

The changing meanings of symbols.

The case of the Good Shepherd ring found off the coast of Caesarea.

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Abstract

In December 2021, The Israeli Antiquity Authority (IAA) announced the discovery of a thick Roman-era gold ring with an octagonal blue-green gem bearing an image of a young figure dressed in a tunic and carrying a lamb on his shoulders, the so-called Good Shepherd. This ring is the most significant object discovered in recent underwater excavations off the coast of Caesarea Maritima. This thesis presents a study of this artefact, considering the general iconography of the Good Shepherd, the uses of gems and rings, and the archaeological context of the discovery. The research question asks what we can know about the ring's owner based on its iconography and the archaeological context in which it was found. This thesis focuses on the symbol of the Good Shepherd and its engraving into gemstones.

This thesis draws on insights from “material” approaches to studying religion. Material culture has come to be appreciated as a rich resource for a better understanding of lived experiences in all times and places, and no less so for Christianity's complex and diverse practice in the Greco-Roman world. At the same time, art historians and Religion in Late Antiquity historians now recognise that Christianity emerged within pre-existing cultures with established artistic forms, iconographic prototypes, and manufacturing techniques that it drew upon, adapted, and transformed as it gradually developed its distinctive iconographic vocabulary.

The Good Shepherd Ring from Caesarea will be a case study to explore the diverse meanings of a particular symbol to examine the historical role of art in recounting the past. Given what we can know about this ring, the religious identity of its owner appears to be Christian, but the evidence is not entirely certain.

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Abbreviations

IAA Israeli Antiquity Authority

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1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

1.1 Introduction

In December 2021, The Israeli Antiquity Authority (IAA) announced the discovery of a thick Roman-era gold ring with an octagonal blue-green gem bearing an image of a young figure carrying a lamb on his shoulders and dressed in a tunic (see Figure 1.1).¹ This ring is said to be the most significant object among many others discovered in recent underwater excavations off the coast of Caesarea Maritima. The excitement about the ring was based on the iconography: This gem appeared to be an early example of the Christian image of the Good Shepherd. This thesis presents a study of this artefact, considering the general iconography of the Good Shepherd, the uses of gems and rings, and the archaeological context of the discovery of this specific ring.

¹<https://www.timesofisrael.com/underwater-treasure-1700-year-old-coins-among-shipwrecked-items-found-off-caesarea.com>



Figure 1.1: Gold ring with incised gem recently found off the coast of Caesarea Maritima.

(The Daily Mail, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-10336363/Stunning-Good-Shepard-ring-depicts-young-Jesus-holding-Roman-era-shipwrecks.html>)

1.2 Motivation

The category of visual culture, as seen in art and artefacts, is fascinating. Even more fascinating to me is the specific example of the engraved gem. The ability of ancient engravers to use gems of minute size to depict people, symbols, and events and to communicate simple and complex ideas is awe-inspiring. And the ring as an object may give us a window into the beliefs of the people who wore them if we can carefully interpret the imagery of the rings. The specific example of the Good Shepherd ring from Caesarea is fascinating because its archaeological context seems to be quite precise.

1.3 Research Question

The research question I want to explore is: What can we know about the ring's owner based on its iconography, and what do we know about the archaeological context in which it was found? We are limited in some vital way because the ring has not yet been published in an

academic journal or book despite being widely publicised in the news. Nevertheless, we can still conduct a preliminary study of the iconography (that of the ring) and examine what has been published in news articles emanating from the announcement by The Israeli Antiquity Authority (IAA).

1.4 Scope of Study

I am interested in symbols and religious belief, but this thesis focuses on an object. So, I am inspired by the Material Religion approach. I believe that by studying this object, I can explore and reflect on ancient people's beliefs. This tradition of religious paintings, illumination on manuscripts, icons on wood, and large pictures on cloth destined for walls of churches has taught and has equally sustained the Christian faith. Hence, in this work, we shall trace the history of the symbol of the Good Shepard and its engravement into gemstones as seen, for example, on the ring found off the coast of Caesarea in Israel. This journey shall also lead us to think about the Location and places where this art may be found. As mentioned above, all of this is to acquire knowledge of how humans and objects interact, and it helps to tell the story of the experiences of ancient people. In this thesis, our main concern is the meanings that humans of different ages have made of the symbol of the Good Shepard. We agree that there is a strong link between agency and society; this thesis is more concerned with the system behind the figure of the Good Shepherd.

1.5 Research Design

This research is going to take the form of a case study. Given that this research is interested in the changing meaning of the Good Shepard symbol focusing on the good shepherd ring, we think the case study approach will give us more insight. Plus, the Good Shepherd image is a symbol which represents the whole. The case study approach is inductive because we argue from particular cases and then make general assertions. The case study design will help us interpret this symbol and explore the different ways in which it has been used and understood.

1.6 Research Method

For this thesis, I have chosen to use a qualitative approach. Since we are dealing with historical issues, lived experiences, and behaviours, our qualitative research will take a historico-analytical approach. This approach is all about going back into the history of the use

of the Good Shepherd image and analyzing how it has been used over time. Although my main interest is theology, I will study this object, its iconography, and its archaeological context to approach ancient people's beliefs and experiences.

1.7 Objectives

Much of human knowledge of ancient civilization comes from the interpretation of arts and artefacts emanating from archaeological sites and research. Art is many-sided and has been approached by scholars and laypeople alike from many directions, so it carries a lot of interpretation. Moreso, the beauty of every artwork makes the question of meaning more compounding; as the saying goes, "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder."

This work aims to examine the possible historical role that art might have and plays in recounting the past. Our primary concern is the changing meanings of art (symbols) which is a function of interpretation, i.e., how can we, from interpretations made from art, write history? The changing meaning results from the fact that any artwork's style or motif depends on time, circumstance, context, or geographical provenance. In effect, this thesis is all about analyzing the Good Shepard ring found off the coast of Caesarea and telling a story about its form (themes or motifs). In other words, our interest is to bring out what the ring has and represents in the context of time and space. Particular attention to the Good Shepard symbol will be seen engraved on gems – the case of the ring discovered off the coast of Caesarea. Through this image, we hope to let the artefact speak for itself while helping to throw more light on the relationship between people of the past and the present and the social and natural phenomena of their worlds. Pushing a little further, we will pay attention to an important aspect that cannot be ignored in the study of iconography: the challenges that come with interpretation. Jensen has noted that the styles in interpreting symbols range from realism to conceptual.² By realism, we understand that we are dealing with those images that are easy to read, and on the other hand, in the abstract (conceptual) style, there is a higher level of difficulty.

1.8 What, therefore, is a symbol?

The first thing that comes to mind about symbols is that they have a web of meanings. To have the exact meaning of a particular symbol, one may have to consider the context in

²Robinson M., Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, (London and New York; Routledge, 2000), 1.

which the user has used it or be an insider, as indicated by Mehl. For him, the meaning of any symbol depends on the context in which it is used. Roger Mehl opines that, «Le symbole est opaque, le symbole n'est accessible qu'à 'ceux du dedans'»³ It determines the limits of a community. Symbols unite individuals who acknowledge and understand the symbol as insiders in a community, whether sociopolitical or a manifestation of some spiritual vocation. Symbols link the individual's existence to collective existence by this very fact. Meslin adds that “L'intentionnalité religieuse qui anime certaine opération symbolique exprime en effet le désir de l'homme de se rattacher à une totalité dans laquelle il voit un signe du divin.”⁴ Baldock, on his part, equally thinks that a symbol appears to be a material reality but, on the other hand, reveals a transcendent reality⁵. At this juncture, It seems incumbent to indicate that we cannot speak *stricto sensu* of natural religious symbolism whose meaning would be intrinsic in as much as symbols can, in a way, be regarded as a mode of expression (a language); it cannot exist before the man who thinks it and uses it. It is for this reason that we may accept the propositional statement by ‘The real Savage’ that

*Symbols have been deployed in Christian art from the beginning as expressions of Christian faith, either as single motifs or as elements of pictorial ensembles, to impart meaning and define compositional relationships. Some derive from ancient pagan sources, either directly through visual transmissions or indirectly via Christian adoption of pagan symbols in the scriptures.*⁶

For Gilbert Durand, “*le symbole est une système de connaissance indirect*”⁷. It is indirect knowledge and bridges the gap between that which is signified and the sign. *Ou le signifie et le signifiant annulent plus ou moins la 'coupure'*. Sharing the same view, Jensen maintains that art as a symbol function as “a bridge” between the known and unknown. In Baldock's opinion, a symbol is quite different from a sign, and he cautions that we need to be incredibly careful about how we treat symbols, lest we turn them into signs. A sign, according to Baldock, is a convenient way of conveying some practical information (tangible information); one tangible

³ Roger Mehl, « Symbole et Théologie » in *Le Symbole*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique palais Universitaire, Strasbourg, 1975, p. 3-6.

⁴ M. Meslin «De L'Herméneutique des Symboles Religieux » in *Le Symbole*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique palais Universitaire, Strasbourg, 1975, p. 24-32.

⁵ John Baldock, *The Elements of Symbolism*, (Great Britain, Element Books, 1990), 10.

⁶ The real Savage.....

⁷Durand Gilbert, L'Univers du Symbole” In *Le Symbole*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique Palais Universitaire, Strasbourg, 1975, p. 7-23.

reality expresses another. On the other hand, a symbol may be considered a tangible reality expressing some mystery⁸. What he is saying, in other words, is that a symbol or an image reveals something more than itself. They are vague representations or what Plato may call poor copies representing reality. A symbol may appear in the form of a word or visual image. In the case of religion, we may refer to such symbols as sacred. Sacred symbols, as seen in religious communities, play a vital role. Clifford Geertz opines that;

*“Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, it is a moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.”*⁹

What and how people do what they do gives reason for such. How they carry out such practices speaks volumes about their way of life. And so, we may conclude that.

*“Religion consists of the rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, and actions that people engage in when they try to interpret human experience and the world following a relationship with the transcendent or immanent divine presence or being. Art I will understand as the images or processes that painters, musicians, dancers, poets, filmmakers, and others who are working in a tradition of skill, and according to aesthetic principles, create to interpret human experience.”*¹⁰

Christian imagery and symbols constitute a prominent interpretive device from their earliest expressions at the beginning of the second century. Despite the high prevalence of textual records, symbols in the form of images or visual expressions continued to gain ground in the topography of the Christian world.

Christians widely used the image of the Good Shepherd. “The identification of Jesus as a shepherd is made by numerous early Christian writers, including Clement, Tertullian, and the author of the Aberkios inscription.”¹¹ Such an image presents Jesus as humanity’s compassionate shepherd, extending his benevolence to his flock of believers and all of humanity. But Christians were not the only people in the ancient Mediterranean world who used this image. As a matter of fact, Christians did not invent this image but seemingly gave it a new interpretation different from the traditional image associated with pastoral life. The circulation

⁸ Baldock, *The Elements of Symbolism*, 9

⁹ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” in *Anthropological approach to the study of Religion*, Tavistock Publication, Edinburgh, 1966, 1-46.

¹⁰ Carter, Curtis, *Art, and Religion: A Transreligious Approach*, Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications, Wisconsin, 1976, 1

¹¹ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007), 53.

of images and other works of art over time and space and the many interpretations given to these images are intended to explain them within a particular context. Historians, scholars, and archaeologists alike have found it difficult to determine with precision their origin and hence to derive precise meaning from this artwork/image is difficult. The case of the Good Shepherd ring is a good example. The gem no doubt depicts an image known to have been used by Christians. The question is: Was this ring owned by a Christian, and if that is the case, what are the implications?

The excavation of archaeological sites by archaeologists and archaeological sources makes it evident that visual art is of utmost importance to be ignored by anyone interested in ancient history. This may be understood in a sense wherein it gives information about the ancient world. It helps to tell a story about the past. It gives information on the relationship between people of the past and the social and natural phenomena of their worlds. In the context of early Christian art, we depend so much on archaeology as a scientific discipline. Snyder writes: “Early Christian archaeology has been close though not exclusively attached to the excavation of the catacombs in Rome.”¹² Josef Strzygowski adds that Rome and Byzantium, to an extent, championed Hellenistic and Oriental art in antiquity¹³. The production of such art depended on the communities involved. Their objectives, in some cases, were not explicit. However, scholars have learned that iconography, from its origins, was all about representation. In this case, it portrays the communities' way of life and belief patterns. As a matter of fact, the transmission of a people's ethos could and was done via art. In other words, one of the ways historians use to know about people of the past and their way of life is through art. We can make assertions about ancient times by interpreting this art as found in archaeological sites or elsewhere (e.g., underwater, in the museum). Pictorial art gives insight into the lives and thought patterns of people from the past. Hence, such images are symbolic because their presence speaks more than meets the eye. The importance of art and artefacts in every domain talk less of its position in religion and, more precisely, in Christianity, cannot be overemphasized. Symbols play a social role in human existence. They help in externalizing internal convictions. This is to say; symbolization is a form of language. By nature, the human person is a

¹²Snyder F., Graydon, “Early Christian Art”, in *Art and Architecture*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 455-461.

¹³ Josef Strzygowski. “The Origin of Christian Art.” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 20, no. 105 (1911): 146-53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/858793>.

communicator and uses this type of language to communicate their inner world to others. In effect, it isn't easy to have an almost abstract language.

