

A gem with Christian motifs at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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The use of carvings on precious and semiprecious stones to ward off evil, as ornamentation or for use as signatures was widespread in Antiquity. The practice almost certainly originated in prehistoric times, when precious stones and similar natural plant or animal materials are known to have been highly valued. Apart from their hardness, shine and colouring, what prompted the desire for possession of such stones was the attribution to them of special magic or symbolic powers. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Book of Exodus tells how the High Priest of Israel's breastpiece had to be made, with each tribe being represented by a different gem¹. The aesthetic value of the gems and the attribution to them of magic powers justified their price and explains why they stimulated an intense trade between the Mediterranean world and far-off regions like the Baltic, the Indian Ocean and central Asia.

Carved gems combine the values attributed to the material used and the iconographic themes represented on them. Although a signet ring might be dismissed as bearing symbols of exclusive interest to the person who owns it and uses it as a means of registering his presence in the documents he authorizes, in many cases the ornamentation of the carvings goes beyond the simple purpose of personal identification to become a declaration of beliefs. Research into such carvings helps to restore many lost artworks, the features of which are reproduced on the gems. It is also an aid to understanding the links between a variety of symbols and the beliefs of different ages or of individual cultures in the ancient world.

In late Antiquity, the use of gems was criticised and persecuted as the kind of ostentation Christians should avoid, not least for their links to magic beliefs and superstitions. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, St. Jerome and St. Gregory of Nazianzus all considered gems to be one of a set of vices and weaknesses that had brought about the decline of Rome². In Hispania, a late 4th century text by Pacian, bishop of Barcelona, includes some harsh criticism of the faithful for general moral laxity and their taste for ostentation and luxury. The use of personal accessories implied the survival of pagan values and traditions, like the crowns that identified the *flamens*, also used by some convert priests, who were sentenced to two years' excommunication under canon 55 of the acts of the Council of Iliberris.

1 Lipinsky 1975, p. 279.

2 Ibid, p. 284.



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1. Carved oval gemstone with symbols
Paleochristian, second half of 4th century
Quartz, 3.2 x 2.1 x 0.4 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/1432

However, the symbolic value of gems, recognised in Biblical texts, led to a revival of their use by Christians that can be traced from in the 4th-century treatise by Epiphanius of Eleutheropolis *De XII gemmis* (*On the Twelve Precious Stones*), in the sixteenth book of the *Etymologiae* by St. Isidore of Seville or in Alfonso X the Wise's *Lapidario*. From the abundance of carved gems from the 4th century with Christian iconography that have survived to this day³, it is clear that Christian iconographic motifs were added to the classical decorative repertoire of the Roman glyptic to satisfy the new demand for this kind of object. In terms of both size and the richness of its ornamentation, the Christian gem at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum examined in this essay [fig. 1] is an exceptional piece, illustrating the way in which the glyptic also gained continuity in the Christian world in works as fine as any to be found in pagan culture.

Provenance of the carving

María de Arechavaleta, companion and heir to the collector José Palacio Olabarría, donated the gem to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1953, where it was given inventory number 82/1432. For this reason the entire bequest, including the gem, is known indistinctly by the surnames of both, although José Palacio is rightly considered the creator of the collection. Foremost among the articles donated to the Museum is the set of nearly three hundred works from the Far East⁴, which Palacio acquired on his frequent visits to Paris art-house auctions, in particular at the Hôtel Drouot; many of the catalogues he kept are full of notes on knock-down prices and the works he had acquired. The recent publication of a Greek ceramic ram from the Palacio Collection⁵ reviewed what little is known of the collector's life and the breadth of his preferences in painting, sculpture and the decorative arts. In the latter category, the bequest added more than two hundred *objets d'art* to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection.

Despite having carefully worked through all the auction catalogues in the Palacio-Arechavaleta bequest, we did not find a single mention of the gem, which suggests that Palacio might have acquired it directly from a Paris antiques house. Although, as a genuine expert, he was forever on the lookout for Oriental *objets d'art*⁶, in other fields of interest he would go for items he found particularly attractive, in a very varied range of materials and themes. It may have been the size of the gem under discussion here or the variety of themes it contains that caught his eye, without this necessarily meaning he was particularly interested in finding more works of this kind. However that may be, it is impossible to say whether the gem was a recent archaeological find, or if it had previously been in other collections or whether, as is the case with many ancient carved rings, it was a valued work that had passed through a variety of hands with its primary function intact to the present day. Neither the style nor the parallels mentioned later provide solid information about its likely origins.

