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MAGICAL AMULET FROM PAPHOS
WITH THE *ιαεω*- PALINDROME¹

Abstract: *During the first excavation campaign of the Paphos Agora Project (3rd July – 6th August 2011), an interesting object was discovered. In Trench II, Area 2 (Room 5), in the upper, late Roman layer, an oval amulet was found (siltstone, 39.41 x 41.32 x 4.81mm). The layer is dated to the 6th century AD, partially due to the presence of ceramic objects of the Cypriot Red Slip Ware type (Hayes form 2, AD 450-550). The obverse of the amulet contains a schematic, simplified figure of a sitting Harpocrates and below the mummy of Osiris in a boat, as well as depictions of animals (a crocodile, a rooster and a snake) and symbolic astrals (a half-moon and a star). On the reverse, however, an eight-line text of the so-called *ιαεω*-palindrome, consisting of 59 letters of the Greek alphabet, was carved. According to the current state of knowledge, it was translated in the following way: “Yahweh is the bearer of the secret name, the lion of Re secure in his shrine”. Both the depiction and the text carved into the surface of the amulet clearly indicate the influence of the Orient and the context of solar ideas; the object may be dated to the 5th-6th century AD.*

Keywords: *Amulets; ancient magic; Harpocrates; Osiris; palindromes; Paphos*

In the 2011 season, a new research undertaking, namely the Paphos Agora Project, was commenced by the Head of the Department of Classical

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Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University Institute of Archaeology.² The director of the project is Prof. Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka and its participants have included employees of the department as well as a significant number of students. The aim of the project is to uncover and research a Hellenistic agora in the city of Nea Paphos. During the first campaign (3rd July – 6th August 2011), work was conducted in two trenches (Trenches I and II), of which Trench II turned out to be the more interesting one due to the larger number of interesting small finds, as well as other factors. The trench was dug around the central part of the stylobate of the east portico of a Roman agora, where the entrance was most probably situated (Papuci-Władyka 2011, 18). It was in Trench II that, among other objects, an intriguing but inconspicuous amulet was discovered. This object represents the subject of this paper (Pl. 1).³

The amulet is a flat, oval plaque made of dark grey siltstone (mud stone?) and measuring 34.91 x 41.22 x 4.81mm.⁴ The preservation state of the object is essentially good despite a vertical split and small chips on the edges. On the obverse side, in an oval decorative space surrounded by a carved line, a boat is depicted in the lower part (the bow and stern of the same height) sailing to the right. This direction is suggested by the presence of two steering oars located on the left at the stern of the ship. Noticeable lines depict the construction features of the boat, which is made of bound papyrus. Slightly above the boat's deck (but inside) a laying mummy is placed (most probably Osiris) with its feet pointing to the right, which is the direction in which the boat is moving. The torso of Osiris is geometric, almost triangular, and his head is round with no detail on a thin, long neck. Above, in the upper part of the amulet, Harpocrates is shown sitting on a sort of stool, facing left, with his feet lowered down (and not crouched as is usually the case). The round head of Harpocrates, placed on a thin neck and depicted in profile,

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³ The amulet was discovered on the 23rd of July, 2011, in Trench II, Area 2, Room no. 5, in the upper level. Context PAP11/II/111. Coordinates: X: 202,159; Y: 137,32; depth 7409. Inv. no. PAP FR 44/2011. The latest material in that layer was late Roman (including pottery type Cypriot Red Slip Ware/Hayes form 2, dating to AD 450-550) and Byzantine from the 6th century. The above information was provided by Professor E. Papuci-Władyka.

⁴ This material is hard to define. It is a soft 'stone', slightly porous and atypical of 'magical' amulets and gems. The material is relatively easy to work with as far as carving surface text and decorations is concerned. That is why the drawing on the obverse is rather sketchy and the typeface of the letters on the reverse is no different from the way they were written on, for example, papyrus.

is facing left. Harpocrates' right hand is raised to his lips and in the left hand he holds an object which should be recognised as a misshaped *flagellum* (the *nekhekh* sceptre), a typical element of Harpocrates' iconography. Furthermore, astral symbols are situated to the right and left of Harpocrates' silhouette: a half-moon to the left and a star consisting of three crossed lines to the right. The symbols are completed by smaller 'stars' depicted as single points. The basic layout, consisting of Osiris in the boat and Harpocrates above him, is completed with additional elements filling the remaining empty spaces in the decorative field. Apart from the vertical silhouette of a *cynocephalus* (in mummified form?) depicted on the right, the silhouettes of three other animals are also shown above the bow of the boat. Below the boat there is an open-jawed, toothy crocodile with only two feet shown. Its torso is arched, matching the arch of the bow above and it fills the space between the bow and the bottom of the amulet. To the left of the stern a bird is depicted (rooster?) with long straight legs embedded in a small sphere, with its head decorated by a crown of sorts consisting of seven rays. In the space to the right, between Harpocrates and the *cynocephalus*, a snake is shown with its body in a single coil (the tip of its tail touches the figure standing next to the snake). The snake's head, with an open maw and extended tongue, faces left towards Harpocrates.