The production of art, at times, may emanate from our inability to apprehend certain things with precision. In discussing what a thing is, David Morgan places it in opposition to an object. An object, in this sense, may refer to that which is unknown or indeterminate; it implies obscurity or uncertainty¹⁴. Hence, in the inability to rationalize certain mysteries of life and life's infinity, humans resort to expressing such incomprehensible realities in myths and symbols¹⁵. These are done to define things, events, or happenings. The "modern man confronted with the multiplicity of the phenomenal world and simultaneously driven by his desire to understand it (the world) in rational or logical terms, has developed an insatiable appetite for definition"¹⁶. The implication is that we can think of definitions from a literary perspective (which has to do with words) or from a symbolic point of view (Iconographic). In this way, art as a symbol gives personal and direct information founded on intuitive or inner perception. Baldock maintains that the outcome of such a quest (quest for definition) based on an inner perception is man's integration into the 'wholeness' of the natural environment to which he belongs. In the comfort and familiarity of this environment, communication is made possible. It is with such convenience that they can express their inner perceptions. This mode of communication then brings the individual together with others who can identify and understand this image or symbol. David Morgan asserts that studying ancient art or artefacts offers a different engagement with studying history than text alone could provide. This is to say, non-textual evidence offers valuable testimony to the character of political, religious, or social life in the past¹⁷. Symbols, therefore, instil in man that air of belonging and going by Plato's dualism, it would appear the world inhabited by man is symbolic. Heywood Thomas shares this view and adds that this view might not have been popular in antiquity but might have only started with Plato to continue with Neo-Platonism and mingle within the Christian tradition.¹⁸ This implies that everything in the phenomenal world represents something beyond (the real world). On his count, Baldock opines that,

¹⁴David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religion*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 3.

¹⁵ Baldock, *The Elements of Symbolism*, ix.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, ix.

¹⁷David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religion*, 3.

¹⁸Thomas J Heywood, *The Religious language as Symbolism* accessed 5th of May 2020, 89-93.

“Symbols express something mysterious whose presence or existence, while still beyond the grasp of our rational mind, may be sensed in a way that is simultaneously ‘internal’ but distant. Through it, our inner, unconscious or spiritual experience is united with our outer, sensory experience.”¹⁹

We are therefore confronted with the problem of meaning each time we gaze at an image, for they are believed to be representations and thus carry more meaning. Icons have a broader perspective of the constituting elements for them (images) to be regarded as symbols. To determine what they mean, we are expected to make some interpretations. Meaning, in this context, is all about knowing what the art or artefact, image or symbol represents and again situating it within time and space. Symbols may be regarded as man’s attempt to understand and communicate some transcendental or divine reality. Having stated the above and with inspiration from the process of worship, which is symbolic, one may say that symbolism is indispensable as far as a religion is concerned, given that vast paraphernalia exists related to religious rituals and practices. Heywood opines that some do not produce new knowledge but only express devotion. He adds that, via these symbols, we could still determine what these people believed²⁰. Robin M. Jensen maintains that visual art, artefacts, and architecture often provide powerful messages and meanings²¹. Hence, material evidence is a valuable, indispensable, and independent source of historical data.

Historical data has also presented us with facts about the evolution of human civilization and how it has equally affected iconography. This evolution has followed a variety of patterns, and these patterns are dependent on the needs of the society in question. Similarly, symbols have been used differently and have different meanings for different people and groupings.

Against the backdrop of the vital role played by art in human history, we can understand the idea behind Christian art and architecture. We note here that the Christian struggle for identity couldn’t only end in text. Christianity in late antiquity significantly influenced the promotion of the visual culture, as could be readily seen in the Roman Empire, from humble beginnings to imposing monuments just after the conversion of Constantine. Early Christian art

¹⁹ John Baldock, *The Elements of Symbolism*, 1.

²⁰Thomas J Heywood, *The Religious language as Symbolism* accessed 5th of May 2020, 89-93.

²¹Robinson M., Jensen, *Material Evidence (2): Visual Culture in The Oxford Handbook to Early Christian Studies*, 2009 105.

was not entirely different from the same biblical subjects corresponding to the Jews and taking the standard of Greco-Roman images. Examples may include Moses reading the ten commandments, which was not significantly different from a Roman official reading out a proclamation. We can also think about the image of the Good Shepherd, which was not different from Hermes, the shepherd.

As we have seen, images have been used to propagate cultural ideologies. Some of these images are borrowings from other cultures and groupings. The primary concern of this work is on gems as a media on which some of these representations were made, particularly the engraving made on the ring from Caesarea. Such depictions cut across cultures, and engraved gems bearing distinctively Christian symbols appeared only around the third and fourth centuries.

Art has been used to represent or symbolize people's convictions and rituals. Thus, the role of material evidence is indispensable as it informs scholars, historians, and archaeologists about the distinct types of cultural practices and social organizations. Visual art has been particularly useful to both historians and archaeologists in their quest to know and recount history. Art has been helpful in the sense that the various interpretations accorded them reflect the context in which they were used and, by extension, serve as a representation of the lived experiences of various groups of people. They have been interpreted to mean different things for separate groups of people over the years. Jesus' teachings are symbolic, especially in his parables and the book of Revelations. This variety of meanings and usage has pushed me to want to embark on this research.

Again, the choice of the ring engraved with the image of the Good Shepherd is engineered or inspired by the ubiquitous nature of shepherds and shepherding in the ancient world and how despite being as common as we know them today, their role has been interpreted in various ways and has served as an inspiration for diverse domains. And so, like Huebner, I believe: "The extent to which this is rooted in contemporary realities rather than in the longings of educated urban elites for a simple rustic life in an idyll far removed from politics and the turmoil of civil war is unclear."²² This point of view makes the subject more exciting and worth investigating.

²² Sabine R Huebner. *Papyri and the social world of the New Testament*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 117.

Religious belief may be considered a common human characteristic, given that it (religion) is all about a personal relationship with a supreme being or an unseen order. It may be regarded as such, given that religion has to do with a people's way of life and practices. From this perspective, we are called upon to ensure that we maintain the rightful relationship with fellow humans and our immediate community.²³ Maintaining the appropriate relation here could be staying up-to-date with the tradition and beliefs of the community of men with which one shares the same ideology. This ideology could be understood to be the theorization of rituals and practices. Religion is sometimes expressed in the material. It is for this reason that we may talk of material religion. The gem no doubt depicts a Christian image but was owned by a Christian, and if that is the case, what is the implication, or what can we make of it?

In the case of this work, as far as the Good Shepard ring is engraved on the ring discovered off the coast of Caesarea. Therefore, our focus will be to find out the origin and use of the Good Shepard image and what it represents when carved in a gemstone through the centuries.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis has four main chapters in addition to this introduction (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 looks into the image of the Good Shepherd. It surveys what we know about actual shepherds in antiquity, the views of shepherds in ancient Mediterranean literature and mythology, and the use of the image of the Good Shepherd in ancient art. Chapter 3 discusses the problem of interpretation of symbols in early Christian art and then focuses on specific problems of the Good Shepherd Image. Chapter 4 looks into ancient gems—how they were produced and used. Chapter 5 examines the available information on the archaeological context in which the gem was discovered. A short conclusion (Chapter 6) summarizes the findings of the thesis.

²³Mathew Clark, "Understanding the nexus between religion and development, in *Handbook of Research on Development and Religion*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Edgar Publishing Limited, 2013, 1.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE GOOD SHEPARD IMAGE.

2.1 Introduction

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11 and 10:14). In the synoptic gospels, Jesus compares his role with that of a shepherd (for example, Mark 6:34 and 14:27). Thus, within the Christian tradition, there is a long history of referring to and conceptualizing people in leadership positions as shepherds. They are expected to protect and provide for their congregations, just as a shepherd does for flocks. Today, the shepherd metaphor and the image of a shepherd and sheep are primarily associated with religious groups. Yet, the Good Shepherd metaphor and imagery's religious use is so daily that it is easy to forget that it is grounded in the activities of actual shepherds who have tended animals for thousands of years.

2.2 Historical Shepherds

Evidence for the domestication of sheep and goats in western Asia extends back at least as early as 8000 BCE and perhaps even two thousand years earlier.²⁴ With this domestication, shepherding became a primary economic activity in the Near East. Meat, milk, wool, and other products from the flock were provided for people and served as a medium of exchange.²⁵ Shepherds equally took weaned lambs and cheese to the nearest markets for sale²⁶. The animals themselves could be used to settle tax debts.²⁷

The best evidence for the activities of actual shepherds consists of documentary texts like contracts. The reason for these contracts was because of the nature of the task of shepherding, which did not make room for supervision. Supervising was challenging because

²⁴ Alexia Smith, Amy Oechsner, Peter Rowley-Conwy, and Andrew M. T. Moore, “Epipalaeolithic animal tending to Neolithic herding at Abu Hureyra, Syria (12,800–7,800 calBP): Deciphering dung spherulites,” *PLOS ONE* (14 September 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272947>), summarized in Alexia Smith, “Ancient Dung Reveals Earliest Evidence for Animal Tending,” *UConn Today* 15 September 2022 (<https://today.uconn.edu/2022/09/ancient-dung-reveals-earliest-evidence-for-animal-tending/#>).

²⁵ “Shepherding was an essential aspect of ancient agrarian and pastoral societies because flocks were valuable sources of food, material for clothing, and dung for crop fertilization, as well as ritual sacrifice” (Jennifer A. Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power* Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas 2021, 11).

²⁶ Sabine R Huebner. *Papyri and the social world of the New Testament*. 128.

²⁷ G. Ernest Wright, “The Good Shepherd,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 2 (1939) 44-48.

the shepherds often took away the animals from the settlement areas for more extended periods in some cases. So such contracts served as recognition of responsibility for the animals by the shepherds. These contracts were most often drawn up once a year and most often after the month of sharing (April). Herding contracts had a period of preference "...with a marked preference for the 12th and 1st months. Shearing is a springtime activity, and it is obvious that these contracts were drawn up after the sharing when the animals passed once more from their owners to the shepherds who were to pasture them."²⁸ The word for a shepherd in these Old Babylonian contracts is often *sipa*. At the same time, the other party was the *na.kad*, which could be either the temple/government or an individual.²⁹ The best evidence for the Greek and Roman period is papyrus documents from Egypt, recently collected and studied by Sabine Huebner.³⁰ She concludes that in Roman Egypt, shepherds were usually not owners of flocks but hired help. An owner of a large flock could hire a shepherd to watch the animals, or a group of owners of smaller flocks could band together to hire a shepherd to watch their animals. These documents suggest that shepherds were employed on an annual basis. Their wages were below average, and they lived nomadically, moving herds from place to place. They often had disputes with farmers, who complained about shepherds illegally grazing flocks on their farms. Huebner also draws evidence from legal codes showing suspicion about shepherds. This suspicion suggests that the image of the shepherd in the Roman world may not have always been positive.

2.3 Shepherds in Ancient Literature and Myth

Shepherds have been a common subject in ancient cultures and myths. In Greek and Roman literature, however, shepherds are positive figures. Shepherds were often depicted as simple, honest, and virtuous people who lived close to nature and were deeply connected with their flocks. Their lifestyle of living among the animals is romanticized in Roman poetry and mythology as shepherds are known to have often raised and cared for heroes, like the shepherd Faustulus who is said to have raised Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome. There is also the Persian King Cyrus, who was supposedly abandoned by his parents and raised

²⁸ J. Nicholas Postgate, "Some Old Babylonian Shepherds and their Flocks", in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 20 (1975) 1–21 (with a contribution by S. Payne) [review article of: J.J. Finkelstein, Yale Oriental Series, Babylonian Texts, Vol. XIII].

²⁹ Postgate, "Some Old Babylonian Shepherds and their Flocks," 2.

³⁰ Sabine R. Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 115-134. My summary of historical evidence for shepherds relies on Huebner's chapter.

by shepherds. Thus, the image of the shepherd in literature and myth could also carry royal and imperial overtones.³¹ Depictions of Apollo, Orpheus, and Hermes as prototypes of the Good Shepherd are believed to have originated the Christian conception of the Good Shepherd. The reason is that the image fits into pagan, Christian, or Roman traditions, and thus it was challenging to decipher the context of its use. The Egyptian word for the ruler is (*heka*), which was depicted in hieroglyphs as a shepherd's staff and interpreted to represent the shepherding dimension of kingship³². We can also find such with the Hittites earlier mentioned. In Greek mythology, shepherds were often associated with the god Pan. Pan was known as the patron of shepherds and the flock. As much as he was depicted as a wild and mischievous god, he was still recognized as one who cared for and loved nature and his flock.

Biblical texts frequently use the image of sheep and shepherd. These images are primarily drawn from the life of a pastoral and patriarchal people of the ancient Near East. In biblical literature, shepherds were often viewed as heroes of the faith in the likes of King David, who became a great king and was the source of inspiration for many cultures has contributed to the idea of shepherds as humble and virtuous leaders. Some images may mean a lot for some groups of people based on their traditions or everyday life.

It is obvious that the Christian Good Shepherd follows the oriental branch in regard to meaning, but with a modification. The caretaking is intensified to redemption. The Good Shepherd rejoices in the one sheep lost and refound (Luke 15:4,5) and even gives his life for his sheep (John 10: 11); he is sacrificed, and not the animal. The artistic type, on the other hand, although of ultimate oriental origin, derives from Greco-Roman art; the added garment is taken even from profane and bucolic representations, not from religious ones. The Christian Good Shepherd thus reflects in an exemplary manner the complex development of ancient civilization and the synthetic character of its final phase.³³

The biblical shepherd represents an individual responsible for the care and safety of sheep and goats while grazing away from the nomadic camp or the village. It reflects a person who can move a large flock without loss from one pasture to another, often many miles apart³⁴. Most Old Testament people were nomads, and the likes of Abraham, Moses, and David quickly comes

³¹ *Ibid*, 117-118.

³² Valentine Muller, "The Prehistory of the 'Good Shepherd.'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3, no. 2 (1944): 87-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/542921>.

³³ Muller, Valentine. "The Prehistory of the 'Good Shepherd.'" 90.

³⁴ Porter, Lawrence B. "Sheep and Shepherd: An Ancient Image of the Church and a Contemporary Challenge." *Gregorianum* 82, no. 1 (2001): 51-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23580418>.

to mind. From the Old Testament background of a Good Shepherd, we can make allusions to the redemptive mission of Jesus as he says of himself that he is the Good Shepherd. In Christian art, Jesus is portrayed as the Good Shepherd who came to care for and guide his sheep towards redemption and eternal life³⁵. It should be noted that the reason for using this (Good Shepherd) image is not to teach a new lesson but to remind Christians of Christ's lessons already taught.