In any case, it is not the sort of object that sits particularly well with the collector's main preferences, there being only one other gem in the Bilbao Museum bequest: a garnet scarab set on an ancient Hellenic rotating gold ring [fig. 2]. In this carving a seated female figure is portrayed holding in her left hand a bird with the

3 Spier 2007, the most recent essay on this theme, catalogues much of the known production.

4 Bilbao 1998, Bilbao 2014.

5 Corzo 2013.

6 Sagaste 2007, p. 457.

7 Inv. no. 1891,0806.86; Boardman 1970, no. 668.



2. Carving with an image of Athena Polias, 3rd century B.C.
 Garnet scarab mounted on a rotatable gold ring
 Ring: 1.6 (maximum diameter) x 0.2 cm; scarab: 1.5 x 1.1 x 0.7 cm
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Inv. No. 82/1433

unmistakable large round eyes of an owl, symbol of Athena and the city of Athens. A gold ring from c. 400 BC from Cyprus signed by Anaxiles in the British Museum collection⁷ has a similar portrayal of Athena with the owl on her left hand. A coin from Xanthos from 410 BC⁸ bears the same iconographic type, which comes from the revered statue of Athena Polias, tutelary goddess of the Acropolis and Athens; Pausanias (I, 26.6) describes the ancient wooden image, which received the offering of the peplos during the Panathenaic festivals. The seated figure, bearer of a patera and holding a golden owl, was one of the most highly valued objects of the treasure of Erechtheion⁹. We know of archaic replicas in terracotta and one in stone, found on the north slope of the Acropolis, which may well be the one Pausanias attributes to the sculptor Endoios (I, 26.4)¹⁰. In the gem under discussion here, the simplified semi-nude figure is very similar to a seated Aphrodite, although the owl means it must be Athena. The footrest she sits on, with its air of being the top of an Ionic column, also bears a remarkable likeness to the altar that precedes Athena Polias in portrayals on Attic black-figure ceramics¹¹.

Description

It is not easy to tell exactly what kind of setting was to be used for the early Christian carved oval gem from the Palacio Collection in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. At about three centimetres long and two wide, the gem was probably not destined for a ring, and may have been meant for use as a pendant or in the setting of some other kind of sumptuary object. It could well have been part of some piece of liturgical furniture or perhaps part of some ceremonial object like a pax.

8 Brett 1974, no. 2088.

9 Kroll 1982.

10 Demargne 1984, no. 18.

11 Kroll 1982, plate 11th.



3. Carved Oval Gemstone with Symbols

Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

Iconographic explanation

1. Christ as the Good Shepherd.

2 and 8. Tree and birds: an evocation of Paradise (*locus amoenus*).

3. Anchor: a symbol of firmness in the hope of resurrection.

4. Fish: their Greek name, *ichthys* or *ichthys* (ΙΧΘΥΣ), was interpreted as an acronym of "Iēsoūs CHristós Theoū hYíós Sōtēr" (Jesus Christ Son of God the Saviour).

5. Altar and divine hand: symbols of the sacrifice of Isaac, a prefiguration of Christ's sacrifice to redeem believers.

6. Alpha and Omega: God as the beginning and end of all things.

7. A laurel wreath *lemniscata* (adorned with ribbons): a representation of the triumph of the devout soul.

9. Chi Rho: the monogram of Christ.

10. Possibly a tool used by gravediggers in the Christian catacombs (*dolabra fossoria*).



5. *Nomos* with portrayal of Apollo Karneios
 Lucania (Metaponto), 5th century BC
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 Inv. no. 97.427

4. Sheep-bearing shepherd
 Nuragic bronze, 7th century BC
 Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
 Inv. no. ASH000007-01

Tests performed¹² showed that the carving was done on black, chestnut-toned quartz. A wide variety of quartz is used for gems, and different types of quartz are often confused. Although opal is physically similar to this particular gem, analysis ruled out this possibility.

