare cases we can follow gems from workshop to owners, and imagine the successions of owners from the first to the last ones. Indeed, in ancient times gems were often used for several generations. Finally, we can follow the reproduction of an image from a model (a coin, for example) onto gems and recognize series, workshops, and artists. We can also follow the circulation of images from the engraved stones on to other materials.

We will try to illustrate these lines of investiga-tion by referring to an iconography that is still well recognizable nowadays: the Capricorn figure. The goat-fish hybrid entered the European collective imagination in the Classical Age and the gems bearing this picture have contributed widely to spread its iconography and the various meanings linked to it through the centuries. Most of the gems we will present come from the collections of the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano (MATR) in Verona, Italy, which houses a relevant group of intaglios with Capricorn: 40 exemplars, mostly unpublished.

Two Myths, Two Iconographies (A.M., U.V.)

Following the representation of Capricorn on gems, we start analysing literary sources: the glyptic images reflect indeed the different myths about the origin of the monster. The first myth revolves around the figure of Zeus and his childhood and is related to the Naiad Amaltheia. According to Ovid, Rhea decided to give the new-born Jupiter to a nymph, the Naiad called Amaltheia, who nourished him with the milk of her goat. The goat’s broken horn became a symbol of abundance, the Cornucopia: when Zeus won over Chronos, he put his nurse and...
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In another version of the myth, related by Hyginus, Amaltheia is the daughter of the King of Crete. Again, she received and fed the little Jupiter with the help of her goat, and then she and her goat were put among the stars. The connection between the goat and the Cornucopia is highlighted also in Apollodorus’ *Library*, where we can find mention of Cornucopia’s extraordinary powers. This association is also illustrated by Eratosthenes in his *Catasterismi* where Amaltheia is the mother of Capricorn. The myth of Capricorn is related to the positive image of the Cornucopia, whose power could be understood as a good omen for the owner of the image.

Capricorn-Amaltheia is well portrayed in a group of gems, in which the lower part of the body of the animal becomes a horn of plenty. These intaglios appear as an evolution of an image of Cornucopia, common in Ptolemaic coinage and glyptics, ending in a head of goat. At the same time, their images recall the double-bodied animals and figures common inItalic “a globolo” scarabs. A couple of intaglios in Verona MATR collection presents this iconography: the blob style of the carnelian MATR inv. 26925 is well diffused, for example, on gems from late Celtic contexts in northern Italy and Gaul (from the 2nd century B.C.E. until the middle of the 1st century B.C.E.). On the other hand, the carnelian MATR inv. 26926 reflects the calligraphic style of workshops engraving with wheel drills, in the last decades of the 1st century B.C.E. (Fig. 1) Nevertheless this image seems to disappear after the Augustan era: in carnelians MATR inv. 26927-26928, (Fig. 2) Capricorn and Cornucopia are presented as separate, under the influence of Augustan coinage, that oriented the taste of the craftsman and of the owners, as we will explain later.

In these last gems, Capricorn appears as a sea-monster half-goat and half-fish. This iconography, created in the Near East during the Bronze Age to depict the monster Suhurmāšu, constitutes the

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7 Ov. fast. 5, 115-128; particularly 121-124: “She suckled the god. But she broke a horn on a tree, and was shorn of half her charm. The nymph picked it up, wrapped it in fresh herbs, and carried it, full of fruit, to the lips of Jove.” (James G. Frazer - G. P. Goold).
8 Hyg. astr. 2, 7.
9 Apollod. 2, 7, 5: “Now Amalthea was a daughter of Haemonius, and she had a bull’s horn, which, according to Pherecydes, had the power of supplying meat or drink in abundance, whatever one might wish.” (James G. Frazer).
10 Alexander Olivieri, *Pseudo-Eratosthenis catasterismi, Mythographi Graeci 3* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1897), 33-34. Eratosth. catast. 27: “Having gained the power, Zeus put him among the stars with his mother, the goat. For having found the shell in the sea, he has a fish-tail as mark of distinction.”
greatest part of the gems with Capricorn. Two almost contemporary intaglios of the end of the 7th century B.C.E., a late Babylonian seal, depicting the goat-fish,17 and an “island gem” portraying a goat with a long tail of a sea-snake (a ketos),18 illustrate the far origin of the two iconographic versions. According to a Greek myth,19 Aegipan (son of Pan or of Zeus himself) helped Zeus by returning him his sinews, which had been stolen by Typhon. The myth is also reported by Hyginus, in two different ways. Firstly, quoting the Eratosthenes’ version we have already discussed, Aegipan was put by Jupiter among the stars because he had helped him fighting the Titans.20 The other version he proposes highlights a connection between the Capricorn and Pan. In fact, to avoid the Titans, Pan suggested the Gods to transform themselves into beasts and turned himself into a goat. Here, the great difference with the first myth is that Capricorn is Pan himself, later put among the stars by Jupiter.21