It must be stated that the depiction is fairly unskilled and schematic. It is iconographically based on Egyptian sources, but these sources were not fully understood by the creator of the amulet. As a result, various misinterpretations and irregularities arise. Harpocrates ought to be sitting on a lotus flower with his legs drawn up (here he sits on an ordinary stool, with his overly short legs hanging down) and the *flagellum* is simply an unclear object with a round ending. Harpocrates is sitting in a position in some ways reminiscent of Isis holding the baby Horus and Harpocrates holds the misshaped *flagellum* in the same way that Isis would hold Horus. A falcon from the initial concept was turned into a rooster with a rayed crown on its head that was an aspect of Chnoubis or cock-headed Anguipedes, popular in the category of magical gems. We can find no justification for the *cynocephalus*' gesture of raising its right paw to its lips in a manner similar to Harpocrates and its left paw is too short; in the classic version the *cynocephalus* faces Harpocrates with paws raised in adoration.

Another issue is the considerable artistic ineptness, which can be seen in the inaccurate proportions and geometric outlines of the torsos of the figures and the round heads on thin, long necks. The larger parts of the bodies are also covered with slanted or crossed lines. In the cases

of Osiris and the *cynocephalus* it could represent mummy bandages, but it has no justification in the case of Harpocrates. Therefore, we are dealing with considerable deviations from the basic Egyptian iconographic concepts. However, the fundamental context of solar ideas has not been lost and is properly complemented by the text on the other side of the amulet (Bonner 1950, 141). Without taking into account the archaeological data that enables us to date the entire level where the amulet was discovered, the iconographic and stylistic features of the amulet allow us to suggest that this unusual find may be dated to the 5th-6th centuries AD.

A scene on the obverse of the amulet depicting Harpocrates and Osiris in a papyrus boat with adjoining symbols and animal silhouettes is clearly linked to solar depictions. Harpocrates as a child sitting in a lotus flower symbolises a youthful, morning image of the Sun God emerging from the netherworld, a symbol of the daily and yearly rejuvenation/regeneration of nature (Bonner 1950, 140-147; Michel 2001, 68-69). Harpocrates, in the same way as the Greek god Helios drives a quadriga, traverses the celestial ocean in a boat. The half-moon on the left symbolises Thoth, while the star on the right represents Sirius. Figuratively, this may refer to the birth of Horus as a child/Harpocrates in the moment when Sothis/Sirius appears in the sky, which also marks the beginning of the annual Nile flooding (Michel 2001, 81). Harpocrates is often surrounded by animal silhouettes, the roles and meaning of which are strictly determined by the *dodekaoros* system as well as other factors. Most commonly each animal was depicted in three copies with this number indicating the representation of an entire species (Bonner 1950, cat. nos 203-210; Michel 2001, cat. nos 124-130; Michel 2004, 273-275 [19.4]). Some of them, such as the falcon, ram or scarab were considered 'good' as they adored the Sun/Harpocrates; this group included birds (probably initially represented by the falcon) depicted near the left border of the amulet. The crocodile, on the other hand, which is situated in the lower part of the amulet from Paphos, below a papyrus boat, falls into the 'evil' category of animals defeated by the Sun. A crocodile is also a symbol of chaos, the chthonic world and its powers, the West, the Night and the element of water. The snake depicted above, to the right of Harpocrates, also falls into this category.

The basic iconographic concept of Harpocrates in a papyrus boat surrounded by carefully chosen animals was, in the case of the Paphos amulet, complemented by the mummy of Osiris. It was depicted in a papyrus boat in the horizontal position, as per a scheme encountered on the decorated surfaces of magic gems (Śliwa 1989, cat. no. 69; Michel

2004, 312 [39.1.b]). The depiction of Osiris, the ruler of the world of the dead, who is linked to a well-known Egyptian mythological story of death and resurrection, can be interpreted as expressing the hope of vanquishing death and as an annunciation of eternal life.