All the decoration [fig. 3] is arranged around the main scene. This shows the figure of the Good Shepherd (1) with a lamb on his shoulders, which He holds with outstretched arms. Both are beneath a tree with high, curved branches where a bird perches (2). At the Good Shepherd's feet, a fillet marks the bottom line for the scene and creates an independent register in the lower part of the carved surface, with an anchor (3) arranged horizontally and the ring to the left, accompanied by two fish (4) facing in different directions. To the left of the Good Shepherd is an altar (5) topped by a large hand, palm open to the front, next to which are the reverse Apocalyptic letters Alpha and Omega (6). On the altar, at the edge of the carving, there is a crown with ribbons (7), on which has lighted a bird (8) similar to the one in the branches of the tree. Above that is the Chi Rho, the monogram (9) formed by the Greek letters Chi (X) and Rho (P), these being the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ (Χριστός). Finally, between the Good Shepherd and the trunk of the tree is a vague vertical feature difficult to identify (10), formed by a haft with a sort of double-headed axe above, which may be a *dolabra*, a pick used to cut and excavate by the gravediggers or *fossores* of the Christian catacombs.

¹² The gem was examined under spectroscopy by a team from the Department of Analytical Chemistry at the University of the Basque Country led by Dr. Maite Maguregui.



6. Hermes *Kriophoros*, c. 500-490 BC
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Inv. no. 99.489

7. Hermes *Moskophoros*, 570 BC
Museum of the Acropolis, Athens

In formal terms, the composition is largely in line with the standard features of the Roman glyptic, particularly in the tendency towards synthesis and the predominance of a symbolic idiom over a more narrative style, which to a great extent is dictated by the technical conditions of the support. Late Imperial art in general sought synthesis using a range of expressive resources. The representation of a scene using one of the component motifs, with enough features to enable identification, was one of a number of mechanisms regularly employed on all kinds of supports, as is the case in this carving. The motifs in the carving are a faithful reflection of the message of salvation that dominated early Christian art.

Iconography

Framed by the rural setting of the tree and the birds, the motif of the Good Shepherd centres the composition. One of the most widespread images in ancient Christian art, the Good Shepherd is in fact based on a previous pastoral figurative tradition, which took off particularly in the 3rd century, largely in association with funerary rites and images. In formal terms, the iconography of the Good Shepherd originated in the Greek figures of Hermes *Kriophoros*, although some details, including the robes and other occasional features, such as the staff and pouch, are from the Roman pastoral tradition¹³.

13 Schumacher 1977.

Images of shepherds with animals have their earliest precedents in the Bronze Age and illustrate the importance of livestock in the ancient world [fig. 4]. In classical Greece some of the major gods in the pantheon, including Zeus, Apollo and Hermes, were worshipped as protectors of flocks under names like *Epimelios* (the guardian of the flock), *Karneios* (the ram god), *Nomios* (protector of grazing land and sheep), *Kriophoros* (the lamb bearer), *Melosoos* (the rescuer of sheep) and *Lykaios* (he who protects the flock from wolves)¹⁴. Different iconographic types were used to represent these attributes: for instance, some showed Zeus and Apollo with rams' horns [fig. 5], or Hermes carrying a sheep on his shoulders or under his arm [fig. 6].

Similar in iconographical terms to Hermes *Kriophoros* is the image of the *Moskophoros*, a young man carrying an animal, in this case a calf, on his shoulders, probably taking it to a ritual sacrifice [fig. 7]. It is interesting to see how the two concepts, of protecting the flock or herd and of sacrifice to the gods, eventually converged in the Christian figure of the Good Shepherd.

From the 3rd century AD, the widespread diffusion of pastoral motifs came about in response to a change in the spirituality of Roman society, which no longer saw itself reflected in the triumphant heroes of the great mythological cycles. Instead, there was an increasing affinity with a new kind of representation symbolising the onward march of time and the soul's reception in Paradise, much more in tune with the doctrines of salvation that gained ground throughout late Antiquity in the Roman world to the detriment of traditional pagan religion. So throughout the late Ancient period, pastoral motifs, associated with iconographic usages proper to some kind of paradisiacal environment and the *locus amoenus*, cropped up frequently in both pagan and Christian milieus¹⁵. The image of the Christian Paradise is a transposition of the classical *locus amoenus*, the iconographic features of which were transferred to the new compositions for sarcophagi¹⁶ and to mural paintings¹⁷, with the purpose of creating an agreeable image of the afterlife, comparable to the kind of peaceful existence found in pastorals¹⁸.