We can find Capricorn on roman gems too, as shown by some intaglios and glass gems now in MATR collection, whose main comparisons are related to Rome, Aquileia and other areas of early romanisation. Capricorn appears as a sea-snake in the glass intaglios MATR inv. 26951-2695322 and in the grey jasper MATR inv. 26950, (Fig. 3) close to the products of the “Officina del Pegaso” of Aquileia (in this gem, only the subtle lines used to draw horns permit to better define the monster as a Capricorn).23 The image of the goat-fish is even more diffused: in glass (MATR inv. 26946, 26955); in the fine, pellet style of the carnelian MATR inv. 26931; or in the onyx MATR inv. 26929 (Fig. 4). The monster, curiously, has no head because the stone broke during the engraving, forcing the craftsman to eliminate the damaged part in order to save his precious work.

Coins and Gems with Capricorn in the Late Republican Age: An Increasing Popularity (A.M., U.V.)

Why, during the 1st century B.C.E., do we find a remarkable number of images of Capricorn carved on intaglios, which, we argue, were produced by Italian workshops, or impressed on glass gems? Should we suppose a continuous tradition of gems production, by schools or workshops? Did other artefacts or trends increase the diffusion of these iconographic schemes? These gems confirm a phenomenon not foreign to ancient and modern authors: the diffusion

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19 Apollod. 1, 6, 3.
20 Hyg. astr. 2, 28. “[Eratosthenes says] that the reason his [Capricorn] lower part is fish-shaped is that he had hit his enemies with murrices instead of rocks.”
21 Hyg. fab. 196. “By the gods’ will, Pan was included in the number of the stars, since his warning allowed the gods to flee Typhoon’s attack, also because he then turned into a goat, which is why he is called Aegocerus and, by us, Capricorn.”
of the science of astrology and the practice of horoscopes in Rome and in the prosperous cities of the paeninsula, in part due to the presence of a multi-ethnic crowd from Greece and the Orient.\textsuperscript{24} Capricorn, Jupiter’s helper, ascended to the sky, could be felt as a positive and apotropaic creature, from which help could be obtained for every-day life.\textsuperscript{25} In Rome lived a critical mass of people virtually interested in such iconography, who encountered a new generation of glyptic craftsmen and artists, mostly arriving in Rome and Italy, with their knowledge and sketchbooks, during the Age of the Roman conquests, from Seleucian areas, Pontus, and even Alexandria.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore it was easy for the customers to find their favourite gems under the sign of Capricorn.

We can note the same phenomenon in coinage. A little Capricorn is depicted on a denarius of C. Vibius Pansa (90 B.C.E.), on a denarius serratus of L. Papius (79 B.C.E.), and on a bronze coin of Q. Oppius (we accept it was minted around 80 B.C.E.).\textsuperscript{27} The role of these Capricorns is debated: they could be symbols related to the minters, inspired by the rulers, or simply countermarks. In Rome, messages on coins (images and legenda) should be read, above all, as a proposal of the magistrate or emperor, with limited attention paid to users’ comprehension. However, a recurrent symbol could create a sort of familiarity with its image, whatever its origins. So, after a few decades, during the Civil Wars, the young Octavian could easily impose the image of Capricorn on gems for his political propaganda. Here is a short list of propaganda gems in MATR collections: inv. 27990, the adoption ring of Caesar for Octavian, with a Capricorn at the centre, dated around 44 B.C.E.;\textsuperscript{28} inv. 26024, a maiden (Virgo Astraea) seated on a bull-goat (a double monster related to Caesar and Octavian);\textsuperscript{29} inv. 26109, a young Octavian-Neptunus with a Capricorn near it, maybe related to the battle of Naulochus (36 B.C.E.); inv. 26947: a sculpture of a Capricorn on a base, as a tribute for the victory of Actium (31 B.C.E.).\textsuperscript{30} All these gems are made of glass, the cheapest material for the replication of masterpiece creations by artists also working for Roman mints. These glass intaglios, created with Octavian’s supporters in mind, are said to have first been diffused among the comrades and clients of the future princeps.\textsuperscript{31} We argue that they were the field where the political value of the image of Capricorn was tested, before its extended use after 27 B.C.E. And it is interesting that, even if Capricorn does not seem to be very attractive to modern engravers, a few post-classical, fine pieces revived some of these iconographies.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Augustus and Capricorn: The Choice of a Symbol (U.V.)}

The relationship between Augustus and Capricorn has been deeply investigated by scholars for centuries, but it is not easy to find a unique explanation. According to Roman Emperors’ biographer, Suetonius, Augustus was born on September 23\textsuperscript{33}, 63 B.C.E., hence he was born under the sign of Libra.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{25} Even though Bakhouche, “Augustus,” 54, says that the Capricorn could have some negative interpretations. Bakhouche quotes J.-H. Abry “Auguste: la balance et le capricorne,” REL, 66 (1988), where the author highlights Capricorn’s bad influence according, for example, to Vettius Valens Anthologie 1, 2 who describes the Capricorn as savoris aeterni, amarissima, aspicilum, ephelio, aupilanticeþ, aqüete, « source of evil, servile, riddling and double »; cfr. also Cic. atrat. 58-59 geldium nullido de pectore frigus anhe- lans // corpare semperis magna Capricornius in orbe.