From a biblical perspective, the image of sheep and shepherd appears to be unique as it cuts across almost every tradition or culture. Most famously, the man who would become the most revered king of Judah and Israel, David, was said to have been a shepherd (1 Sam. 17:15), again evoking royal connections. Even the God of Israel was spoken of as a shepherd (Gen. 48:15), giving the idea of the shepherd as having a divine connotation. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, in the early Christian period, Jesus was imagined as a shepherd. Jesus says of himself that he is the Good Shepherd. We can therefore say that "the fact that the positive symbolism of the shepherd was prominent even when shepherds themselves were not always viewed favourably demonstrates the ability of symbols to take on their own life and power beyond their quotidian origins."³⁶ However, the attention given to sheep and shepherds in the Bible has greatly influenced its understanding and given it a universal character through which ancient, present and probably future generations will use and identify with it. The image can speak of the past, present, and future. The claims made by Jesus of him being the Good Shepherd having its origin in the Old Testament with the Davidic king can be seen to have been the vehicle through which we can conveniently make allusions to as seen in other traditions. "In times of rapid cultural change, such as our own, a crisis of images is to be expected. Many traditional images lose their former hold on people, while new images have not yet had time to gain their full power"³⁷. Worth mentioning is the fact that the intrinsic and maybe historical worth of the biblical images of the church has had a considerable influence on every generation and works of life as they speak to them in different ways.

³⁵ Marilyn Stokstad, Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014). 220-229.

³⁶ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, (Waco, Texas; Baylor University Press, 2021), Kindle edition, 11.

³⁷ Porter, Lawrence B. "Sheep and Shepherd: An Ancient Image of the Church and a Contemporary Challenge." 51.

Huebner thinks this image had an unparalleled symbolic significance across the ancient Mediterranean world,³⁸ probably thanks to its flexible nature. Flexibility here may be regarded as the ability to adopt and adapt the image to fit multiple contexts. From an imperial perspective, the shepherd stood to represent an ideal ruler. At the same time, from a biblical or religious viewpoint, it refers to pastors, leaders of religious communities, and even that which is divine.

Deducing from the defined role of the shepherd (protection of their flock, providing food, refuge, water, and security; a glaring picture of what an ideal society should look like), one can already suggest a certain level of attachment between the shepherd and the sheep, forming a vital and existential interdependence between the shepherd and the sheep. Interdependence in the sense that the sheep depends on the shepherd for food, shelter etc., while the shepherd also depends on the sheep for clothing, milk, meat etc. Providing for his flock and enduring whatsoever for the Good of the sheep thus places the shepherd in leadership. This care and lead role might explain why a shepherd became a commonly used metaphor or model used by imperial and church figures to suit their different contexts. Huebner maintains, "No other phase of life left a deeper impression than the pastoral upon the literary modes of expression, the ideas, and institutions of every civilization in the Near East."³⁹ Ernest Wright observes, "Considering that 'Shepherds' and 'sheep' were a most important part of the life of the Ancient Near East, it is little wonder that no other words in the Bible compare with them in symbolic interest."⁴⁰

2.4 Ancient Visual Depictions of the Good Shepherd Motif

Given the importance of actual shepherds and the literary image of shepherds, it is not surprising that the ancient Mediterranean world also had a vibrant tradition of visual art depicting shepherds. I will focus on the image of "the Good Shepherd," a young man carrying an animal over his shoulders. Artists have represented this symbolic image as artistic creations in the form of mosaics, wall paintings in catacombs, sarcophagi, sculptures or independent statues, oil lamps, decorated glasses, and engraved gems and rings.

Centuries before Christianity, this image was used and existed in different geographic areas. An early example is a prehistoric depiction discovered on the eastern side of the Egyptian

³⁸ Sabine R Huebner. *Papyri and the social world of the New Testament*. 118.

³⁹G. Ernest Wright, "The Good Shepherd" in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

desert by the harbour of the Red Sea.⁴¹ On this relief is a depiction of a shepherd carrying an animal on her shoulder, as in the Near East. It should be noted here that the person in the said representation is considered a female. This female figure suggests that communities did not regard shepherding as an activity exclusively reserved for a particular gender. Shepherding may have been an activity for all genders. Again, we also find this motif in the Hittite art, that of Carchemish and Sinjirli, which may be dated to the first three centuries.⁴²

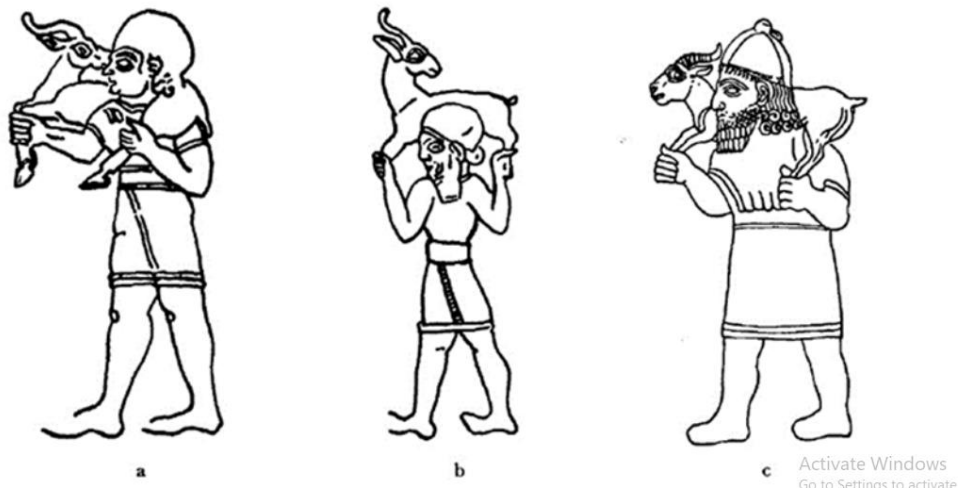


Figure 2.1.1: Drawing showing three men carrying on their shoulders sacrificial animals. (Klausner, 1958: 28)

We can also think of the cylindrical seals, which places Syria among the earlier communities to own this art. Cylinder seals fall among the first group of essential seals used by man⁴³. As such, research into the ritual practices of ancient people cannot ignore cylinder seals and their impressions. “Locally obtained materials such as hematite, serpentine, jasper, and chalcedony were most commonly used to make cylinder seals, but the highly prized lapis lazuli was occasionally obtained via trade”.⁴⁴ They often have a hole going through length-wise to accommodate a string or thong worn by its owner.

⁴¹ Muller, Valentine. The Prehistory of the “Good Shepherd.”87.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Fred L. Gray, “Engraved Gems: A historical perspective”, Gemological institute of America. <https://www.gia.edu/doc/Engraved-Gems-A-Historical-Perspective>, 191-201.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.



Figure 2.2A Bronze Age cylinder seal made from Hematite (left) and its impression (right).

<https://archive.org/details/sealcyindersofw100ward/page/316/mode/2up?view=theater>.

The figure holding the animal over the shoulders is in the upper register on the left.



Figure 2.3A drawing of the cylinder seal in Figure 2. The figure holding the animal over the shoulders is in the upper register on the left.

Figure 2.3 above is an example of what a cylinder seal looks like and its impression. One would find various scenes represented in image form on the cylinder itself. It should be noted that the image, as seen on the seal, is inversely done. This way, once it is rolled over clay or any other object, the impression becomes understandable and readable. The above cylinder seal is about 3.4cm in height, and its diameter is 1.5 cm.⁴⁵ It was discovered in Cyprus and is held in Louvre Museum. Because of its extreme minuteness and its crowded complexity of design, the guess is that this cylinder seal might have originated from the Hittite region⁴⁶. As a two-face register, we are concerned with the upper part wherein we can identify “two short-skirted figures, each carrying a goat on his shoulder⁴⁷” – an image interpreted to depict the Good Shepherd. Figure 3 represents a drawing of what we have as the impression in figure 2.

⁴⁵ <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010133658>.

⁴⁶ <https://archive.org/details/sealcylindersofw100ward/page/316/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁴⁷ <https://archive.org/details/sealcylindersofw100ward/page/316/mode/2up?view=theater>.

The right to the origin of the motif of the Good Shepherd may be given to Egypt in North Africa. The relief of Egypt presents itself as the cradle of this motif and more (seals and ivories) before being moved to other places with Syria inclusive. A prehistoric example of this motif, a rock drawing of a shepherdess, has been identified in the eastern part of the Egyptian desert. The depiction of a shepherdess makes it clear that the activity of tending sheep was widespread/ rampant and was not reserved for a particular sex.

The humble figure of the shepherd proved to be a fertile metaphor in Greece. The image we now regard as that of the Good Shepard was known as the calf bearer or *Moschophoros* (μοσχοφόρος). The most famous example of the calf bearer sculpture depicts a bearded man carrying a calf on his shoulders to be offered a sacrifice to the goddess Athena (see Figure 4). It was created by a sculptor, probably around 570 BC. It was discovered on the Acropolis in Athens in 1864 and is presently in the Acropolis Museum. The guess is that this statue initially might have been 1.65 meters, that is, 5.4 feet in height.⁴⁸ Someone had dedicated this statue to the goddess of wisdom, but it is not entirely clear who that person is. It should be noted that the bearded individual is wearing a himation that covers his shoulders, and the rest of the body remains exposed.

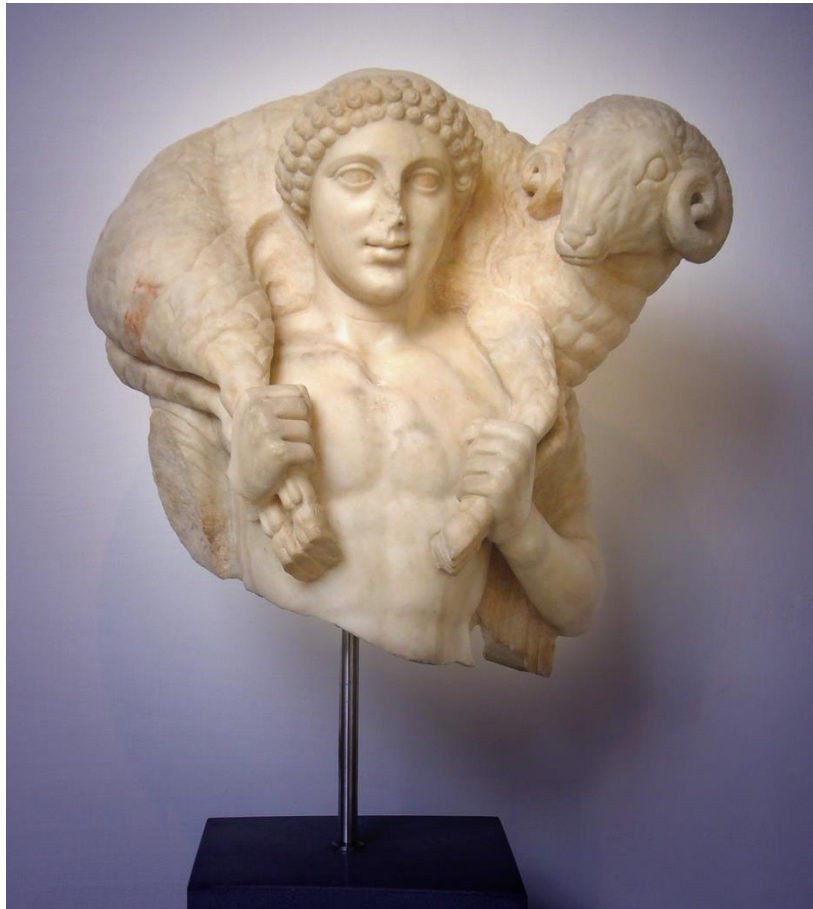
⁴⁸ “Male Statue with its Base. The ‘Calf-Bearer,’” Acropolis Museum website (<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/male-statue-its-base-calf-bearer>).



Figure 2.4 Statue of the Moscophoros, found on the Acropolis in Athens⁴⁹

Other early versions of the iconography of the shepherd figure show the male carrying a ram, the Kriophoros (see Figure 2.5).

⁴⁹ <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/male-statue-its-base-calf-bearer>



*Figure 2.5 Statue of the Criophorous from the Museo Barracco in Rome*⁵⁰

Figure 2.5 shows an example of the *Criophorous*, with the ram over the young man's shoulders, identifiable by its horns. This example is considered a Roman copy of an earlier Greek original.⁵¹

As Freeman notes, the *Criophorous* was sometimes thought to be the god Hermes: "Hermes who was known as the deity who guided souls to the underworld and the patron of flocks and herds was often represented as Hermes *Criophorous* carrying a lamb or a ram on his arms or his shoulders."⁵²

⁵⁰ <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/6066/hermes-kriophoros/>.

⁵¹ Alice Taylor, "The Problem of Labels: Three Marble Shepherds in Nineteenth Century Rome," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Supplementary Volumes 2002, vol. 1, *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity* (2002) 47-59.

⁵² Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, 11.



Figure 2.6 Stand-fitting bronze figure of the Criophorous made in Etruria.⁵³

⁵³ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIB796>.

The above figure is another depiction of Hermes Criophorous. As a depiction of Hermes, it represents a classical mammal deity. It is made of bronze in Etruria- Italy. The height is about 10.50cm, and one can deduce that the figure is unclothed.



Figure 2.7 Upper body and head of yellow limestone male figure (Criophorous, ram-bearer).⁵⁴

Figure 2.7 above is a half-image depiction of a youth/ram bearer wearing an apron and kilt, according to the Egyptians. We note that the preserved upper body and face are all worn, and both faces are featureless. Unlike the case in figure 2.5, where the figure is holding the ram with his two hands, we observe in the case that the figure is holding the horned animal with one hand as the left-hand hangs down close to the body. The image is assumed to have been produced between 600 BC and 560 BC. This date interval falls within the sixth century – a period in which the Criophorous is usually dated. It was produced in Cyprus. The dimensions are height: 9.50cm, length: 3.35cm, width: 5.90cm, Depth: 3.20cm.