In the classical world, the motif of the shepherd carrying a sheep or a ram on his back symbolised the ideals of *humanitas* and *philantropia*. The Christian re-reading of these concepts, alongside the Biblical references to the theme of the shepherd¹⁹, were a frequent subject for the earliest Christian authors, who interpreted the portrayal very much in association with the idea of salvation, placing particular stress on the identification of the shepherd with Jesus Christ. One constant feature of the Christian treatment of the theme is the portrayal of the Good Shepherd as a young man, linked to the recuperation of vitality and youth offered to the souls of believers in the afterlife. Also significant is the fact that the image of this beardless youth is in complete accord with the iconography of Christ in use during the greater part of the 4th century. Indeed, portrayals of bearded shepherds carrying a sheep following the same iconographic pattern as the one used for the Good Shepherd, to be found basically in the decoration of late 3rd- and early 4th-century sarcophagus fronts, cannot strictly be identified with Christian images [fig. 8]. However, it is true that some exceptional cases are recorded of portrayals of a bearded Good Shepherd; one such is the graffiti in the catacomb of Susa (Tunis). Considering the common origin in the iconography of Hermes and its widespread use in funerary contexts, this kind of *kriophoros* or ram-bearer image must have gained its full significance

14 Stroszeck 2004.

15 Himmelmann 1980.

16 Schönebeck 1937.

17 Bisconti 1990.

18 Bayet 1962.

19 Jonah 10:11



8. Continuous-frieze sarcophagus with pastoral motifs
Late 3rd-early 4th century
Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican City



9. Continuous-frieze sarcophagus with portrayals of Christ and the Apostles
Rome, last quarter of 4th century
Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican City



10. Mausoleum of Gala Placidia (Ravenna) with portrayals of Christ as shepherd, 5th century



11. Mosaic from a domus in Fondo Cossar (Aquileia) with a portrayal of the *dominus-pastor*, 4th century Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, Italy

by evoking one of the principal attributes of the Greek god, the psychopomp, which led spirits to their last resting-place²⁰.

So the Good Shepherd as figure-symbol was used regularly from the earliest stages of Christian iconography and reached its ceiling in the first half of the 4th century. Subsequently, the motif would be replaced by portrayals of Christ as shepherd, as seen in the sarcophagus front from late 4th-century Rome, where He is shown flanked by the Apostles and accompanied by lambs [fig. 9], thereby stressing the symbolic reading of the scene²¹, or repeating classical schemas such as the one of Orpheus amongst animals in a mosaic on the Gala Placidia mausoleum in Ravenna [fig. 10]. It is also interesting to see how this process of iconographic assimilation, in which motifs from the classical figurative tradition become bound up with a new Christian idiom, is paralleled in the private sphere. As part of a special language associated with the new processes of self-portrayal typical of the late Imperial period, we find new iconographic types such as the *dominus-pastor* [fig. 11]²².

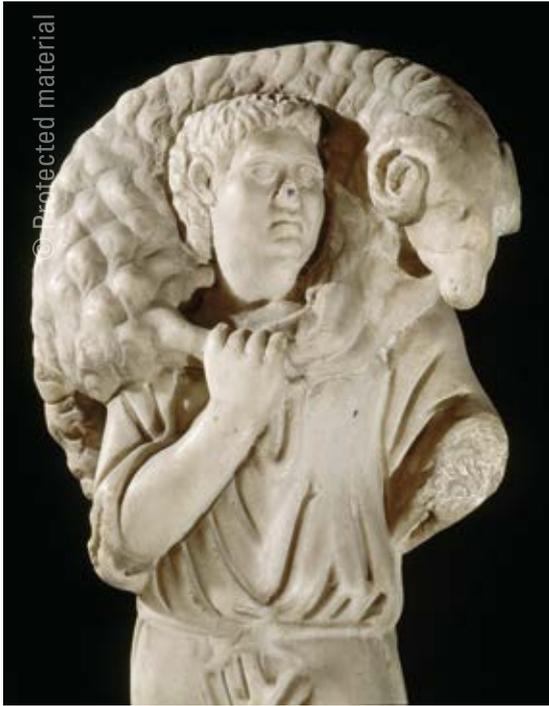
The Good Shepherd portrayed on the Bilbao gem follows one of the most usual variants current in the 4th century. As we have already noted, the beardless, short-haired youth, dressed in a *cincta* tunic (held in place with a cincture) and wearing *peronis* (ankle-high boots), carries a sheep on his back. Any variations on this motif usually affect the clothes worn and the presence or otherwise of the animal, although the symbolic reading is assimilable to the classical type²³. The *exomis* tunic, which left one shoulder bare, is one of the most frequent, particularly in sculptures. Somewhat rarer are portrayals with *alicula*, a tunic that covered both shoulders and the upper arms, which is recorded in sculptures and paintings alike. Footwear is usually a simple *pero* boot, although on occasion, particularly in paintings, *fasciae crurales*, which covered the entire leg, are also portrayed.