\textsuperscript{26} A group of clay bullae with the goat-fish, from the archives of Seleucia on Tigris (Iraq), dated by the end of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC, is worthy of further study: Ariela Bol- lati, ‘Animali Fantastici,’ in Seleucia al Tigri. Le impronte di sigillo dagli Archivi, a cura di Antonio Invernizzi (Alessandria: Centro Scavi Torino Missione in Iraq II, 2004), II, 172-173, inv. 94, AF 101-104.


\textsuperscript{29} Alessandra Magni, “Per una storia della glittica ‘di propaganda’: alcune riflessioni,” L’Antico. Gemme inedite a Verona,” La Rivista di Engramma 170 (dicembre 2019) (http://www.ingramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3719); 17, 19, 27, where inv. 26947, 26109 are preliminarily discussed.

\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, a part of these glass gems, evidently unfinished, didn’t circulate in antiquity: Magni, “Propaganda,” 17.

\textsuperscript{31} A neoclassical Poniatowski gem, with a portrait, a little Capricorn and the signa- ture of Dioskourides (Christie’s, London: 1839-1529; http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk /record/5101809-C244-4D81-8843-9F212C5891AA); a cameo in St. Petersburg with a portrait of Octavian, a Capricorn and various symbols (Hermitage Museum, FP-12650: Golyźniak, Propaganda, 415, 93; fig. 813; https://www.hermitagemuseum.org /wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/18%20carved%20stones/1002501/), that deserves further studies.

\textsuperscript{32} Suett. caes. 2, 5: ‘Augustus was born just before sunrise on the ninth day before the Kalends of October in the consulship of Marcus Tullius Cicero and Gaius Antonius, at the Ox-Heads in the Palatine quarter, where he now has a shrine, built shortly after his death.” (J. C. Rolfe).
Then why the Capricorn, as Suetonius himself pondered, is said to be the sign under which he was born? A great analysis of all the hypothesis given by scholars is to be found in Tamsyn Barton’s *Augustus and Capricorn*, in which she shows the difficulty to come up to a definitive answer to the problem of Augustus’ horoscope. Going from the Moon’s ascendant of the day he was born, to the one of the day of his conception, which probably was in December, every hypothesis has been contemplated. Nevertheless, Barton shows that both the theory of the Moon’s Ascendant and the theory of the sign of the month of his conception can be reconciliated with other theories, and that the answer is not likely to be found in astrology. Other possibilities have recently been considered by Beatrice Bakhouche, who has related the Capricorn to the sky of January 16th, 27 B.C.E. (when Octavian was declared Augustus by *Senatus*) and linked it to July 20th, 44 B.C.E. (when *Sidus Iulium* appeared) as well as to September 23rd, 63 B.C.E., including in her analysis astrological facts. Our purpose, however, is not to decide which interpretation of astronomical phenomena is correct: we are only trying to define the symbolic possibilities that the Capricorn offered to Octavian’s and then to Augustus’ propaganda, that very often reuses and resemanticises an old, quite diffuse image. Capricorn represents the union between the sea and the earth, so it is perfectly suited to embody Augustus’ will to pacify the sea and the earth, after the battle of Actium. The Capricorn is also related to the Egyptian myth of Osiris, because he was reborn after Winter Solstice, *id est* in the sign of Capricorn. Following this interpretation, it is clear that the rebirth of Osiris can be linked to the rebirth of the Roman Power with Augustus, to the *aurea aetas* central to the emperor’s propaganda. Moreover, the Capricorn represents the heavens’ gate whereby the souls ascend to the divine ether, underlying even more the strong symbolic value of rebirth.