A magical text of eight lines was carved quite carefully, yet not deeply, into the reverse side of the amulet. The text consists of 59 Greek letters and the last line, consisting of only three letters, was somehow squeezed into a space seemingly too small to contain it. The letters seem to have been written by a skilled hand. A soft, malleable material and a sharp carving tool allowed the scribe to shape the letters in the same manner in which letters were written on papyrus, with the curves of ο, φ, ω; and the arches of β, ε, μ present. The text is arranged in the following manner:

IAEW
BAΦENEM
OYNOΘΙΑΡΙ
ΚΝΙΦΙΑΕΥΕ
ΑΙΦΙΝΚΙΡΑΛ
ΙΘΟΝΥΟΜΕ
ΝΕΡΦΑΒΩ
ΕΑΙ

The text we are dealing with is a full record of a so called *ιαεω*-palindrome, known both from numerous magical papyri and the so called magical/gnostic gems (see the analogical text layout on an oval gem made of green jasper Michel 2001, cat. no. 15. See also Bonner 1950, 204; Michel 2004, 484; Mastrocinque 2004, 107). Despite taking a certain amount of care, the scribe made two mistakes in the case of the Paphos amulet – in both verses four and five he wrote ρ instead of ν.

The full logos we encounter here:

ιαεωβαφρενεμουνοθιλαρικριφιαευειφιρκιραλιθονυομενερφαβωεαι
is one of the longest, as it has as many as 59 letters (the central letter is ν). Such a long chain of letters is sometimes written on gem and amulet surfaces horizontally over a few lines and a random division of letters additionally complicates the distinguishing of the palindrome (Delatte and Derchain 1964, cat. nos 100 [here the text is additionally engraved in a mirror-like style], 330, 509, 513; Michel 2001, cat. nos 15, 91, 159). It is also often written in a circular pattern along the edge of the amulet in the same way that the coils of the snake Ouroboros are formed (Delatte and Derchain 1964, cat. nos 122 and 432; Michel 2001, cat. nos 130, 145, 277, 304 [in some cases the Ouroboros is also present]).

The first four letters pose no difficulty in interpretation as they form the Iaeo/Iahweh word, a more precise rendition of the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* than the more frequent Iao (Ganschinietz 1914, 700-701; Brashear 1995, 3587). The remaining letter sequence on the other hand (βαφρενεμουν οθιλαρι κριφι), corresponds to the Egyptian f3j.f-rn-jmn ʿḏ mr-Rʿ(m)-k3r.f.ʿḏ (Schmidt 1931, 443-444; Schmidt 1934, 177-178). Together it forms the following meaning: ‘Iahweh is the bearer of the secret name, the lion of Re secure in his shrine.’ This palindrome most commonly occurs alongside depictions of solar gods, which is also the case with the Paphos amulet. Depictions of Harpocrates as a child sitting on a lotus flower (Michel 2004, 269-271 [19.1]) or seated on a papyrus boat (Michel 2004, 272-274 [19.3-19.4]) are also often present when these two elements are connected.

Among the most interesting finds connected with the *ιαεω*-palindrome is the discovery of an entire divinatory kit, which was found in the lower city of Pergamon in 1899 (Wünsch 1905; Dziwiza 2011, 239-241). Fragments of a similar contraption were also discovered during the following century in Syrian Apamea (Donnay 1984). Taking both finds into consideration, an attempt has been made to establish the religious and cultural context for this kind of divinatory kit (Gordon 2002; Mastrocinque 2002). It seems that the place of discovery of both finds was also significant, as both Pergamon and Apamea were still important cultural centres, where the traditions of Hellenistic magic with strong oriental influences were still of vital importance. Now we may also include Paphos into this circle as yet another centre where traditions of Hellenistic magic flourished. According to the actual state of known materials, the amulet found at Paphos seems to belong to a group of gems coming from a Syrian-Palestine workshop of the late 5th century AD (Spier 2007, 109-114).

The above described find perfectly fits into the context well known also from the New Testament (*Acts* 13.6.12):

‘They [Barnabas and Paul] travelled the whole length of the island, and at Paphos they came in contact with a Jewish magician called Bar-Jesus. This false prophet was one of the attendants of the proconsul Sergius Paulus who was an extremely intelligent man. The proconsul summoned Barnabas and Saul and asked to hear the word of God, but Elymas Magos – as he was called in Greek – tried to stop them so as to prevent the proconsul’s conversion to the faith. Then Saul, whose other name is Paul, looked him full in the face and said, “You utter fraud, you impostor, you son of devil, you enemy of all true religion, why don’t you stop twisting the straightforward ways of the Lord? Now watch how the hand of the Lord will strike you: you will be blind, and for a time you

will not see the sun.” That instant, everything went misty and dark for him, and he groped about to find someone to lead him by the hand. The proconsul, who had watched everything, became a believer, being astonished by what he had learnt about the Lord.⁵

If we applied a large dose of imagination, we could even suggest that a kind of an amulet similar to the object discovered in Paphos in 2011 could have once belonged to that same Elymas Magos, with whom Barnabas and Paul quarrelled.

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⁵ *Jerusalem Bible* 1971. With abridged introductions and notes. Paperback edition. London.

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Pl. 1. Magical amulet found at Paphos, 2011. Siltstone, dimensions 34.91 x 41.22mm, thickness 4.81mm. About 5th-6th centuries AD. Photo by W. Machowski