⁵⁴ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIB8327>



Figure 2.8 Terracotta figurine of Hermes carrying a ram over his shoulders (Hermes Criophorous).⁵⁵

Figure 2.8 is another depiction of Hermes in the British Museum, believed to have been produced around 480 BC. Its dimensions are Height – 19.10cm, weight – 0.40kg, width – 10cm, depth – 6.20mm, and it is said to have been acquired in 1863. The stand-fitting figure made from terracotta appears unclothed, the same as in figure 2.6 above. This statue was excavated in Sicily – Italy, by an excavator and field collector named George Dennis.

We find the “Good Shepherd” image in Christian contexts in the Roman period. Scholars generally agree that the Christian image of the Good Shepherd is a prototype of that of the Greeks⁵⁶. What might explain this is the fact that the Greek Hermes carried a ram on his shoulders and moved around the town to deliver Tanagra from a plague⁵⁷. As such, they see Hermes *Criophorous* as an example of this copied prototype. The image occurs in nearly all the artistic media that early Christians used, for example, the Old and New Testaments. Here, we can see a caregiver whose main objective is to redeem. This redemption is x-rayed in Luke

⁵⁵ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIB837>.

⁵⁶ Muller, Valentine. “The Prehistory of the ‘Good Shepherd.’” 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

15:4,5, where the Good Shepherd rejoices in the found lost sheep. It is found, for example, in statues (see Figure 2.9).



Figure 2.9 A 3rd-4th century Marble statue of The Good Shepherd in Rome, precisely in the Catacomb of San Callisto.

Figure 2.9 shows a statue depicting the Good Shepherd assigned to the third or fourth century, and it was found in the Catacombs of San Callisto and is now in the Vatican Museums. We see here the standard features of the image of the Good Shepherd—a young man in a tunic holding

a lamb draped over his shoulders. This statue shows the young man equipped with a small bag and boots laced up to the knee.⁵⁸



Figure 2.10 4th Century Mosaic of the Good Shepherd in Aquileia Basilica.

Figure 2.10 shows a mosaic in the basilica in Aquileia, an ancient Roman city. The mosaic is 700 square meters and is one of the city's most important archaeological finds. It is assigned to the fourth century. The portion of the mosaic in Figure 2.10 shows a person we may consider a shepherd. He carries an animal on his shoulders and stands before another animal. He also wears a tunic and a kind of foot covering that goes just below the knees. In his right hand, he holds a set of pan pipes.

⁵⁸“Statuetta del Buon Pastore,” <https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.28590.0.0>.



Figure 2.11 Good Shepherd image in the catacomb of Callixtus/Callisto.

Catacombs are underground burial sites used by Jews, Christians, etc., with an extensive network of chambers, and these were very common in the ancient Mediterranean world. Such cemeteries are noted to have preserved much of Christian art and, as such, give much information about early Christians and the beginnings of Christianity's involvement with art.



Figure 2.12 Sarcophagus from the Via Salaria, with a bearded shepherd in the centre.

https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.31540.0.0?lang=en_US

Figure 2.12 is a tub-shaped Salaria sarcophagus depicting two large squatting rams on both ends. At the centre of the sarcophagus is a bearded shepherd sandwiched between two trees carrying a sheep on his back. At the foot of the trees, we can also see two sheep. To the left, we find a deceased seated in a thoughtful posture, while to the right, we find another seated and praying. This sarcophagus is dated 350-375 and made from marmo bianco.



Figure 2.13 Bottom of the plate with Criophorous shepherd.

<https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.60718.0.0>

The above figure is the base of a dish with a shepherd carrying a lamb at the centre. Next to the shepherd, we can identify two other rams by his side. Also, at the base of the image, we can see the designs of a flute and cista. This image is encircled by two bands separated from each other by an auspicious inscription.



Figure 2.14 Devotional medal with the Good Shepherd surrounded by biblical scenes.

This is a devotional medal from the 4th century A.D. made from bronze. On it is the image of the Good Shepherd surrounded by biblical scenes. It is mounted in a modern double frame of

silver and gault metal. The medal has a diameter of 4.6cm, and with the fame, it measures 8.1/9.8cm. It was passed to the Vatican Museums from the Vatican Library on 01/10/1999⁵⁹.



Figure 2.15 Heart-shaped beak lamp with shepherd on the disc and vine branch.

The above lamp can be dated between the end of the second and the first half of the third century A.D. It originates from Ostia but is in the Christian Museum of the Vatican Apostolic Library.

⁵⁹ <https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.60542.0.0>.

It measures 11 x 7.6cm and is made from terracotta⁶⁰. On it is a depiction of a young shepherd boy carrying a lamb on his shoulders. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between lamps of pagan and Christian origins as they are found in all parts of the classical world.



Figure 2.16 Fifth-century pottery lamp decorated with the Good Shepherd image.⁶¹

The oil lamp depicts a figure carrying a ram on his shoulders and holding the animal with two hands. A faint oval groove indicates the base. The nozzle is broken, and the middle of the figure is restored.⁶²Produced in Italy around the fifth century, the lamp has the following measurements 10.10cm in length and a width of 6.10cm.

⁶⁰ <https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.61403.0.0>.

⁶¹ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1982-0302-8.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Most importantly for this thesis, we also find the image of the Good Shepherd on gems. Below is an example from the Vatican Museum (Figure 2.17).



Figure 2.17 Oval gem engraved with a depiction of the Good Shepherd.

The oval-shaped gem is engraved with the image of the Good Shepherd. Next to him is a dog which was very common to see shepherds move around with. There are equally some inscriptions on the shepherd's left and right sides. There is also a palm branch over his head. This gem is made from red rock and has a golden metal frame. It is dated 4th Century A.D. and

measures 1.3 x 1.1cm. It was initially in the Christian Museum of the Vatican Library before being passed on to its present location in the Vatican Museum.⁶³



Figure 2.18 Engraved gem of the Good Shepherd mounted on a gold finger ring.⁶⁴

The above intaglio is made from sard and fitted into a gold frame – probably a gold ring depicts the image of the Good Shepherd representing Jesus Christ, who stands with a sheep or ram on his shoulders while two other sheep are flanked on both his right and left sides. There is also an inscription on the gem in Greek (*Iésou uie Theou*) which may be translated as “Jesus, son of God”. It should be noted here that both the inscription and the image appear in the obverse. This engraved gem must have been produced between the third and fourth centuries. Its length is 56mm. Figure 2.18, therefore, brings another perspective regarding the changing meaning of symbols. Here, the interpretation of the image is made explicitly clear as representing Jesus, the son of God. This clarity is brought about by the inscription on the gem. The inscription gives the impression that this engraved gem served a religious purpose.

The late antique examples of the iconography of the Good Shepherd show some standard visual features. Across most examples, we find a male youth wearing a short tunic,

⁶³ <https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.60529.0.0>.

⁶⁴ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1865-0224-1.

sometimes with sleeves or no sleeves. The tunic is pinched at the waist by a belt. In many examples, the youth wears high sandals with crossing laces up to the knee. Sometimes the youth carries an object (a pot or pipes) in one hand. Sometimes other animals are present by the side of the youth.

2.5 Conclusions

We have seen that the motif of the Good Shepherd had a long life in antiquity and is present in many different media. This presence is probably connected to the fact that shepherding has been an essential profession for a long time. The image of the shepherd became associated primarily with rulers who wished to depict themselves as protectors of people. Furthermore, regarding the king as a shepherd did not only represent him as a paternal benefactor, as seen above, but it also went as far as expressing the cultic authority of the king. In this regard, the king is seen as a mediator or point of contact between the gods and men. Here, the king is seen as a go between the people and the divine being. This cultic authority warrants him to be the chief priest. In other words, the people can reach the gods through the king, maybe not directly. Christianity seems to have adopted and adapted this image to suit its mission more than any other institution. The shepherd metaphor is widespread in the Bible from the Old to the New Testament. The use of this image in the Old Testament is foundational to the symbolic representation as seen in the New Testament, wherein Jesus regards himself as the Good Shepherd. The biblical usage of the shepherd image may be regarded as a climax of earlier appropriations of this image in ancient times before Christianity. We can situate the origin of this image in the Bible itself as biblical authors adopted, appropriated, and kept the pastoral tradition in their writings, teachings, and art. They adopted this tradition from the Near East, where the image was used to refer to or to describe the person and the works of their gods or kings. Huebner writes,

The figure of the shepherd served as a symbolic representation of the ideal ruler not only in ancient Israel but also across the entire Near East, including Sumer, the Akkadian Empire, Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt. For example, the Egyptian god Osiris was depicted with Shepherd's crook, and the crook was also an accoutrement of the ruling pharaoh. Homer often referred to the leaders of the Hellenes as "shepherds of the people."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Huebner Sabine R. *Papyri and the social world of the New Testament*, 115.

In this symbolic representation of kings, gods, and tools like the shepherd's crook, we may be able to grasp how this metaphor got its way into and conquered the Christian domain of visual art.

3 THE INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

3.1 Introduction

Every work of art expresses something and thus gives room for various designs and interpretations. Arthur Danto refers to this as the “aboutness”⁶⁶ of art, implying that art objects are expressive objects in their very nature – expressing a point of view. It goes on that no one point of view conveniently explains a work of art. In other words, every work of art has more than one meaning. According to Carroll, they (works of art) always come with features that are unusual, puzzling, and disconcerting, and as such, there is a need for some tolerance for ambiguity⁶⁷. The question “What do you see?” may be simple, but it is not. The confounding nature of art provokes and sustains exciting interpretations⁶⁸. Jensen adds that pictures rarely convey a single or clear message. This is true as we often have the author’s point of view on the one hand and that of the viewer on the other hand. Images without captions or detailed explanations remain vague or “open-ended as far as their meanings are concerned”.⁶⁹ Owing to the ambiguous nature of artworks, in her second theoretical concern, Jennifer Freeman raised concerns about the meaning of art, whose understanding can only come from interpreting such visual images. In her opinion, “the identification and interpretation of images is not a simple matter of one-to-one decoding, in which one image automatically and always unequivocally bears one meaning.”⁷⁰ That is to say, artworks are never apparent as they may seem at first glance and so need interpretation. According to her, the context in which an image is found or exists helps us understand what that image represents. We are often puzzled when confronted with the artwork. Every time we come across such works, we, most often than not, ask questions to know what the work is all about or the message the artist intends to convey and hence how to value the artwork. It is for this reason that the question “What do you see?” will always have varied responses as each viewer sees an object “...through the lens of a mediated tradition, memory, and the culture in which they stand,”⁷¹ and so we cannot in any way ignore the strong

⁶⁶ Terry Barrett. “Principles for Interpreting Art.” in *Art Education* 47, no. 5 (1994): 8-13. doi:10.2307/3193496.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁹ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 8.

⁷⁰ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, 5.

⁷¹ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 8.

subjective character of art. However, all interpretations are intended to shed more light on the artwork in question.

Given that we move around with articulated assumptions about everything in existence, the chances of coming up with a confident interpretation of a work of art are made very difficult. This is further compounded by the fact that we can't, in the first place, interpret a piece of work in isolation from the others, and that interpretation does not imply guessing the author's intent or the interpreter but the artwork, hence, the meaning of an artwork is not limited. Take, for example, the shepherd image she uses. To her, such an image exists just like any other work of art produced in a Roman workshop if found in isolation. If such an image happens to be by itself and without other images linked to it, it cannot be placed under a category. Again, suppose it were to exist alongside or on the same sarcophagus or fresco or other scenes that carry Christian meaning. In that case, the Christian Good Shepherd comes to mind,⁷² or one may view the image as an imperial representation of a ruler, for example, coins or seals on a correspondence. This implies that the various motifs presented via images are ambiguous. In line with image viewing, motif, and context, Jensen has this to say,

Their messages are far more complex than their simple identifications, and their language is symbolic rather than precise or specific. Thus, theorizing about what images mean is more analogous to translating than decoding. The one requires that we look more widely at the culture or context of the message, while the other requires merely that we apply a set of rules – an exercise that might produce a facsimile, but rarely a meaningful equivalent.⁷³

Jensen and Freeman agree that to derive the meaning of an image, we need to consider the image's context and culture. Here, we can already notice a disparity in the use of words between Freeman and Jensen regarding what we need to do to images to get their meanings. I would like to stress that this disparity is a matter of dictum, given that decoding and translation are all

⁷² Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, 5.

⁷³ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 11.

forms of interpretation. For Freeman, all we need to do is to decode the image. My understanding of what Freeman implies when she mentions decoding in the context of interpretation is that it is a process of interpreting the visual language used by artists to convey meaning in their works. It is, therefore, a means via which elements of form, style, composition, and subject matter are put together to create meaning. From this perspective, decoding demands a good mastery of the cultural and historical context in which the artwork was created, and it helps us uncover the rich layers of meaning.

On the other hand, Jensen thinks that if we are in a quest to obtain the meaning of an artwork, all we need do is to translate the meaning of the artwork. I understand translation as the process through which an artwork's meaning is communicated to various audiences, cultures, and historical periods. That is, it is moving the image from one language ('spoken' only by the eyes) to another (expressing in words what the eyes have seen) and maybe in more simplified terms. One might think of translation as a process of adapting the artwork to a new audience or context⁷⁴. As seen above, translation requires considering the image's culture and context. Therefore, an archaeologist's task is to combine components of culture and context to expose the society which owns the material evidence. The de-territorialization of an image brings about the complexity of meaning. Jensen adds that "visual art conveys its message through the agency of setting, style, and composition," which are factors of context and culture. These three aspects go a long way to give a socio-historical context to an image which helps a lot in expressing the meaning of an image. In all, translation and decoding are fundamental aspects of interpretation as they bring insight and perspectives of artists across time and space; thereby bringing about a better understanding of the diverse and complex cultural traditions that shape art. Cretiu shares this view as she contends that appreciating art is always culture-specific. She adds that it is often influenced by general and cultural politics, thus giving it a solid subjective character we cannot ignore.