The Augustan poets did participate to that symbolic propaganda by including in their literary works some references to the Capricorn. Horace in his *Odes*, for instance, which P.J. Connor understands: “So ‘the tyrant of the Western or Hesperian wave’ contains reverberations that shift our thoughts from geographical astrology to politics. Within this rollcall of the possible ascendant birth signs, Horace took a quick shot at the supremacy of Augustus, a sharply worded suggestion about the nature of his dominance, or domination, in Rome.” It is therefore clear that the Capricorn was at the heart of Augustus’ propaganda and that he has used it in a large variety of *media*, coins, coinage, public monuments, literary works, to reach the widest and most heterogeneous public at different levels of understanding. The symbols of that message, namely peace, rebirth, and power, became part of Augustus’ program of creating a new *aurea aetas* for Rome and its Empire. Nonetheless, some messages were undoubtedly reserved for a more specific audience. While the Emperor’s circle facilitated the edition of literary works about astrology (e.g. the *Astronomica* of Manilius *post* 9 C.E. or the Latin translation of *Aratea* by his nephew Germanicus, 12-14 C.E.), charlatans and magicians were persecuted, as Cassius Dio remarks. Astrology – this could be the...
message of the emperor’s entourage – is a serious science, but dangerous if in inexpert hands.

**Coins and Gems with Capricorn in the Augustan Age: The Success of the Image (A.M.)**

The presence of Capricorn on coins, really discreet until the II Triumvirate, became of great impact in the Augustan era, after 27 B.C.E., in oriental mints, and then in Rome and Western Provinces. The circulation of the image of Capricorn between coinage and glyptics is clearly illustrated by some MATR intaglios, in which the iconography is completed variously by globes, as on the carnelian inv. 26940 (Fig. 5), and on the glass inv. 26944; by rudders, on the linear carnelian inv. 26937 (Fig. 6); by palm branches, on the agate inv. 26923-26924 (Fig. 7); by the trident, on the carnelians inv. 26940 (Fig. 5), inv. 26941. These symbols of power and victory, common on post-Actiac monuments too, were admitted by gem owners in their private lives and accepted on personal seals. While the figurative scheme is similar, the styles of these gems are different: we find old-fashioned a-globolo and pellet gems, and modern calligraphic, linear gems. Some pieces even show a mix of these different currents. The archaistic gems created by the Officina del Tirso in Aquileia, close to the intaglio inv. 26923 (Fig. 7), reflect a widespread taste in the Augustan art. On the other side, the mental image of Capricorn allows to recognize some really sketchy work, as the chalcedonies inv. 26933 or 26945. (Fig. 8)

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46 Maybe by inspiration of Attalic coinage: see SNG, IV Fitzwilliam Museum, SNGuk_0406_4664 (drachm, Attalus I, mint of Alabanda: http://www.sylloge-nummorum-graecorum.org). Due to pandemic situation, I’m unable to better investigate this aspect of Augustan coinage, that could be inscribed into the fascination expressed by Pergamon all over the late Republican Age: Ann Kuttner, “Republican Rome Looks at Pergamon,” HGPh 97 (1995), 157-178. About cistophori with Capricorn and Cornucopia on reverse see e.g. Walter Trimmlich, “Münzpropaganda,” in Kaiser Augustus, 486, 512-513, kat. 337 (=RIC I, 493).

47 Trimmlich, “Münzpropaganda,” 486; Capricorn with globe: RIC IV, 174-175 (denarii, mint of Lugdunum, 12 B.C.E.); with cornucopia and globe and rudder: RIC I 2, 125-130 (aurei and denarii, mint of Colonia Patrica, 18-17 B.C.E.). On the reverse of the remarkable denarius RIC I, 124 (mint of Colonia Patrica, 18-17 B.C.E.), the image of Capricorn is a part of an allegorical composition with flying Aurora.


49 “Officina del Tirso”: Sena Chiesa, Aquileia, 28-29, pl. LXXXII, nos. 5-11.
After the Augustan Age: Variations and Persistence (A.M.)

After the Augustan era, the coinage ensures a continuous circulation of the image of Capricorn as goat-fish and, especially in the 3rd century C.E., as sea-snake. The image of double Capricorns supporting the clipeus uirtutis, created for gems such as the sumptuous cameos housed in New York and Berlin and spread on glass intaglios as MATR inv. 27988, circulated on coins from the Julio-Claudian era until the middle of the 3rd century C.E.

However, beside replicas of Augustan types in the Flavian Age up to Hadrian’s rule, in the 2nd century C.E., Capricorn is once again a simple element in complex iconographies: as attribute of heroes and personifications, like Felicitas with Antoninus Pius or Tranquilitas with Philip the Arab, in top of standards, or under temples for Legions (for instance in Zeugma in Commagene, Turkey). Gems with Capricorn from limes settlements are less numerous than one would expect from a symbol related to legions:

we find, among them, five gems from Xanten, a dozen from Carnuntum and a sporadic presence in other sites. The circulation of the image in full Imperial Age is anyway confirmed by a number of clay impressions with Capricorn found in several archives (at Cyrene in Libya or Zeugma).

The Magic Capricorn (A.M.)