20 Yamada 1999.

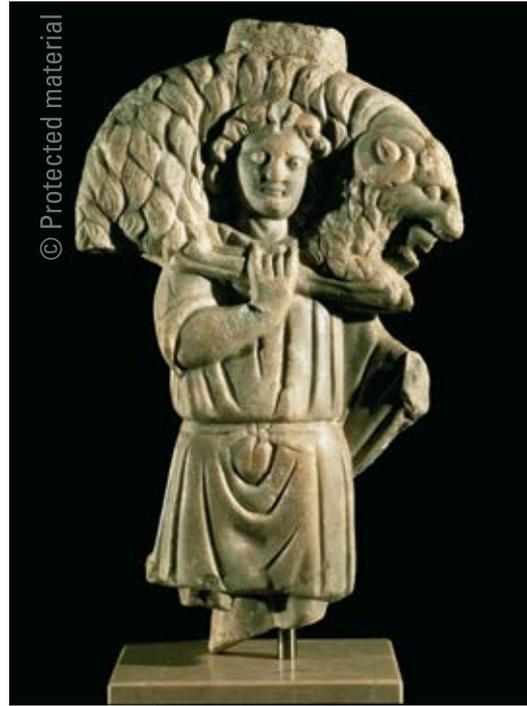
21 Bovini/Brandenburg 1967, no. 30.

22 Bisconti/Branconi 2012

23 Ibid.



12. *Good Shepherd*, 4th century
White marble, 84 x 32 cm
Casa de Pilatos, Seville



13. *Good Shepherd of Gádor*, 4th century
White marble, 68.5 x 40 cm
Museum of Almería

Proof of the relevance acquired in the 4th century by the motif of the Good Shepherd is the fact that it was used on all kinds of supports. In some cases, like free-standing Christian-themed sculpture, this was virtually the only image used, with the exceptions of the figure of Christ as philosopher in the museum of Rome's Palazzo Massimo and the small sculptures showing the Jonah cycle at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In these, which make an iconographically homogeneous group, the Good Shepherd is shown in front of a tree trunk, usually a palm-tree, which made the sculpture more consistent; He bears a lamb on His shoulders while two others graze at His feet. Obeying the same functional requirements, the Good Shepherd's arms are very close to the body, to prevent any fragility threatening the work as a whole. This makes the figures look very compact as a rule. Three Spanish examples are amongst the fifteen or so known cases. The one in the Casa de Pilatos (Pilatos's house) in Seville [fig. 12] belongs to the Rome type²⁴, in which the Shepherd's face turns towards the head of the lamb, while the two found in Gádor (Almería) [fig. 13], markedly front-on, have features that link them with works from further East²⁵.

There is plenty of room on the surface of the Bilbao gem for the Good Shepherd to extend His arms to hold the ends of the lamb's legs and thus give greater agility to the feet. His head turns to the profile of the animal's face, obliged by the clean carving, thereby avoiding any possible meeting of its eyes with the Good Shepherd's.

Some of the symbols that complete the decoration on the gem are part of the most widespread iconographic repertoire in ancient Christian art. The anchor and the fish are rooted in the Roman figurative tradition with

²⁴ Trunk 2002.

²⁵ García and Bellido 1950.

marine themes, which led to a cryptic allusion to the figure of Christ. The word “fish” in Greek (ΙΧΘΥΣ, ΙΧΘΥΣ) was interpreted as an acronym of Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ ἠγίου Σωτῆρ (Jesus Christ Son of God the Saviour), so the simple drawing of a fish could be taken as a declaration of Christian faith. The acronym and the New Testament allusions to the fishing of souls, and the widespread diffusion, in both figurative art and apologetic references, of Biblical texts featuring Jonah and Noah, soon led to the portrayals of fish and other features linked with the sea becoming the most often repeated themes in early Christian iconography. The identification of fish with the soul or the catechumens made the use of this motif very common very early on, mostly in connection with funerals and baptisms²⁶.

The image of the anchor is a generic evocation of firmness in hope, confirmed in Christian thought in texts like one by St. Paul²⁷, where the Christian believer is encouraged to hold fast to Jesus Christ’s promises as the “sure and solid anchor of our soul”. St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom took up the same idea and developed it further, applying it especially to hope in the resurrection promised by Christ, so that the anchor linked to the fish may be read as the proclamation of “hope in Christ”.