The focus of this chapter is to present a brief historical background on the origin of Christian art, from which we will proceed to examine some issues and problems involved in the interpretation of images. This will end with some principles for interpreting a work of art. As we have mentioned above, the purpose of interpreting images is to have their precise

⁷⁴ The case of this thesis is different given that it is not the case of adapting to a new audience.

meaning within the context in which they exist, given that they speak to us differently. And because they speak differently to different people, determining their relevance makes it a little challenging, given that their presence tends to have subjective value. Every interpretation made is backed by some attachment or affiliation to some culture. So, every visual art has its cultural context, which should form the basis for its interpretation. Falconer believes that “Art belongs to every age and forms one of the common interests of human life.” Through art, therefore, we can gain knowledge about ancient civilizations.

3.2 Historical Background to Early Christian Art

The study of early Christian art is quite fascinating. Beth Williamson thinks it is because “...it touches on a wide range of subjects: history, politics, theology, philosophy,”⁷⁵ etc. The beginning of Christian art was very timid. It was timid because it began within the restricted confines of a persecuted minority community, initially persecuted for their beliefs.⁷⁶ From a chronological point of view, Robin Jensen opines alongside other scholars that Christian art cannot be dated earlier than the late second or early third century. This is considered a late start, and so various reasons have been advanced to explain this late beginning in Christian art. Scholars have posed questions regarding this late start. They have questioned whether this late start is because early Christians were so faithful to the Old Testament, which forbids idolatry or if they were too poor to afford or commission artists to create art for them. Whatever the case, it is evident that Christians tried very hard to distinguish themselves with the images they chose to adorn their items. Early arts, according to most historians, is limited to the first six centuries after Christ, and so “Christian art is here limited to those expressions of the beautiful which are inspired by feelings and thoughts which originated in the Christian Faith or are associated with the formal worship of the Church.”⁷⁷ From this perspective, scholars and historians can identify specific motifs/themes as being Christian. Hence, much of early Christian art usually is differentiated by its subject matter—in other words. It bears what could be regarded as typically Christian symbols or biblical narrative scenes (both in the Old and New

⁷⁵ Anda-Elena Cretiu, “English for art purpose: interpreting art”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia*, vol. 58 (Lviii), issue 2, 2013, 49-66.

⁷⁶ Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A very short introduction*, (United States; Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

⁷⁷https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/62515/dalrev_vol26_iss1_pp65_74.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Testament)⁷⁸. The subject matter is the recognizable stuff in a work of art, e.g., a person, place, or thing.⁷⁹

3.3 The question of interpretation

As rational beings, we are always curious to know, and this curiosity often comes with questions that need answers. To answer such questions, we often relate to things around us. To interpret is to make sense out of the things we find around us. “Interpretation, in effect, is always a process of reinterpretation, something which takes place from the vantage point of the present, of the here and now.”⁸⁰ To interpret is to see something as representing something or expressing something, being about something or a response to something, belonging to a certain tradition, or exhibiting certain formal features⁸¹. Interpretation involves analyzing and making sense of information or data, often in context. The necessity for interpreting emanates from the fact that no artistic work comes with a specific or fully grounded meaning.

As a guide, Terry Barrett raises several questions that we might want to consider answering if we want to be efficient in our interpretation of Artworks. These questions include;

What is this object or event that I see or hear or otherwise sense? What is it about? What does it represent or express? What does or did it mean to its maker? What is it a part of? Does it represent something? What are its references? What is it responding to? Why did it come to be? How was it made? Within what tradition does it belong? What ends did a given work possibly serve its maker(s) or patron(s)? What pleasures or satisfactions did it a fool the person(s) responsible for it? What problems did it solve or allay? What needs did it relieve? What does it mean to me? Does it affect my life? Does it change my view of the world?⁸²

⁷⁸ Robin Jensen and Mark Ellison, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), xxiii.

⁷⁹Terry Barrett, “Principles for Interpreting Art.” *Art Education* 47, no. 5 (1994): 8–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193496>.

⁸⁰ Terry Barrett. “Principles for Interpreting Art.” in *Art Education* 47, no. 5 (1994): 8-13. doi:10.2307/3193496.

⁸¹ Anda-Elena Cretiu, “English for art purpose: interpreting art”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia*, vol. 58 (Lviii), issue 2, 2013, 49-66.

⁸² Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A very short introduction*, (United States; Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

In the context of artefacts, particularly regarding interpreting the Roman Good Shepherd ring, it is difficult to answer all these questions because of limited information. However, in the fifth chapter, we will try to answer as many as possible.

If someone were interested in the meaning of any visual art, it would be essential to understand its archaeological context, as already mentioned above.

Philosophers, archaeologists, and historians are all interested in art, but what meaning do we make from it? Early Christian iconography is noted to have some similarities with art considered pagan art. However, a few differences can help distinguish Christian from other art forms. Williamson, in her attempt to differentiate Christian art from others, maintains that;

‘Christian art’ is unusual in that it does not describe the art of a particular style, period, or region but art for a particular range of purposes, which encompasses a wide range of forms and styles.⁸³

It implies that Christian art is purposeful as it symbolizes or represents an ideology. Christian art is expressive in nature; hence, it doesn’t speak of itself but communicates a bigger idea.

The beginnings of early Christian art were very timid. However, over a very short period almost got to universal standards to the point of having them almost everywhere, in public and private spaces. The implication is that the flexible character of art, in general, and particularly Christian art, can be used to express various opinions or ideas. Beth maintains that particular objects and images can become an explicitly political or ideological statement with such a character. Therefore, the very existence of Christian art is one of the things that make up Christianity's specific and fundamental character.⁸⁴

The ‘Good Shepherd’ image has received considerable attention over the years, especially as it began to move west from its original Semitic environment. Notably, its motif began to change during this movement as the context changed. Like most images, the strength of the Good Shepard image is its flexibility. This means that the usability of this image has been diverse owing to the changing environment (how each recipient community regards shepherds

⁸³ Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A very short introduction*, 201.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

and shepherding) and times. Following from the actual person of the shepherd and how its metaphor has been used, Jennifer Freeman opines that “the positive symbolism of the shepherd was prominent even when shepherds themselves were not always viewed favourably demonstrates the ability of symbols to take on their own life and power beyond their quotidian origins.⁸⁵“Hence, it is easy to appropriate a sign and give it an interpretation different from what it originally represented or meant. As a result, the shepherd image was adopted and adapted to express diverse views in different cultures. In other words, the person of the shepherd represents for each group what meaning they make of it within a particular context, tradition, or culture. Some of these may include representing political authority, as was the case with kings and emperors who considered themselves or regarded as shepherds. We also have situations where the title refers to the divine, religious or community leaders, etc. For some, the image represents ancient figures whom the Christian community had termed pagan. The calf and ram bearers are glaring examples of this effect. The shepherd’s image symbolizes protection, power, authority, and leadership.

3.4 Role or duty of the shepherd

Before we can conveniently discuss how scholars have interpreted this image of the shepherd tending sheep in the fields, I think it will be good to begin by looking at the role of the actual shepherd. The reason is that scholars have come up with various interpretations of this significant activity thanks to the part played by a shepherd. Hence, the contemporary person may understand the changing meaning of the shepherd image as emanating from the duty of the shepherd (leading the flock to pasture, keeping the flock together, searching for lost sheep, penning them securely at night and bringing them to shelter, protecting them from wild animals and thieves, giving particular attention to weak, pregnant, and injured ones etc.).

3.5 Interpretations

As we have already seen, shepherds and flock tending were very common. The metaphor of a shepherd also became common and could be found almost everywhere, like burial sites (Catacombs), sarcophagi, and among church art.

⁸⁵ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, Kindle edition, 11.

The context in which an image is used determines the content of the image at that moment/era. The contextual analysis seeks to understand how the artwork reflects the cultural values and beliefs of the time and place in which it was created. It involves the study of the historical, social, and cultural context in which the artwork was created. Moreover, the shepherd image can evoke multiple and even contradictory meanings as a symbol. In an article entitled ‘Early Christian and Jewish Art,’ Erwin Goodenough states that it is difficult for individuals to agree on the nature of art. This, to him, is because the motivation of such artwork is, at times, unconscious⁸⁶. Hence, it may be suitable to ascertain that the problem with images, pictures, or symbols is their inability to convey a single and clear message. Again, we emphasize that their interpretation is limitless unless pictures come with captions. What they represent is dependent on the viewer⁸⁷. The context in which the art production takes place is always essential, given that it gives us a good understanding of the actual reality on the ground. In the case of the Good Shepherd, the context provides a somewhat vivid picture of how the various communities and authors perceived shepherds. Given that the historical understanding of artworks cannot possibly mean an attempt to relive the processes of their production and the contexts in which they were produced, we are bound to interpret these artworks to be able to recount the past.

In Ancient Rome, this same image from ancient Greece was copied and known as the *Spes*. Some of these images that we refer to as Christian have equally been given an imperial connotation. This follows from the theme of an actual shepherd as one who guards and leads. It is the case with the image of the Good Shepherd, whose motif has been that of a good leader.

Augustine notes in his discussion of literal and figural interpretations in biblical exegesis that the various meanings of a particular thing may be contrary or just different. What he implies by ‘contrary’ is that a thing is being used on the one hand in the good sense and on the other in the bad. This is the same scenario we find with the Good Shepherd image that has been used on the one hand in the good sense and on the other in the bad⁸⁸.

⁸⁶ Erwin R. Goodenough, “Early Christian and Jewish Art.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 33, no. 4 (1943): 403–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1451996>.

⁸⁷ Jensen M. Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 8.

⁸⁸ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, Kindle edition, 6.

Art has taken a symbolic form; in Christianity, it expresses faith. The interest in deconstructing or interpreting images is to bring out their meaning. We think it is in the process of trying to find meaning that the historian can fit the bits and pieces to help tell a coherent story of the past. To carry out a visual interpretation, Jennifer Awes Freeman says there are two things to be noted from the beginning or outset; the first is that images should not only be considered or regarded as an illustration of texts. To this, Jensen adds that:

Art is neither simply an illustration of texts nor is it necessarily challenging them. Images are articulate and complex modes of expression that make no sense in isolation and have no meaning apart from ideas that emerge in a local community and engage a community's values. The historian's task is not unlike the artist's-to make those ideas three-dimensional, having both surface and depth.⁸⁹

If understood to play a complementary role, visual art and text help better recount history. However, in recent years, there has been some serious objection to this position which maintains that textual sources are of utmost importance in understanding art.

That is to find out what it meant for the users and how it was used to be able to tell a story of the past. In this way, we are more liable to recount a story about history or ancient people and their worldviews. Jensen, talking about the multiple meanings we may derive from a single image, opines that

A myriad of considerations and caveats must be laid out before a single interpreter dare say anything with confidence about meaning. Each viewer sees an object afresh but also through the lens of a mediated tradition, memory, and the culture in which they stand. In the end, all interpreters reveal as much as themselves, their values or cultural

⁸⁹ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 31.

formations as they offer some objective statement about the meaning of a single image.⁹⁰

We are always caught between two camps when interpreting images or pictures. On the one hand, we have the artist; on the other, we have the viewer. This may be explained in the sense that “every symbol or image has its context of origin and is profoundly dynamic, which means it can change or evolve from its original meaning.”⁹¹ All these changes are seemingly a result of contextual interpretations. Meyer and others maintain that the meaning of an object may not be gotten if it is considered on its own. The idea is that other related things should be considered for obtaining such (meaning). Such things may include the local adaptation of that object and conceptual schemes of what people do with that object⁹². All this fall within the domain of interpretation and meaning. Hence, this image’s meaning has changed considerably from the Ancient Greek period.

3.5.1 Difficulties

1. Unconscious production
2. As a symbol, it can evoke multiple and even contradictory meanings. The various meanings of things, in this case, the meaning of the good Shepard image, may either differ or be contrary to the others. Contrary here implies something has either a negative or a positive connotation.

Moreover, making an analogy from Kinney Dale’s article in which he reflects on the imperial and Christian association of the basilica (here, she opines that there are so many questions to ask concerning the debate on whether the early church basilica was imperial. Some of such questions may include the origins of the building type, and it also entails asking whether these building types have some fixed or contingent associations.⁹³) one would conveniently say that “the meaning of the Good Shepard motif is determined not simply by its formal,

⁹⁰Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 31.

⁹¹ Nicholas Cachia, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10,11) The image of the good shepherd as a source for the spirituality of the ministerial priesthood, Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana Roma 1997, 15.

⁹²Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine & S. Brent Plate (2010) The origin and mission of Material Religion, *Religion*, 40:3, 207-211 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010>.

⁹³ Dale Kinney, “The Church Basilica,” in *Imperial Art as Christian Art-Christian Art as Imperial Art: Expression and Meaning in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Justinian*, Rome, Bardi Editore, 2001, p. 115.

iconographic details, but also by the various cultural contexts (pagan, imperial, Christian) in which it was created and viewed.”⁹⁴

Again, scholars have also viewed the presence of the shepherd figure in the Christian context not to signify Jesus the Good Shepherd necessarily but also to mean philanthropy⁹⁵. As we have already seen, the Shepherd image is an ancient concept and a popular pagan subject adopted by scripture writers. In this regard, the Good Shepherd as we know it today can be traced back to the pagan Hermes as a symbol of philanthropy. In the shepherd, we see some level of personal initiative taken to promote the welfare of the other. The shepherd sacrifices his interest for that of his flock.

Another interpretation scholars have given to the image of the Good Shepherd is to consider it not as representing the Good Shepherd per se but regarding it as worshippers going to offer sacrifice.⁹⁶

3.6 Conclusion

The main interest of interpreting art is to analyze and understand the meaning and significance of works of art, such as the Good Shepherd image. After examining the various elements of the Good Shepherd image, which involved form, style, composition, and subject matter, we identified the broader cultural, historical, and social context from which the image was created. It is in line with the above that we were able to suggest that it is in the interest of a self-conscious historian to attempt to map out a territory while taking into cognizance that there are many ways to get to a particular point/place. The leading role of shepherds as individuals tending sheep is understood by scholars nowadays as a role that can be interpreted, translated, and widely used in every domain of life. Its usability and adaptability can be seen in the fact that the secular, the social, and the religious have adopted this category (of a shepherd)

⁹⁴ Jennifer Awes Freeman, “The Good Shepard and the Enthroned Ruler: A Reconsideration of Imperial Iconography in the Early Church” in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in its Imperial Context*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155j2k5.10>. 159 – 195.