Among these clay bullae, some represent Capricorn accompanied by the Moon and inscriptions, perhaps voces magicae. In antiquity as in the Modern Age, stones were given a protective function; images, inscriptions, rituals of consecration could increase it. But it is difficult to define the degree of magic of a gem or isolate a group of magical gems in scientific terms. We can look to the continuous tradition of Homo Signorum - Zodiac Man, from antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond: here is confirmed the link between Capricorn, Saturnus and winter, in order to protect people from rheumatism; knees are the parts of the body reserved to Capricorn. This protective function, linked to melothesia, can lead to the choice of a gem more than a simple Zodiac sign. Often gems show Capricorn in association with other Zodiac signs: with Cancer, in MATR inv. 26938 (Fig. 9) or with Scorpio. In this last case, the protection of genitalia, ensured by the image of Scorpio according to the Zodiac Man, increases the power of the stone. In the quite ancient cernelian MATR inv. 26936 (Fig. 10), the figures of Capricorn and Scorpio are combined in a curious monster. Sometimes these combinations

60 Gertrud Platz-Horster, “‘Neue Gemmen aus Xanten,’ Xantener Berichte 30 (2017), 45-90: 64-65, no. 27 and the list provided.
65 Compare Idit Sagiv, Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 138, fig. 58.
66 Compare Maddoli, “Cirene,” 119, no. 797, Sylloge, II, 160. Ts 22 (yellow jasper). For the meaning of these gems see Lancellotti, “Astrologia,” 122-123.
were also explained using the powerful system of images created by the Augustan circle (the Scorpio as the sign of Tiberius, the crab as Augustan coinage symbol...). Even if we cannot exclude it, we have to remark that this hidden political meaning got lost over the centuries and it does not seem to be mentioned, for example, in \textit{Lapidaria} books that, from the Hellenistic Age to the Middle Ages, describe the properties and powers of the stones and their engravings.\footnote{Thomas Cantimpratensis (\textit{De lapidibus pretiosis et eorum virtutibus} 1.1) cited a taurum insculturum aut verginem vel capricornium, that, among its vertues, tutum facit gestantem (Matteo Milani, ”Trattato delle virtuose pietre,” \textit{Carte Romane} 3/2 (2015), 109-149: 120-121). The description recalls the cited gem MATR inv. 26024, but any political meaning is lost.}

**Gems with Capricorn in the Middle Ages: Readings, Re-appropriations, Imitations (A.M.)**

The image of Capricorn disappears from coinage at the end of the 3rd century C.E. At the same time, we note a change in production, diffusion, and use of the engraved gems. Among the new Christian gems, there are no images of Capricorn. Condemnation of astrology by Augustine or later by Isidorus of Seville\footnote{Aug. \textit{De Genesi ad litt.} 2,17: Ideoque fatendum est, quando ab istis vera dicitur, in- stintus quodam occultissimo dici, quem nescientes humanae mentes patiuntur. Quod cum ad decipiendos homines fit, spirituum seductorum operatio est: “It must be admitted that when they predict the truth, their predictions are caused by a wholly mysterious inspiration, that human minds undergo without their knowledge. But when it happens to deceive souls, it is the work of spirits of deceit.” Isid. \textit{Etym.} 3 27: Astrologia vero partim naturalis, partim superstitionis est. . . . Superstitiosa vero est illa quam mathematici sequuntur, qui in stellis auguriantur, quiac etiam duodecim caeli signa per singula animae vel corporis membra disponunt, siderumque cursu nativitates hominum et mores praedicare conantur: “Astrology, however, is partly natural, and partly superstitious. . . . Superstitious astrology, however, is the one that the Mathematicians [astrologers] follow: they vaticinate from the stars, relate each part of the soul or of the body to the twelve signs and attempt to predict births and behaviour by the courses of the stars.”} can partially explain this absence. In fact, even the \textit{interprestatio Christiana} of the Zodiac, implemented for example by Zeno, Bishop of Verona (+ 371 C.E.), ends up condemning Capricorn. For Zeno it was a companion of the devil, symbolizing the sins, washed away by the Aquarius, while Christus was related to Aries, the young goat.\footnote{Francesca Tasca Dirani, “Il Sermone dello Zodiaco di Zeno di Verona (I, 38). “Astrologia Praedicabilis” ed inculturazione”, \textit{Angelicum}, 83, 3 (2006), 533-556.} Nevertheless, while any political meaning slowly disappeared, along with coinage, the astronomical, astrological, and magic value of Capricorn continued, more or less openly, throughout the Middle Ages. In these centuries, ancient gems were collected as \textit{spolia}, reused on holy crosses, altars, or reliquaries, where the view of the carved image was difficult and apparently the gems lose the faculty to generate impressions and to circulate. Little evidence ensures that the original meanings of the gems were correctly understood by scholars, but new interpretations were given to them.\footnote{Erika Zwierlein-Diehl, \textit{Interpretatio Christiana. Zur Bedeutung der Gemmen in Mitteleuropäischen Schreinen}, in \textit{Die Gemmen und Räume des Dreikönigschreines} 1.1 (Stuttgart: Verlag Köhler Dom, 1998), 67-104.} Collected free, unset stones were used to generate impressions that then inspired artists who illuminated books, for example.\footnote{Jurgis Baltrušaitis, \textit{Il medioevo fantastico}, transl. Fulvio Zuliani, F. Bovoli (Milano: Adelphi, 1983), 51-62, 85-94.} A tradition of astrology and astronomy facit gestantem (Matteo Milani, ”Trattato delle virtuose pietre,” \textit{Carte Romane} 3/2 (2015), 109-149: 120-121). The description recalls the cited gem MATR inv. 26024, but any political meaning is lost.
man, riding the goat-fish. The figure is inscribed in a limited space, which is unusual for this type of representation, but typical of gems. A gem was used as a model, with the intermediation of impressions, or drawings inspired by impressions (because of the opposite orientation): an intaglio, now in a private collection, which dates from the 1st century B.C.E., provides a good example of this rare iconography. A second specimen, on the Portale dello Zodiaco in the Sacra di San Michele in Piedmont, masterpiece of Nicolaus (1128-1130), represents the Zodiac sign of Capricorn as a winged sea-snake, inserted in shoots of acanthus. Winged Capricorns, as the carnelian MATR inv. 26948 (Fig. 11) are rare, but a tradition of winged monsters of oriental origin, depicted on medieval cameos inspired by drapery, is known and studied. So, during the lower Middle Ages, the image of Capricorn as goat-fish or sea-snake circulated and is recognizable in association with the Zodiac and Months, due to the replicas on public monuments: an image and a link with astrology that is still valid today.