Chi Rho and crown are from the group of portrayals incorporated into Christian iconography as Christianity expanded after the Edict of Milan and eventually became the official religion of the Empire, and motifs from the Imperial vision of art were used in Christian images. Likewise, other iconographies proper to Imperial portrayals, such as the *acclamatio*, or the motifs of the *velatio* or the *proskinesis*, would provide the basis for popular representations of the second half of the 4th century such as the gathering of the Apostles, the *etimasia* and the *traditio legis*.

Ideograms were commonly used in Roman culture in the late Imperial period, personal seals—particularly abundant during Constantine’s time—being a good example of this. The Chi Rho formed by the superposition of the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek was created by Imperial propaganda to legitimise Constantine’s victory over Maxentius, and was based on previous symbolic anagrams. The Chi Rho was the identification *par excellence* of Christianity until the 6th century, when it was largely replaced by the Latin cross.

In any of its iconographic variants, the laurel crown was identified in Roman culture with military or sporting victory. From the beginning, Christian iconography employed the image of the palm, given as a prize to victorious athletes and chariot drivers, as a symbol of martyrdom. From Constantine’s reign, the portrayal of the laurel crown, in its ribbon-adorned form, became standard in all supports, although particularly frequent in epigraphic ornamental apparatus and in the production of decorated sarcophagi, where it appears in isolation or containing the Chi Rho.

The inclusion of the letters Alpha and Omega, which appear in reverse flanking the altar in the lower part of the gem, responds to the declaration of God the Father, who in the Apocalypse uses the expressions “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”²⁸ and “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the First and the Last”²⁹ to describe Himself. The letters from the Apocalypse habitually appear associated with the Chi Rho, although occasionally they are shown in isolation. Their arrangement around the altar is an iconographic *unicum*, although placing them in reverse order, i.e. with the Omega first, is well

26 Achelis 1888.

27 Hebrews 6:19.

28 Apocalypse 21:6.

29 Apocalypse 22:13.

documented on a variety of supports. The use of this iconographic peculiarity, which may be a practical solution in the case of signet rings, does not appear to respond to any established criteria, although it was probably designed to reinforce the eschatological meaning of the symbol.

Much more unusual is the portrayal of the altar on which an open hand is placed, which may almost be considered an iconographic *unicum* too. Although the altar is used to identify the theme of the sacrifice of Isaac, the central characters of the story are also usually portrayed. The iconographic cycle of Abraham developed from the appearance of the earliest Christian motifs, with the scene of the sacrifice being documented in Dura Europos and the first decorative programmes for the Roman catacombs.

Abraham, in each of the passages that tell the story of his life, became one of the paradigms of the symbolic representation of the salvation of Christians through obedience and faith. With this meaning they abound in association with funerals³⁰. The most documented scene of the Abraham cycle is the sacrifice of his son Isaac. Although its use, like the use of other passages from the Old Testament, is linked essentially to the message of salvation through divine intervention, it also facilitates Isaac's identification with Christ, who is sacrificed by His Father³¹.

Sacrifice is reflected in ancient Christian iconography at two points of the story. The first has Abraham and Isaac walking to the place of holocaust, the father carrying a sword and the son the wood for the preparation of the ritual. The second, the most widely known, captures the dramatic moment when Abraham prepares to carry out the sacrifice, usually hard by an altar or even on one. At this point God intervenes, represented by the divine hand, which appears in isolation in the upper part of the scene, either emerging from a cloud or through an angel who stops the fatal blow.

In the gem at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum the altar is perfunctorily rendered, with the upper and lower mouldings left as simple fillets. Even so, they are noticeably low and bulky. The main variant of the motif consists in the presence or absence of flames at the top; the flames correspond to a literal reading of the Biblical story, which tells how Abraham gathers wood for the sacrifice. However, in our carving the flames are replaced by what appears to be a hand. This is a most unusual motif, with just one other documented example in an item in the Ashmolean Museum, which we discuss below in the section on formal parallels. The only possible interpretation of this portrayal is that fire has been replaced by the hand of God, which in the most common iconography associated with this Biblical passage usually appears in isolation, as a symbol of divine intervention.