⁹⁵ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, Kindle edition, 5.

⁹⁶ Wright, G. Ernest. “The Good Shepherd.” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 2, no. 4 (1939): 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3209271>.

to represent the ideals of what is expected in each field/domain and, particularly, from their leaders.

This is to say that the different interpretations that may arise from a more profound and careful engagement with a particular image are simply vehicles leading to a better understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the image/artwork. It equally gives us insight into human experience.

4 GEMS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will briefly orient the reader to the study of engraved gems, bearing in mind that precious stones and metals often serve as evidence concerning the art of early times and peoples and their manners and customs⁹⁷. It will proceed by providing definitions of key terms, background on the practice of engraving gems, a brief history of engraved gems in antiquity, a summary of the iconography of engraved gems, a description of some of the uses of engraved gems, and finally a short account of modern scholarship on these artefacts.

4.2 Definitions

What are engraved gems? A good working definition for “gem” is: “Minerals that have been chosen for their beauty and durability then cut and polished for use as human adornment.”⁹⁸ A gemstone is a valuable piece of mineral crystal, usually mined from the ground and often used in jewellery making and other adornments⁹⁹ like finger rings. To this effect, the domain of gemstones is vast (well over 200) and exciting too. It may be divided into two categories, that is, precious and semi-precious. From this perspective, one may then look at an engraved gem to be a precious or semi-precious stone, usually relatively small (not more extensive than a couple of centimetres), that has been “processed and polished so that the top surface of the stone featured the design or motif desired by the artist.”¹⁰⁰ Many such objects have survived from antiquity. “The hard and durable quality of the stones has made for excellent preservation so that we can appreciate in many cases the artist’s work in its original state; a rare

⁹⁷ Julius Wodiska, *A Book of Precious Stones: The Identification of Gems and the Gem Minerals and an Account of their Scientific, Commercial, Artistic, and Historical Aspects*, (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1909) 1.

⁹⁸ Donald Clark, “What is a Gem?” International Gem Society (<https://www.gemsociety.org/article/what-is-a-gem/>). Some specialists distinguish between a “gemstone” (the precious mineral) and a gem (the carved product). See Edwin William Streeter, *Precious Stones and Gems: Their History, Sources and Characteristics*, 5th ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), 2.

⁹⁹ <https://news.thediamondstore.co.uk/gemstones-birthstones/gemstones/the-history-of-gemstones/>.

¹⁰⁰ Idit Sagiv, *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, (Summertown Pavilion/Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2018), 1.

opportunity in classical art.”¹⁰¹Hence, at first sight, its radiance, coupled with its multiple colours, marvels the viewer and constitutes a source of pleasure.

Gem engraving is an ancient or aged-long activity. Cecil Thomas opines that,

The invention of gem engraving is coeval with the dawn of civilization, for whenever man emerged from the savage condition and realized his power of delineating line and form, then would he discover the all-important but childishly simple secret of the art of engraving gems, i.e., that the many beautiful stones that lay around him, ready shaped by Nature, were easily scratched or engraved by sharp splinters of other and harder stones that in equal profusion lay ready to his hand.¹⁰²

Hence, gem engraving is not recent.

Engraved gems are classified as a type of glyptic art (stone carving). Technically speaking, to engrave is to “carve in” (*intaglio* in Italian), but the term equally covers the class of carvings whose image projects (cameos). The made itite craftsmanship depicted in the combination of minute and accurate details cannot go unnoticed¹⁰³. By this, we are saying that they appear in petite sizes yet rival monumental marbles, vases and bronze in terms of artistic skills. Regarding the relatively small size of gems, Pliny the Elder opines that the majestic might of Nature is presented to us contracted in minimal space¹⁰⁴. Though limited in space, gems interpret the needs and expectations of their owners, expressing them visually and are the most intimate testimonies of public and private life in antiquity and the primary medium for the diffusion of classical art¹⁰⁵. These techniques will now be discussed in more detail.

¹⁰¹ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1920), xv.

¹⁰² Cecil Thomas, “Gem Engraving.” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 60, no. 3091 (1912): 359–371. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41340030>.

¹⁰³ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1920), xv.

¹⁰⁴ Pliny the elder, *The Natural History Book XXXVII*, John Bostock et al. (Eds), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D37>.

¹⁰⁵ Maria Elisa Micheli, *Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art*, DOI: 10.18688/aa177-5-48 <http://actual-art.org/files/sb/07/Micheli.pdf>.

4.3 Methods of Engraving Gems

As noted, ancient engraved gems can be divided into two classes based on the technique used to produce them. They appear in form of intaglio, or cameo. The designs of intaglio gems are cut as depressions into the gem's surface. In other words, the carving is incised into the stone. That is, the “design is carved into the flat background of the stone.”¹⁰⁶ It is achieved by grinding away material below the gem's surface, thereby leaving an inverse image or forming a seal capable of taking impressions. The details are obtained by varying the depth of the engraving¹⁰⁷. Figure 4.1 shows a schematic image of an intaglio of a human face.



Figure 4.1 Schematic drawing of a gem (in black) carved as an intaglio, showing the pattern of a human face (in white).

“What’s an Intaglio?” <https://www.myintaglios.com/history/>.

The cameo technique is essentially the opposite of the intaglio: “Whereas the relief in intaglio is incised or incised, that is, cut into the stone by the drill, in the cameo process the drill cuts away the stone to raise the composition in relief.”¹⁰⁸ In effect, cameos are gemstone designs that require the removal of a good quantity of material from precious stones so that, in the end, we have the image projecting out from the gemstone. We might say literarily that cameo means “raised above.” It is a relief feature common in Greece and Rome and can be traced back to Mesopotamia. Figure 4.2 shows a schematic image of a cameo of a human face.

¹⁰⁷ Fred L. Gray, “Engraved Gem: A Historical Perspective,” 192

¹⁰⁸ James David Draper, “Cameo Appearances.” In *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 65, no. 4 (2008): 1–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25434145>.



Figure 4.2 Schematic drawing of a gem (in black) carved as a cameo, showing the pattern of a human face (in black).

“What’s an Intaglio?” <https://www.myintaglios.com/history/>

Early gem cutters executed their task with a limited set of tools and tended to prefer mostly soft stones and metals. As time went on and owing to the shortcomings encountered with the manual method of gem cutting (lack of ability to provide details, no use of lenses and the time-consuming factor), there was a need for innovation. Things began to change, especially with the Greeks, who introduced the use of hardstones. The introduction of hardstones led to the introduction of the hand drill. With this innovation, they made use of abrasive powder and a hand drill. “The technique of engraving harder stones with the aid of a bow-driven drill and cutting wheel was introduced in Etruria sometime in the third quarter of the sixth century BCE.”¹⁰⁹ The use of the cutting wheel is an innovation from the handheld drill. Today's principal methods involve either an edged or flat wheel on a drill.

4.4 Engraved Gems in Antiquity

Gemstones can be located everywhere, but some areas are highly noted to possess these gems in high quantities. Such sites may include the Australian and Mexican fire Opal, the blue sapphire from Kashmir in India, or tanzanite from Tanzania. The practice of gem carving is believed to have its origin in Mesopotamia some five thousand years ago. From here, it gradually spread throughout the near east and other areas. In this spread, we also witness a dramatic change from the classical mythological designs of the Graeco-Roman era to the fourth-century Christian themes.

As the art (gem carving) moved from one society/environment/region to another, the themes depicted on them were adapted to portray the various communities' beliefs, practices,

¹⁰⁹ Ulf R. Hansson, “Engraved Gems.” *The Etruscan World*, in ed. J. MacIntosh Turfa, *The Etruscan World*, (Routledge Worlds), London & New York: Routledge 2013, 977-991 2011. doi:10.4324/9780203526965.CH51.

and everyday life. On these semi-precious stones (the material used often) are carved images/portraits and symbolic, mythological scenes. According to Idit Sagiv, these stones were usually less precious by modern standards. This is evident in the use of quartz, such as garnets. In other words, gem carving in classical antiquity was limited compared to modern gem cutting in material and method. However, in ancient times the semi-precious stones used were processed and polished so that on the surface of the stone would appear a design or motif as desired by the artist¹¹⁰. The beauty of gemstones resides in their embodiment of colour and brilliance and, as such, are very charming, says Idit Sagiv. Helen Guiraud says they are sentimental, social, or financial objects¹¹¹. Julius Wodiska thinks that as precious stones mounted on precious metal, gemstones do not only testify to the artistic prowess of ancient people; that is, they do not only stand as examples of craft in antiquity for example, but they go a long way to exhibit their beliefs and customs¹¹². Gemstones also project themselves as objects of fashion; through them, we can determine the kind of life led by ancient peoples and their shared beliefs and customs. They stand to represent a people's ethos. Hence, they represent societies in numerous ways or from different angles¹¹³. Pawet says that "it is plausible that gems show general trends as well as illustrate individual and private acts of those involved in politics and social affairs since they were objects of strictly personal use."¹¹⁴ It thus gives room for analysis which may lead to a snapshot of the people's beliefs, everyday life, and ideologies.

Gemstones are used for several reasons, some of which may include jewellery making. This is probably owing to their beauty. They have also been used for decorative purposes, weaponry, amulets, good-luck charms, healing, medicinal purposes, barter, display of wealth, status and power and religious symbols¹¹⁵. The oldest jewellery made of gemstone dates as far back as 25,000 years. Over the years, this activity has dramatically evolved. It appears to have been the most crucial mark of identification. "The earliest engraved gems evolved from amulets

¹¹⁰ Idit Sagiv, *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 13.

¹¹¹ Hélène Guiraud, "Intaglios from Dura-Europos." *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 1992, 48–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40514347>.

¹¹² Julius Wodiska, *A Book of Precious Stones: The Identification of Gems and the Gem Minerals and an Account of their Scientific, Commercial, Artistic, and Historical Aspects*, 1.

¹¹³ Pawet Gotyźniak, *Engraved Gems, and Propaganda in the Roman Republic and under Augustus*, (Summertown Pavilion/Oxford; Archaeopress Publishing LTD., 2020), 1. ISBN 978-1-78969-540-3 (e-Pdf).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ https://anpeateliercph.com/files/Types-of-Gemstones-Booklet_Printing.pdf.

on which gods, as well as everyday images such as animals, were carved”¹¹⁶ to seals or individual symbols, thereby personifying them. In this personification, the notion of engraved gems as seals has its roots. The engraved gems stood as symbols to identify their owners and could be used as a mark on the property.

4.5 Forms of engraved gems

The study of gems, as seen in the present day, is more scientific than it was before. Scientific in the sense that geologists, for example, are now taking the lead role in mining these precious stones. In so doing, their use of technical terms is not very friendly to the ordinary person. That is to say, the terms used by geologists are, to some extent, difficult to comprehend by a non-geologist. However, following in the same line of thought as Lisbet Thoresen, we believe that the scientific approach will hinder us from considering the artistic character of these gemstones and prevent us from looking into their mythological as well as their historical perspectives. In so doing, and given that we are dealing with ancient times and objects, we are therefore opting for a more general approach to this study. The general approach is more concerned with gems' physical (material from which they are made, what and how they are used, techniques involved, etc.) aspects. Moreover, the classification of gems in antiquity is inspired by empirical observations. Gem taxonomy is based on observed features (colour, toughness, hardness, lustre, transparency, shape, etc.).

4.6 Gem Engraving Technique

The art of gem engraving is very famous, thanks to the beauty of the final product. “Gem-cutting requires no built structures, the basic equipment of the gem-engraver being more or less limited to a cutting wheel, drill-heads of various shapes and sizes, and a bow for rotating the drill.”¹¹⁷ The rule from its very beginnings has always been that “a harder stone will cut a softer one.”¹¹⁸ This rule forms the basis of the technique of gem engraving. She adds, “Only soft stones and metals can be worked for the free hand with cutting tools; the harder stones require the wheel technique.”¹¹⁹ The Babylonians practised this method as early as 1500 BC.

¹¹⁶ https://anpeateliercph.com/files/Types-of-Gemstones-Booklet_Printing.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Ulf R., Hansson, “Engraved Gems”, 929.

¹¹⁸ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xv.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The Minoans later copied it. With the wheel technique, stones are carved into various shapes with the help of a rotating wheel. That is, stones are made to rotate with the help of the wheel.¹²⁰ Scholars are more particular about the use of wheels in gem engraving in ancient times by virtue of the fact that these ancient people were well-versed in the use of wheels in making pottery. Before 1000 B.C., artisans in Greece and on the island of Crete had developed techniques for cutting and engraving hard stones using a bronze drill, as in Mycenaen times, wherein cutting was most often done with bronze or copper. However, these skills were lost, and for the next several hundred years, the Greeks could only carve gems by hand from soft stones, such as serpentine, steatite, limestone, lapis and ivory. In the 500s B.C., the Greeks again learned how to carve hard stones using abrasive powders and drills powered by wheels.

The engraved gem familiar to the Egyptians was in the form of the scarab and was mainly used as amulets or for funeral purposes. Cecil Thomas thinks that in as much as there might have been some differences in technique, there was some point of convergence following the implement used in production, which was the sharp splinter of stone or chisel of metal. He writes, “This stone point would invariably be a splinter of corundum or emery mounted on the end of a suitable handle and used like a chisel to incise the engraving.”¹²¹ We are not very confident with the method used by the ancient. However, given that they made use of wheels in making pottery, it is possible that they also used them in gem engraving¹²².

Nowadays, the stone to be engraved is fastened to a handle, held to the rotating drill's head, and moved as the work requires. The wheels used in present times are either hand-driven or driven by an electric motor lathe.