Ancient Gems with Capricorn in Modern Age: Reproductions and Interpretations (A.M.)

As the discovery of the archaeological past offers to Humanists new subjects and objects of study, the collections of gems, so called dactyliothecae, already diffused in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, became indispensable both for the comprehension of mythology, history, and art, and for the status they conferred to their owners. The story of the Cameo Grimani, a masterpiece of Late Republican Age, depicting the young Octavian (perhaps as Aegipan) riding Capricorn, is emblematic of the progressive


69 Images of Capricorn on manuscripts, collected by The Saxl Project, are available here: https://www.thesaxlproject.com/assets/Uploads/00-Capricorn-masterfile-15b-Jan-2017.pdf.

70 The two gems with Capricorn in the Shrine of the Three Magi of Cologne were set in the 20th century: Erika Zwierlein-Diehl, Dreikönigschreine, 103, 262-263, nos. 141-142.


72 Antonio Milone, “Relief with lions, fantastical beasts and a human figure,” in Il duomo di Modena. Atlante fotografico (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1999), 85, fig. 75-76, nos. 75-76 (76). The figure is interpreted as a man dominating a monster, without any reference to Capricorn. An image of the relief is provided here: http://www.medioevo.org/artemediavel.Images/EmiliaRomagna/Modena/Modena130.jpg.


75 Another example: Dembli, Carnuntum, 151, pl. 131, no. 997.

awareness acquired by collectors and scholars. The first modern owners of the cameo understood neither the subject nor its political meaning. Nevertheless in a few years the cameo became famous, as it was reproduced in the plates dedicated to the Grimani collection by the engravers Enea Vico and Battista Franco, and produced, from these ones, a cascade of copies and variations on different media (stucchi, pottery...). Eventually in the catalogues that scholars and collectors produced starting in the 17th century, the illustrations of which were continuously replicated and published, Capricorn is clearly interpreted in its historical meaning. A turning point for the understanding of the symbolic and historical value of Capricorn was the Dissertatio de Gemma Augustea by Albert Rubens (1643), son of the well-known painter and gem collector Pieter Paul Rubens. This great onyx cameo, depicting Augustus enthroned, accompanied by historical and allegorical figures, and surmounted by a Capricorn inscribed in an eight-ray star (the Sidus Iulium) has been known since the Middle Ages; the scene was probably intended as the Elevation of the Cross. Around the year 1600, it had been purchased by the Emperor Rudolph II, without the iconography being fully recognized. Eventually Albert Rubens, supported by historical and antiquarian sources, came to a complete understanding of the iconography of the Gemma Augustea, and so of the Capricorn.

This new, scientific interest in glyptic subjects, already well-spread in Europe, turned to more common, less precious gems as well. We will remain in Flanders for some examples. In the Dactyliotheca that Abraham Gorlaeus (1549-1608) dedicated to his collection, we can find a couple of images depicting an intaglio close to the carnelian inv. 26926 (Fig. 1) discussed above. Martin Henig has reconstructed the journey of this gem: in 1612, it arrived in the collection of the Prince of Wales, Henry Frederick Stuart. After many vicissitudes, Elias Ashmole took a wax impression of it in 1660, for the Inventory of Royal Coins and Gems he was preparing. We can value the distance between the wax impression and the printed image, that classicizes the intaglio, corrects some particulars, and offers an interpretation of them. But we can also note the evolution (or revolution) from the drawings of Cameo Grimani edited by Vico and Franco. They depicted only the figures and not the entire cameo; instead, the Gorlaeus’ plates, even less artistic, show the gem as set in its ring, with its negative engraving and impression.

