

# Figuring out the Anguipede ('snake-legged god') and his relation to Judaism

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## An iconographical enigma

So-called magical gems constitute an especially rich body of material evidence for magic and religion in the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> They differ from the ordinary run of gems in three respects: in their selection of iconographic types, normally divine images of one sort or another; by their use of magic words and occasionally longer texts, primarily in Greek script; and by their use of magic signs, usually called *characteres*. At least one of these three elements must be present for a gem to be identifiable as magical. These "Zaubergemmen" form the most easily distinguishable sub-group of the wider class of amuletic gems, that is, engraved stones of talismanic function.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the iconographic schemes appearing on magical gems adhere closely to the classical Graeco-Roman and Egyptian traditions.<sup>3</sup> Others, however, are unique to this class of gems:<sup>4</sup> rare even on other magical objects, they are practically unknown outside this sphere in the whole variety of ancient art.<sup>5</sup>

The most important, in numerical terms, of all the specifically magical iconographic schemes is, at first glance, a very peculiar composition (fig. 1). It shows a figure with the head of a cock, usually facing to its left (the bird is recognised easily by its comb, long neck and the

- 1 The most important catalogues, in chronological order, are: A. Delatte, "Amulettes inédites des Musées d'Athènes," *Musée Belge* 18 (1914) 21-96; Bonner 1950; Delatte and Derchain 1964; P. Zazoff, "Die Gemmensammlung der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Kassel," in id. (ed.), *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen III. Braunschweig, Göttingen, Kassel* (Wiesbaden 1970); M. Maaskant-Kleibrink, *Catalogue of the engraved gems in the Royal Coin Cabinet The Hague* (Wiesbaden 1978); Schwartz 1979; Philipp 1986; Zwierlein-Diehl 1991; Zwierlein-Diehl 1992; M. Henig, D. Scarisbrick and M. Whiting, *Classical gems. Ancient and modern intaglios and cameos in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge* (Cambridge 1994); Michel 2001a; Michel 2001b. My use of the word 'magical' in this article is wholly conventional: I intend no opposition between 'religious' and 'magical' uses. (Special abbreviations for frequently cited works are listed at the end of this article.)
- 2 Many of the gem-types (Athena Parthenos, Poseidon, etc.) recommended or prescribed for magical use by the ancient sources (such as 'Damigeron', Cyranides Book 1, the Orphic Lithika, and the 'magical papyri') do not belong in our narrower category of 'magical gems'. Most surviving gems do not show any evident formal traits that put their magical function beyond doubt: we can only deduce it from the decoration of the *Zaubergemmen* themselves. What we call magical gems does not, therefore, include the whole range of engraved gems employed as talismans, but only one class within this. See Á. M. Nagy, "*Gemmae magicae selectae*. Sept notes sur l'interprétation des gemmes magiques," in A. Mastrocinque (ed.), *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica* (Bologna 2002) 153-79, esp. 153-56, for a list of iconographic schemes mentioned in the sources on the properties of stones (*lithica*) and in magical papyri.
- 3 Many pieces are treated as belonging to the class of 'Zaubergemmen' simply by virtue of the presence of a magic word or symbol. Three common examples: Aphrodite Anadyomene (picture only: Delatte-Derchain 1964, 187 nos. 246-47; with magic word: *ibid.* 187-88 no. 248); Horus seated on lotus blossom (picture alone: Philipp 1986, 75 no. 94; with magic word: 75 no. 95); scorpion (picture alone: Michel 2001b, 217 no. 344; J. Stroszeck, *AA* 2001, 26 no. 22; with magic word: Michel *ibid.* 216-17 nos. 342-43).
- 4 On "new" iconographic types, Zwierlein-Diehl 1992, 24-25, provides a good starting point.
- 5 The figure of the snake-legged god occurs outside the sphere of the *magica* on a bronze statue from Avenicum of doubtful authenticity: A. Leibundgut, *Die römischen Bronzen der Schweiz II* (Mainz am Rhein 1976) 38-39 no. 21 pl. 22-23. A being of mixed iconography on a British mosaic, which has been connected to the Anguipede, is completely unrelated: P. Witts, "Interpreting the Brading 'Abraxas' mosaic," *Britannia* 25 (1994) 111-17. On the mosaic of a c.6th-c. basilica in Illyricum was found a figure that shows a surprising resemblance to the scheme of the snake-legged figure: see D. Jordan, "An anthropoid in a church mosaic," *JRA* 16 (2003) forthcoming. The mosaic, if the connection to the snake-legged figure is real, pays witness to the *Nachleben* of the scheme.