Regarding the tools, we may speculate that the tools used in ancient times were essentially the same as those used today. Those used by contemporary engravers have their endings in balls, disks, and cylinders and are of all sizes ranging from about a quarter of an inch to a pinpoint.¹²³

¹²⁰ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, 1.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, li.

4.7 Greek and Roman Engraved Gems

The Greeks and Romans used less precious stones, such as rubies and diamonds. Greek and Roman gems were made from semi-precious stones like agate and quartz. Out of these semi-precious stones, gems were produced and worn with the hope they might give the wearer good luck or good health. Some in Rome, for example, were worn to prevent or cure drunkenness. However, Greek and Roman gems are among the most precious objects left to us by antiquity. “The study of Greek and Roman gems is the study of classical art in miniature.”¹²⁴ Classical Greek and Roman gems followed the prevalent style and stayed in line with the subject of representation which was mythology and daily life of the Greeks.¹²⁵ The art of engraving is foreign to Greece and Italy. However, most Roman gems were either brought in from Greece or were copies of Greek gems. Some Greek artists also moved to Rome and continued their production while there. The earliest Greek engraved gem dates back about 2500 years. Roman gems are said to have experienced a reset in a reliquary and other items around the Middle Ages. Some were treasured by the high ecclesiastics and influential laypeople who had them set in their personal seals.

The absence of very fine lines in ancient gems, such as those found on Hellenistic and Roman, raises worries about whether the diamond point was actually used in ancient times. The cutting of the gem was closely followed by its polishing. From the degree of polishing, we can also determine the gem's origin. For pre-Hellenic gems, the engraving was either left dull the polish was confined to the larger surfaces. The Etruscan scarabs were highly polished. Very detailed gems were also highly polished during the Hellenic and the Graeco-Roman periods. Modern-day polishing takes two forms. There is a different polish for the outside and another for the inside. They use diamond powder and oil for the outside, while the inside is polished with Tripoli powder mixed with water¹²⁶.

4.8 Materials Used for Ancient Gems

It is a little bit difficult to lay hands on all the material that the ancients might have used for engraving. However, it is very evident that they favoured quartz over every other mineral

¹²⁴ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xvi.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, xvii.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, lii.

available to them. The possible explanation here is that quartz could produce both intaglios and cameos. Moreover, quartz has beautiful colours and can be finely polished.¹²⁷ They also used harder precious and inferior varieties such as reddish carnelian, sard, greenish and translucent plasma, green jasper, rock crystal, garnets, etc.

4.9 Uses of Engraved Gems

Engraved gemstones have long been an object of interest to both the average person and scholars alike. They are too fascinating to the point that whosoever cannot ignore them. From the Greek and Roman era, gemstones were used for three primary purposes: seals, jewellery, and amulets¹²⁸. Edwin William Streeter maintains that “their transparency and dazzling beauty, their hardness and crystalline forms, must naturally have always excited wonder and induced men to treasure them as amulets, if not to use them as personal ornaments.¹²⁹” Gems are not only valuable as personal ornaments, but they are also a sign of status, rich in meaning and having even thaumaturgical effects¹³⁰. Initially, one may be tempted to think that this too much attention is due to artistic expertise. In fact, this may apply to some collectors/persons. But then the fact is that these gems, which were produced from precious or semi-precious stones, were produced not only for their beauty or show of artistic prowess but also for more significant reasons. These precious and semi-precious stones may include carnelian, agate, jasper, chalcedony, rocky crystal, amethyst, garnet, and sapphire. According to Pliny, through material and figuration, gems act as a relevant guide to show the articulation and transformation of ancient societies¹³¹ as they were worn mounted on finger rings, necklaces etc. Their material, size and colour usually reflect the owner’s wealth. Given the diverse reasons for which gems were used, we may want to split their uses into two. It's either they were produced as functional objects (having a function), or they were produced as objects of fashion.

¹²⁷ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, lv.

¹²⁸ Idit Sagiv, *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 7.

¹²⁹ Edwin William Streeter, *Precious Stones, and Gems: Their History, Sources and Characteristics*, 5th ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), 9.

¹³⁰ Maria Elisa Micheli, *Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art*, DOI: 10.18688/aa177-5-48 <http://actual-art.org/files/sb/07/Micheli.pdf>.

¹³¹ Maria Elisa Micheli, *Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art*, 484.

It should be noted that the use of gems for whatever purpose did not necessarily require them to be engraved. However, in some cases, engraved gems possessed different qualities than those without images; some even went as far as prescribing images to be engraved on certain gemstones.¹³²

The functional or practical use of gems is the oldest purpose for which they were produced.¹³³ Gemstones first served as seals for making impressions on soft material (clay, wax) as a mark of distinction. In fact, Idit Sagiv maintains that the primary purpose known for engraved gems was to be used as seals.¹³⁴ As seals, they were used to imprint the wearer's chosen design, thus identifying the owner as a form of signature. From symbolizing the owner or wearer as an individual, they fast turned into seals with which he might mark his property¹³⁵, authenticate documents, contracts, wills etc. with the Greeks, for example, seals were used on room doors, closets, basements where their supplies were kept, and also on boxes where valuables were stored. These seals were intended to be a mark of identification and securing the property. "A seal was considered a powerful metaphor of an individual and as that individual's relationship with the surrounding world."¹³⁶ The use of seals made more sense given that this was a period in which many people were illiterates, and so, making signs of identification on things appears to have been a better means of communication. Richter maintains that "They took the place of Yale keys and combination locks; for the Greek and Roman householder would guard against the infidelity of his slaves by placing his seal on the doors of chambers and closets in which he kept his jewellery, his secret papers, his supplies, and other precious belongings."¹³⁷ Seals correspond to modern security codes, biometric authentication devices, and signatures.¹³⁸

¹³² Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, (Summertown Pavilion/Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2018). ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=6628658>.

¹³³ Henry Middleton, *The Engraved Gems of Classical Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 1.

¹³⁴ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 7.

¹³⁵ Fred L. Gray, *Engraved Gems: A historical perspective in Gem and Gemology*, 191.

¹³⁶ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 21.

¹³⁷ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xix.

¹³⁸ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 8.

There existed individual as well as official seals. For example, the seal owned by Augustus, which carried his portrait, was used by later emperors as the imperial seal of Rome. Pliny also reports that the seal bearing the head of Claudius was used as a ticket to gain access to imperial presence.¹³⁹ Finger rings, according to some scholars, are a modification of the cylindrical seals which were first worn attached to the neck or the arm. And so the Egyptians, at some point, used these cylindrical seals as signet rings when they were reduced in size¹⁴⁰.

It should be noted during the second and third centuries, and these rings were not regarded or called signet rings. The term signet is believed to be a recent development (second half of the thirteenth century). And so, signet rings date from the early Greeks when army commanders wore iron rings to symbolise victory.¹⁴¹ It is also known that ancient Egyptians were the first people to wear and use signet rings or seal rings regularly.¹⁴²

As mentioned above, gems were also used in place of signatures and, as such, were worn on the clothing of the bearer, attached to a thong around his wrist or neck, and later mounted on rings. Gisela shares this view by saying, “Many ancient sealings of all periods have been found, chiefly in clay, and the ancient writers often refer to this practice.”¹⁴³ Examples of this are in Mesopotamia and the Graeco-Roman era, especially during the Minoan and Mycenaean periods. Babylonians were noted for owning signet rings used as rolling stamps. Their appearance on any document made that document authentic. Henry Middleton thinks that in ancient times when writing was still rare, hard stones or jewels with names engraved on them were of particular importance as they authenticated documents.¹⁴⁴ The seal was also used to attest to a spoken message. These precious stones engraved with an official personal insignia were also used to establish ownership and safeguard the privacy of rooms, cupboards, and letters¹⁴⁵. Such a ring could be entrusted by the king/emperor to a trusted individual to use in

¹³⁹ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, xxiv.

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth J. Roop, *History and meaning of symbolic rings*, (Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, 2011). 2.

¹⁴¹ <https://www.signetcircle.com.au/blogs/the-short-story-of-signet-rings/45263940-the-story-of-signet-rings>.

¹⁴² <https://vintagetom.co.uk/blogs/news/a-history-of-signet-rings>.

¹⁴³ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, (Summertown Pavilion/Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nzw6v>.

¹⁴⁴ Henry Middleton, *The Engraved Gems of Classical Times*, 1.

¹⁴⁵ Giada Damen, “Antique Engraved Gems and Renaissance Collectors,” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gems/hd_gems.htm. (March 2013).

his absence. Henry Middleton adds, "The signet ring of the king was commonly regarded as an authoritative symbol of his power, which he could delegate to a subject by entrusting to him the royal seal, with permission to use it"¹⁴⁶. In Genesis chapter 41:41-44, Pharaoh removes and entrusts his ring to Joseph. He says, "I hereby put you in charge of the entire land of Egypt."¹⁴⁷This indicates that Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of Egypt. Hence, rings, engraved gems, and seals symbolize individual identity (symbolizing the owner), authority, a ritual act, or an official seal.

It is worth mentioning here that carvings made in the early beginnings of this art were not as complex as those we found later. This quality of individuality exhibited by gems significantly helps distinguish them from other monuments and gives them much of their charm¹⁴⁸. It is believed that in about 3000BC, the Sumerians and the Hittites engaged in engraving, which to them was a means to display wealth, given that these gemstones belonged to individuals¹⁴⁹. They were quickly transformed into an identification instrument of the individual who could be the owner or just a wearer. An owner could use the gem in the form of a seal and hence use it to identify the user's property. The wearer probably has a lot of admiration and perhaps pays allegiance to the figure represented or carved on the gemstone. This is the case with individuals carrying gems engraved with the image of the good shepherd. The image does not belong to an individual but speaks or represents something special for the individual.

Engraved gems did not only serve as seals. Just as is the case nowadays, gems were equally used as amulets. To define an amulet in the broadest sense,

...an amulet is any object which, by its contact or its proximity to the person who owns it, or to any possession of his, exerts power for his good, either by keeping evil from him and his property or by endowing him with positive advantages... the material of an

¹⁴⁶Giada Damen, "Antique Engraved Gems and Renaissance Collectors," In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gems/hd_gems.htm. (March 2013).

¹⁴⁷ Genesis 41:41.

¹⁴⁸ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xxii.

¹⁴⁹ Gisela M. A. Richter, "The subjects on roman engraved gems their derivation, style and meaning." *Revue Archéologique*, no. 2 (1968): 279–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41007042>.

amulet may be of any sort, animal, vegetable, all mineral, and the amulet maker does not shrink from using the most repulsive matter for his purpose, herein resembling the medicineman; in fact, one can scarcely draw a line between popular materia medica and the things that we are believed to be useful as amulets.¹⁵⁰

They were believed to possess qualities that could serve man's immediate needs. They were thought to have some exceptional powers. This belief stems from some primitive conceptions of the mind, which believe that supernatural powers may be inherent in some person, animal, or material object or reside there at least temporarily¹⁵¹. So different stones had different or overlapping attributes. For instance, a diamond was believed to be endowed with the mystical power of providing strength to its wearer and protecting against ghosts and magic¹⁵². "Jasper and agate have been ascribed the power to cure disease, as well as being talismanic and possessing protective qualities."¹⁵³ They were believed in ancient times and even nowadays to have curative and protective power. Some gems were engraved particularly with religious themes and appeared mainly in the form of intaglios. As we saw seals, gems that acted as amulets were also "worn, perhaps sewn into clothing, worn on a string around the neck, or somewhere else."¹⁵⁴ The magical strength believed to be found in gems emanates from the ancient tradition of gems having a secret relationship with the stars due to their radiance. Pliny has some reservations about the belief in the strength of gems. However, he still maintains that some gems are liable to have varied effects on the wearer or user. He maintains that the healing power of gems may be experienced if crushed and drunks or worn as amulets¹⁵⁵. According to him, wearing engraved gems made it possible to ward off evil forces, counter poison and promote a good cause.¹⁵⁶ Sagiv, on his part, opines that, in most cases, it is difficult to decipher

¹⁵⁰ Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical amulets chiefly Greco-Egyptian*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 2.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/science/gemstone>.

¹⁵³ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 11.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Pliny the elder, *The Natural History Book XXXVII*, John Bostock et al. (Eds), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D37>.

what was the magical purpose of the gem. Still, sometimes the inscription helps to associate the device with a particular type of magical action.¹⁵⁷

They also served as ornaments. The Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans refined the art of making ornamental rings. The use of engraved seals at some point in time experienced a decline. With this decline, engraved seals lost the status of a significant art form¹⁵⁸. The outcome was the adoption of engraved gems by the middle class for a different purpose - fashion. The combination of precious material and an artistic representation gives an engraved gem its charm, its beauty. These rings were made from gold, silver, ivory, amber, and iron¹⁵⁹. Again, for rings adorned with gems, the variety of colours and the glittering stones are enough attraction to the people (gem cutters, owners, users and reusers), a dominant feature of the first century B.C. Hellenistic works, for example, were their extraordinary variety brought about by the availability of a wide range of gems and enhanced by novel forms and styles. The engraved gem looks more beautiful, presentable, and charming than primitive. This ornamental character was particular for public and religious purposes. For the purpose of beauty, they were used to decorate the backs of books, works of goldsmiths, crosses etc. The women were allowed to wear rings of all kinds for ornamentation or use “in sealing the household goods entrusted to a wife’s care”.¹⁶⁰

4.10 The iconography of engraved gems

The range of motifs depicted on gemstones is extensive, and the standard of gem engraving as we may have in later periods, was set in classical antiquity. What I understand by the iconography of the engraved gem is that it is concerned with the specific symbols, motifs, and themes depicted on these gems. In most cases, they are a reflection of the cultural and historic or daily life activities that are depicted on these gems. The iconography of engraved gems is vast. Ritual scenes were very common in Mesopotamian gems. Egyptian gems favoured inscriptions, while in ancient Greece and Rome, inspiration was gotten from daily life. They

¹⁵⁷ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Fred L. Gray, *Engraved Gems: A historical perspective in Gem and Gemology*, 1983, pp 191-201. <https://www.gia.edu/doc>.