We can also follow the path of another Flemish gem, depicting a Capricorn surmounting a war ship, now in the Royal Dutch collection, included by Jacob De Wilde in 1703 in his book Gemmae selectae. The drawing of the gem offers a correct interpretation. However, of greater significance is the project where the image of the gem is included: a plate dedicated to Jupiter and a selection of quotes from the Astronomica of Manlius (1 4 23) and the Tristia of Ovidius (1 9) that could clarify it. Gems depicting ships were thought to bring good luck in the Middle Ages, as Jean de Mandeville, late author of a Lapidarium, remembered. When we read a glass intaglio such as MATR inv. 26861, which is closely related to the gem in the Royal Dutch collection, we interpretate it, as Jacob De Wilde did. Yet, we should remember that only the creators of the prototype in the Augustan Age were aware of these symbolic meanings; the craftsman and the owner of the gem, probably, would have agreed on the auspicious value attributed to it by Jean de Mandeville.

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78 In a letter from Venice, dated 10.13.1498, the agent of Isabella d’Este Tolomeo Spagnolo describes the figure as a “mostro marino che era mezo becchio e mezo pesce, cum uno nudo in su la schi(e)na”; on Enea Vico’s engravings, the young is called “Palex- mon”; see Yuen, “Sources,” 154, note 33.
80 Albert Rubeni Dissertatio de Gemma Augustea, ed. Heinz Kahler (Berlin: Mann, 1968), 11-12.
81 Zwierlein- Diehl, Antike Gemmen, 244: in the Inventory of the Imperial Treasure (1619) the Gemma Augustea is described as “knustreicher Tafel von weissen Relief auf schwarzem Onyxgrund mit Planeten und Nymphen”. About the interpretatio Christiana of the cameo in Middle Ages, see Markus Lorz, “Die mittelalterlicher Geschichte der Gemma Augustea,” Concilium medii aevi 9 (2006), 159-173.
85 Baltrusaitis, Mediev., 92, note 57.

In the first half of the 18th century the crisis of the graphic representations of the gems in the plates of the glyptic publications, unfaithful and not responding to the scientific needs of the study of the gems, revealed the best way to study the originals: the casts. Thus, in the 18th and 19th centuries a phenomenon with multiple aspects emerged: the collections of impressions, in different materials – the most common, wax, sulphur and plaster – obtained from intaglios and cameos. Alongside the collections of private casts, the series of casts arranged in cases, accompanied by explanations, proliferated; a flourishing commercial activity especially in Rome, the glyptic and Grand Tour capital, to satisfy the numerous requests of scholars, collectors, travelers, specialists, amateurs, places of education and academies. The competition between the mould manufacturing factories was strong; and private individuals also manufactured them. Encyclopaedias of ancient and modern iconographies, the dactyliothecae were instruments of documentation, knowledge, and analysis of gems; they constituted an essential and irreplaceable vehicle for spreading them in a wide, easy, and economical way. The link between Capricorn and Augustus is found both in milestone texts in the glyptic field and in more modest ones.86

However, the role played by the major collections of casts to document and circulate the image of Capricorn was limited. Eloquent example: there is no gem with Capricorn (and more generally no propaganda) in the conspicuous collection of the famous Roman manufacture Paoletti (Bartolomeo (1757-1834) and his son Pietro (1785-1844/5)), who held a “monopoly” of the vitreous matrices, taken from ancient and modern intaglios and cameos, indispen-sable to make the casts.87 There is only one cast of an onyx intaglio, which represents Capricorn, from the well-known manufacture founded in Rome by the German Christian Dehn (1696-1770)88 and continued by his daughter Faustina and her husband Francesco Maria Dolce, and by their sons. One of them, Federico Dolce wrote a text (1790;1792) accompanying two hundred impressions, where the cast of the Capricorn intaglio does not appear. Dehn formed a “museum” of more than 5000 intaglios, cameos, and glass replicas, ancient and modern. Thus, in the indispensable catalogue with commentaries (often erudite and long-winded) of more than 2000 casts published by Francesco Maria Dolce (1772), this intaglio, which is in the section of the celestial signs and constellations, is defined as an ancient original in the Dehn museum; it has been observed that it has the tail composed of the horn of Amaltheia to indicate the fertility that this sign brings to the earth.89 In the large 19th century series of scagliola casts, made in Rome by Tommaso Cades (1772-1840),90 of ancient and modern intaglios and cameos, in book-shaped boxes with a corresponding catalogue, there are five casts, placed either between the Zodiac signs or among the weapons, with Capricorns alone, accompanied by cornucopia and globe, and above the galley.91 To these, one can add the cast of a New York cameo with a double Capri-corn with head within clipes uirtutis.92