Another unusual feature is the object situated between the Good Shepherd and the tree. As noted above, formally it could be a *dolabra*, a sort of long pick used by the *fossores* in excavating subterranean tombs and galleries. Although unusual, the portrayal of the *dolabra* as an individual symbol is sufficiently documented in the standard decoration used in epigraphy³². The use of this motif, always in connection with funerals, has been interpreted as identifying the legal status of sepulchres, and also as a symbol designed to ward off evil³³. Although the lack of parallels in the context of personal accessories or objects obscures any interpretation of this particular motif in the carving, it might have some kind of propitiatory meaning.

30 Moore Smith 1922; Van Woerden 1961.

31 *Origins (Homilies on Genesis)* VIII, 6, notes similarities with the Cross-bearing Christ.

32 Rossi 1857-1861, no. 287.

33 Bisconti 2000.

Formal parallels

Perhaps the most important feature of the gem discussed here, particularly in light of our general understanding and knowledge of such carvings with Christian motifs, is the sheer number of themes it encompasses. This was of course facilitated in part by the size of the gem, much bigger than the average for this kind of article.

A carving in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford provides the best parallel for the set of motifs represented on the gem at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, although the parallelism does not extend to the formal development of the motifs themselves [fig. 14]³⁴. The same themes are represented in the Ashmolean gem, although much more schematically. In this case, the anchor is the central motif, flanked by the components that identify the rest of the subject matter. The tree and the two birds evoke the paradisiacal setting, while the sheep is identified with the Good Shepherd. Likewise, the altar, where the hand of God is placed, alludes to the scene of Isaac's sacrifice. Other motifs in the Oxford carving are the fish and the anagram of Christ's name formed by the separate letters X and P, which are not superimposed as they usually are in a Chi Rho. To these are added the letters H and I in the upper part, which the gem's publishers have not interpreted. In this case, the central position of the anchor, featuring in pride of place the transversal stock of the upper ring, may be interpreted as an allusion to the Cross and the passion of Christ, as seen in others represented on Roman catacomb stones. The anchor thus assumes the core value and is placed at the centre of the composition, as an image of Jesus Christ himself; accompanying the anchor are other symbols of Christ as the Redeemer. A considerable number of carvings are known to exist with the anchor in the same position and accompanied by pairs of fishes³⁵, some of which include the letters IXΘΥΣ, as if to strengthen the animals' role as the acronym of Jesus Christ. In an octagonal red jasper gem [fig. 15]³⁶, the inscription reads XPICTOY, reiterating the symbolic thrust of the anchor and the fishes.

Individually, the majority of the motifs on the Bilbao gem have many parallels in Christian glyptics, to which we refer through Spier's recent publication mentioned above.

Placing the Good Shepherd in a bucolic setting was a very common feature of ancient Christian carvings. There are very few variations to the scene: sheep at the feet of the central character, who occasionally carries a crook, the presence—or absence—of birds in the tree. In most documented cases, the composition is accompanied by one or two symbolic motifs, the most usual being the anchors and the fish, although Chi Rhos are also documented. Biblical motifs are used in abbreviated form very rarely, and usually to accompany the Good Shepherd, as is the case in a carving which shows Noah's ark and, atop it, the bird holding the olive branch in its beak [fig. 16]³⁷. Occasionally, the Good Shepherd is included in more complex compositions, as in two examples in the British Museum [figs. 17 and 18], where one features flat ground and the other a double setting to portray scenes from the Jonah cycle and other Old Testament passages³⁸. In the first, the Good Shepherd is under the shelter of two large branches, and accompanied, at the edges, by the scenes of Jonah swallowed by the whale and Daniel amongst the lions. In both fish and anchors are arranged, one of them with the Chi Rho superimposed, in a reiteration similar to the one in our gem.

34 Spier 2007, no. 434.

35 Ibid, nos. 198-235.

36 Ibid, no. 207.

37 Ibid, no. 330.

38 Ibid, nos. 428 and 429.



14. Paleochristian gemstone with multiple symbols, c. 300-320
Chalcedony with nicolo intaglio, 1.6 x 1.3 cm
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Inv. no. ANFortnum.107



15. Paleochristian gemstone with anchor and fishes, c. 300-320
Red jasper, 1.3 x 1.15 cm
Private collection



16. Paleochristian gemstone with the Good Shepherd and a bird on the altar, c. 350
Sardonyx, 1.6 cm
Campo Santo Teutonico, Rome
Inv. no. G 4



17. Paleochristian gemstone with multiple symbols, c. 320-340
Carnelian, 1.75 x 1.1 cm
British Museum, London
Inv. no. 1856,0425.10