A glass intaglio with the head of Augustus with the Capricorn and the dolphin under it, now at the National Archeological Museum of Florence, was published in the text of Leonardo Agostini Le gemme antiche figurate (1657). The fame and influence of this text, translated, reprinted, and enriched, explains the presence of the glass intaglio among the casts of the conspicuous dactyliotheca of the German Philipp Daniel Lippert (1702-1785), sold in commented series, from 1755 to 1776, with great

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89 Descrizione Istorica del Museo di Cristiano Denh . . . (Roma: Generoso Salomoni, 1772) tome II, O, 39, no. 86.
91 Descrizione di una Collezione di N. 8131 Impronte in smalto possedute in Roma da Tommaso Cades . . ., II, II, nos. 73-75; 47, IV M, nos. 8-9.
92 Descrizione Cades, 37, IV C, no. 301.
success and diffusion, particularly in Germany. The intaglio is also documented among the thousands of casts made by James Tassie (1735-1799) and his nephew William (1777-1860), popular in the English market and with a vast trade. The Tassie collection, whose catalogue was compiled by the writer and antiquarian Rudolf Erich Raspe, contains the largest number of casts with Capricorn, alone, double or with other elements such as cornucopia, rudder, trident, dolphin, bird; but some originals are probably not ancient. Particularly interesting is a sulphur Stosch in the Tassie collection, described as a Capricorn ending in fish, with the trident and the signature ΦΑΡΝΑΧΗΣ. As Raspe points out, it is a beautiful gem that looks like a copy from a Capricorn by the same master, but smaller and without a trident, published by Philipp von Stosch in his Gemmae Antiquae Caelatae. In fact in his revolutionary book (1724), the great scholar and collector Stosch published, among the seventy signed gems, a carnelian intaglio with a sea horse, signed ΦΑΡΝΑΧΗΣ, that was in the Farnese collection in Parma and is now missing.

Extremely significant: a famous intaglio is copied, modified, interpreted, and circulated widely, as testifies its presence, for example, in the collection of casts of the King of the Netherlands.

Conclusions (A.M., U.V., G.T.)

Sometimes our background as scholars, built on centuries of antiquarian research, leads us to see in the figures of gems what we wish to see. We can take as an example a sardonyx now in the British Museum collections. Its oldest image is an impression created in the workshop of James Tassie. By Tassie’s impression, and not by directly observing the original gem, a drawing made at the end of the 18th century and now in the British Museum as well, was generated. The artist enlarged some particulars of the intaglio, but he did not improve the image or offer any interpretation of the gem, only a description. A sketchy gem (MATR inv. 26939; Fig. 12) shows a similar iconography, collecting symbols of prosperity and wealth, generically related to Augustan themes (the Apollo’s crow, the Capricorn) and a less clear figure (a dolphin or a sea-shell, according to the myth of Capricorn-Aegipan we have seen). The stone – a yellow, magical jasper – is typical of Imperial glyptics since the Flavian dynasty and testifies the long duration of these subjects. But what is the monster engraved on these two gems? A Capricorn, as described in Tassie’s catalogue? Or a Hippocampus? While the London gem shows a head with horse’s mane, the Verona gem is not that accurate.

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105 Cf. Tassinari, “Propaganda” 35-37, where examination of the intaglio, of the publications, and also bibliography on Lippert.
106 Alessandra Magni, Gabriella Tassinari, “Gemme vitree e paste vitree: la questione delle officine,” in Siti produttivi e indicatori di produzione del vetro in Italia dall’antichità all’età contemporanea, ed. Marina Uboldi, Silvia Ciappi, Francesca Rebajoli (Cremona: AHV – Comitato Nazionale Italiano, 2019), 76, where previous bibliography.
107 Rudolf Eric Raspe, A Descriptive Catalogue of a General Collection of Ancient and Modern Engraved Gems, Cameos as well as Intaglios, taken ... by James Tassie, Modeller ... (London: C. Buckton, 1791), 225, nos. 3208-3222.
108 Raspe, Descriptive Catalogue, 225, no. 3208.
110 Johannis Cornelis De Jonge, Catalogue d’empreintes du Cabinet des Pierres gravées de Sa Majesté Le Roy des Pays Bas, Grand-Duc de Luxembourg (La Haye: De l'imprimerie d’Etat, 1837), 20, no. 420 (defined amethyst intaglio).
Therefore, we can see the monster we want to see: a Capricorn, created by our Augustan-formed mind.

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