18. Paleochristian gemstone with multiple symbols, c. 320-340
Carnelian, 1.3 x 1.2 cm
British Museum, London
Inv. no. 1856,0425.9



19. Paleochristian gemstone with the Good Shepherd, tree and bird standing on anchor, c. 350-370
Carnelian, 1.6 x 1.3 cm
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
Inv. no. GR-25816 (Zh-5621)



20. Paleochristian gemstone with the sacrifice of Isaac, c. 400
Carnelian
Private collection



21. Paleochristian gemstone with the sacrifice of Isaac and multiple symbols, c. 400
Carnelian, 2.3 x 1.7 cm
Private collection



22. Paleochristian gemstone with the sacrifice of Isaac, c. 360-380
Chalcedony with nicolo intaglio, 2.2 x 1.9 cm
Private collection

If it were not for the fact that it has no olive branch in its beak, the bird that, in our gem, flies between the ribbon-adorned crown and the Chi Rho, could be seen as an allusion to the same passage on Noah's ark. There are parallels, like the one of a gem in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg [fig. 19]³⁹, where the bird alights on the stock of the anchor, as a kind of allegory of the soul that finds a resting-place in the hope of salvation. In the Ashmolean Museum gem [fig. 14] there are two birds, one either side of the anchor, and in one of the gems in the British Museum [fig. 18] the birds are shown in isolation close to the Good Shepherd, while the motif is repeated in the lower part, with the bird now posed on the ark. However, in the other British Museum gem [fig. 17] a bird quite clearly in flight with the olive branch in its beak heads toward the human figure. In our gem, the bird seems to allude to the disintegration of the group that usually perches in the branches sheltering the Good Shepherd.

The main parallel for the altar as an abbreviated motif of Isaac's sacrifice, together with the hand of God, is the Ashmolean carving. The use of the altar as an individual theme to identify the Biblical passage about Abraham is likewise documented in the second of the British Museum gems. The complete scene is portrayed on a gem in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (inv. no. D3729) and on another two gems with a very similar altar to the one shown on the Bilbao item [figs. 20 and 21]⁴⁰. But the clearest development of the scene is to be found in a carving spotted in the Zurich antiques market [fig. 22]. Here, the altar is topped by flames and the hand of God appears at the opposite end⁴¹.

Most of the other motifs on the gem at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum have sufficient parallels in glyptics. The Chi Rho might be shown as a single motif [fig. 23]⁴² or accompanied by others, as is the case in a gem in the British Museum [fig. 24]⁴³, in which it is shown above a hand holding a palm. A carving at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris [fig. 25]⁴⁴ shows the laurel crown as an individual motif, accompanied by a monogram, a fish and a sheep. However, no parallels have been found for the possible representation of the *dolabra* in glyptics from the early Christian era.

39 Ibid, no. 322.

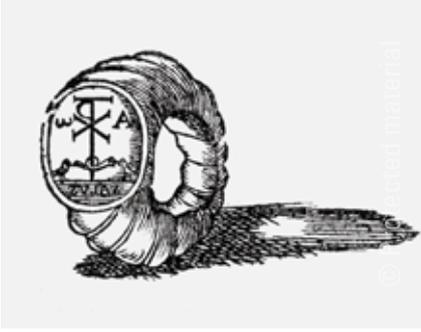
40 Ibid, nos. 413 and 414.

41 Ibid, no. 412.

42 Ibid, no. 148.

43 Ibid, no. 166.

44 Ibid, no. 307



23. Paleochristian ring with monogram carvings, c. 300-350
Rock crystal
Private collection



24. Paleochristian gemstone with Chi Rho and arm with palm, c. 300
Carnelian, 1.15 x 0.95 cm
British Museum, London
Inv. no. 1865, 1023.1



25. Paleochristian gemstone with monogram, fish, laurel and bird, c. 300-320
Carnelian, 1.5 x 1 cm
Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Inv. no. 2167

The combination of symbols and figures in the early Christian gem at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum suggests that it was made in the second half of the 4th century AD. The iconographic repertoire in use at that time had developed to full maturity and the motifs referring to each subject were by then sufficiently clear for use in isolation. It was thus possible to portray more, and more varied, contents, with the inescapable economy of means imposed by the size of the gem. Even so, in this particular case, the gem is larger than usual, meaning the figures could be rendered in no little detail.

In the end, the excellent quality of the work and the carver's ability to create original forms for some motifs, like the altar with the divine hand and the *dolabra fossoria*, makes this particular Christian gem one of the finest of its kind.

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