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth J. Roop, *History and meaning of symbolic rings*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ George Frederick Kuntz, *Rings for the finger*, (New York: Dover, 1973) 13-14.

made use of pictorial scenes, via which mythological figures, scenes, and many others are depicted. Sagiv thinks that most of the depictions on gems are borrowed from the Greek and Roman artistic stock, and so these depictions feature the same gods, myths and scenes from everyday life but in a concise manner.

Given that the depictions on gems were inspired by everyday life, it wouldn't be strange that the depiction of animals and, by extension, the image of the Good Shepherd on gemstones was ubiquitous. The Good Shepherd and the many interpretations attributed to the images are glaring examples of those depictions. When Christian iconography became more prevalent during the medieval period, engraved gems started carrying Biblical scenes, including depictions of saints and others. The gems interpret the needs and expectations of their owners while expressing them visually.¹⁶¹

The iconography of gems is similar to that of coins though more varied¹⁶². Since engraved gems are smaller than coins and very portable, they were valued more because of their beauty and messages about classical antiquity¹⁶³. Added value came from gem carvers using little space to communicate more than we imagined. Both can be considered the primary medium for the diffusion of classical art. They are very portable and can be given out as gifts, as means of propaganda, or even as personal tale-memory.¹⁶⁴ In as much as there is some semblance in the iconography of coins and gems, gems were more valued given the degree of professionalism involved with engraving them. However, it is interesting to note that the depictions on gems are often more detailed than those on coins. They are known to be an extraordinary means of expressing personal beliefs and trends, religious and political ideologies deriving from ancient artistic stock. The depictions on most ancient gems portray animals, famous statues, Gods, and mythological scenes. "Figurations on a gem — carved or in relief — offer an impressive stock-repertory of subjects and compositional schemes. They mirror the major arts and can anticipate what happens in later centuries in stylistic and iconographical

¹⁶¹ Maria Elisa Micheli, "Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art," 484.

¹⁶² Wikipedia. 2023. "Engraved gem." Wikimedia Foundation. Last modified February 20, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engraved_gem.

¹⁶³ Kirsten A. Piacenti, John Boardman, *Ancient and Modern Gems and Jewels: In the collection of Her Majesty the Queen*. (London: Royal Collection Enterprises Limited, 2008), 31.

¹⁶⁴ Maria Elisa Micheli, "Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art," 484.

tastes.¹⁶⁵” Monograms were not common, so the initials of the owners’ names might scarcely appear on a gem compared to the pictorial representation. Gems interpret the needs and expectations of their owners. Thus, the iconography of gems is very rich. On engraved gems could be found depictions of mythological scenes and heroes, animals, faces of emperors, favourite deities, and symbols. “Sometimes it commemorated a glorious event in the family or a personal deed of valour, or it was a portrait of an ancestor, friend, or leader.”¹⁶⁶

The gems were usually set in gold, silver, or bronze mounts, sometimes on plain bands or occasionally with more intricate designs. While many have lost their original mounts, some can still be found in their ancient settings¹⁶⁷.

One important thing that we need to consider is the design choice of the gem. It is already clear that the depictions of gems were gotten from mythological and everyday life scenes. So, it is evident that we should see a visual design in such a depiction.

The choice was apparently oftenest a favourite deity, or mythological hero, or animal, or symbol; sometimes, it commemorated a glorious event in the family or a personal deed of valour, or it was the portrait of an ancestor, or friend, or leader. Often, again, there would be no special relevancy—but the design would be a beautiful composition that appealed to individual taste.¹⁶⁸

4.11 Method of attribution

Chronology and attribution of gems to some workshops and, of course, the datable archaeological context have always been a complex notch to crack for both historians of art and archaeologists. However, Jeffrey Spier believes that “consistencies in style and iconography and, most notably, the shapes and materials of the gems afford considerable evidence to determine their approximate dates.”¹⁶⁹ Summarily, one may deduce from Spier that it is possible

¹⁶⁵ Maria Elisa Micheli, “Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art,” 484.

¹⁶⁶ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1920), xxii.

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.christies.com/features/ancient-engraved-gems-collecting-guide-12550-3.aspx>.

¹⁶⁸ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1920), xxi.

¹⁶⁹ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem*, (Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden 2007), p 12.

to situate a gem based on the categories of style, quality of the engraving, shape and material of the stone used, the fashion of the jewellery on which the gem is mounted (pendants, rings or earrings) and the theme of the motif on the gem.

4.12 Scholarship on Engraved Gems

Our knowledge of ancient gems is drawn mainly from the surviving objects, but some ancient authors discussed them. And a large body of modern scholarship on gems has grown out of collectors describing their gem collections in catalogues.

Pliny the Elder discusses the subject of gems in book 37 of his *Natural History*. It is probably a marvel how “Nature's grandeur is gathered together within the narrowest limits, and in¹⁷⁰ the domain of hers evokes more wonder, and the elegance of gem. Hence, many people find that the single gemstone alone is enough to provide them with a supreme and perfect aesthetic experience of the wonders of Nature.”¹⁷¹ Through this book, we can know those highly valued gems in ancient Rome. Pliny listed and structured into categories those precious stones now regarded as information carriers. They now serve to link antiquity to the modern day. Much of the information therein seems to exist thanks to Pliny’s transcription. And so, for Pliny to be able to appreciate or determine the value of an ancient Roman gem, there is a need to know its origin.

More relevant to our interest is the writing of Clement of Alexandria, considering his input in this field. His contributions towards the origin and interpretation of the earliest Christian art remain significant. Clement of Alexandria has extensively discussed appropriate or inappropriate images for Christian men's signet rings. In *Paedagogos* 3.59.2, Clement writes as follows:

The Word, then, permits...a finger-ring of gold. Nor is this for ornament, but for sealing things which are worth keeping safe in the house in the exercise of their charge of housekeeping. ...And if it is necessary for us, while engaged in public business, or discharging other avocations in the country, and often away from our wives, to seal

¹⁷⁰ Natural History (Rackham, Jones, & Eichholz)/Book 37. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Natural_History_\(Rackham,_Jones,_%26_Eichholz\)/Book_37](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Natural_History_(Rackham,_Jones,_%26_Eichholz)/Book_37).

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*

anything for the sake of safety, He (the Word) allows us a signet for this purpose only. Other finger-rings are to be cast off since, according to the Scripture, instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man. Sirach 21:21 ...And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship's anchor, which Seleucus got engraved as a device; and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to delineate the faces of idols, we who are prohibited to cleave to them; nor a sword, nor a bow, following as we do, peace; nor drinking-cups, being temperate.¹⁷²

Clement then gives us evidence that some Christians wore rings with images in the third century. And, at least for Clement, some images were better for Christians than others. This is not to say that he has created some fixed boundaries but has attempted to guide the viewer in their dialogue with the viewed. Clement's view on the kind of images used on signet rings differs from what obtains today, wherein there is a quest for a text to back the image used. For Clement, the meaning of images used on rings should stem from either ritual, liturgical or experiential elements of Christianity¹⁷³. "To understand early Christian art, we must divest ourselves not only of modern theological presumptions but also modern viewing habits and prejudices."¹⁷⁴

In the modern period, collectors of rings have often given us descriptions of ancient rings. Philip von Stosch (1691-1757) made a career as a dealer, researcher, and collector of intaglios and cameos (engraved gems), which are now mainly in Berlin and his large books on the subject. He amassed about 3500 original engraved gems and glass pastes, which were sold after his death in 1764 to the king of Prussia. "He was known to scholars and collectors all over Europe, many of whom visited him in Florence and examined his treasure",¹⁷⁵ which was superior to that of the king of France. Johann Michael Adolf Furtwangler (1853-1907) presents

¹⁷² The translation is from William Wilson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2. (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). For analysis of this passage, see James A. Francis, Clement of Alexandria on Signet Rings: Reading an Image at the Dawn of Christian Art," *Classical Philology* 98 (2003) 179-183.

¹⁷³ The translation is from William Wilson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2. (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). For analysis of this passage, see James A. Francis, Clement of Alexandria on Signet Rings: Reading an Image at the Dawn of Christian Art," *Classical Philology* 98 (2003) 179-183.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Dorothy MacKay Quynn, "Philipp von Stosch: Collector, Bibliophile, Spy, Thief (1611-1757)" in *The Catholic Historical Review*, Oct. 1941, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Oct. 1941), pp. 332- 344. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25014047>.

a major comprehensive restructuring of the whole preserved corpus of ancient engraved gems and cameos based on new typological and stylistic criteria which Furtwangler developed and applied systematically to facilitate classification and distinguish ancient originals from the numerous modern copies and fakes that had undermined collecting and study for generations. He ignored, for the most part, the later Roman period and made considerable contributions to the classification of Greek and Roman gems.¹⁷⁶

Campbell Bonner (1876-1954) studied especially magical gems. Bonner is inspired by the fact scholars have not often treated them well. To him, how these magical gems have often been displayed and interpreted is proof of their neglect, and this might stem from the fact that they are often poorly executed and hence of less value. One other essential factor which he highlights as a probable reason for this neglect is that these magical gems do not fall within “within the province of any single specialist, and their subject is foreign”¹⁷⁷ He defines an amulet as “any object which by its contact or its proximity to the person who owns it, or to any possession of his, exerts power for his good, either by keeping evil from him and his property or by endowing him with positive advantages.”¹⁷⁸ There is an extensive database with images and descriptions of magical gems, The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database (<http://cbd.mfab.hu/>).

4.13 Conclusions

From these ancient and modern literary sources, along with the evidence of the gems themselves, we have a good knowledge of the production and uses of gems (decorative adornment, sealing, magical protection). And we now have a solid context for talking about the Good Shepherd ring from Caesarea.

¹⁷⁶ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem*, p 8.

¹⁷⁷ Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets: Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, vii.

¹⁷⁸ <http://cbd.mfab.hu/bibliography/30>.

5 THE CAESAREA GOOD SHEPHERD RING AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

Having examined the image of the good shepherd in literature and material culture and explored the manufacture and use of gems, we can move on to discuss the Good Shepherd ring recently found off the coast of Caesarea Maritima. The ring was one of several artefacts that the Israel Antiquities Authority reported as finds from the excavation of two shipwrecks off the coast of Caesarea in December 2021.¹⁷⁹ The IAA describes the ring as “a thick octagonal gold ring set with a green gemstone carved with a figure of a young shepherd boy dressed in a tunic and bearing a ram or sheep on his shoulders.”¹⁸⁰ The ring appears to be in excellent condition (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2).

¹⁷⁹<https://www.timesofisrael.com/underwater-treasure-1700-year-old-coins-among-shipwrecked-items-found-off-caesarea.com>

¹⁸⁰ “IAA survey off the coast of Caesarea recovers treasure from two ancient shipwrecks,” (<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/general/iaa-recovers-treasure-from-two-ancient-shipwrecks-22-december-2021>)



Figure 5.1: Gold ring with engraved gem found off the coast of Caesarea.
(The Daily Mail, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-10336363/Stunning-Good-Shepard-ring-depicts-young-Jesus-holding-Roman-era-shipwrecks.html>)



Figure 5.2 Gold ring with engraved gem found off the coast of Caesarea.

(Image source: *The Daily Mail*, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-10336363/Stunning-Good-Shepard-ring-depicts-young-Jesus-holding-Roman-era-shipwrecks.html>)

This chapter will discuss the form of the ring and what we can know about its archaeological context.

5.2 The Form of the Ring

The octagonal ring style was one of many styles used for ancient rings. Octagonal rings are found with and without inset gems. We could compare the form of the Caesarea Good Shepherd ring with a piece in the British Museum (AF.205; see Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3 Octagonal gold ring in the British Museum.

(AF.205; image source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-205)

It does not hold a gem; instead, it has a Latin inscription, ARGYR VIVAS, which means “Argyrius, may you live.” This ring has been assigned to a date of “3rdC-4thC” by the British Museum. It is possible that the octagonal shape could help us to discover the date the ring was made. The editors of another octagonal ring (flat and less similar to the Caesarea ring) in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston have stated that:

Simple octagonal rings along these lines have usually been dated to the third or fourth century, but there is little firm archaeological support for this chronology. Two octagonal rings in the Rhineland have, however, been found in contexts that suggest a date in the third century. Both of these rings have flat sides. The curving, concave facets that the Boston ring seems originally to have displayed can be paralleled in another archaeological context datable in the third century; a ring with twelve concave facets, as well as another octagonal ring with flat sides, has appeared in a recently published hoard of metal work from Veillon, France. The hoard can be dated in A.D. 266 or shortly thereafter from the literally thousands of coins it contained.¹⁸¹

From the above few examples, one may reason inductively to guess that the octagonal shapes of rings were a thing of the third century. This implies that the octagonal gold ring found in the waters of Caesarea is most probably from the third century.

5.3 The imagery on the Gem

The image of the good shepherd is engraved in a blue-green gem and mounted on the golden ring. We can see the familiar features noted in Chapter 2—the youthful figure in a tunic with the animal over the shoulders. There are some differences, and the boots are well below the knee. The ring's exact size is unknown, but news reports say it is small and speculate it may have belonged to a woman.¹⁸²

We can compare the image of the gem in the Caesarea ring to the image of the gem from the Vatican Museums, which was assigned to the fourth century (see Figure 5.4):

¹⁸¹ Annewies van den Hoek, Denis Feissel, and John J. Herrmann. “Lucky Wearers: A Ring in Boston and a Greek Epigraphic Tradition of Late Roman and Byzantine Times.” *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 6 (1994): 41–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20519762>.

¹⁸² Livia Gershon, “Early Christian Ring Found in Third-Century Shipwreck Off of Israel,” (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/early-christian-ring-found-in-third-century-shipwreck-near-Israel-180979282/>) 23 December 2021.



Figure 5.4 compares an incised gem from the Vatican Museums (MV.60529.0.0) with the incised gem from Caesarea Maritima.

(image sources: <https://catalogo.museivaticani.va/index.php/Detail/objects/MV.60529.0.0> and <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-10336363/Stunning-Good-Shepard-ring-depicts-young-Jesus-holding-Roman-era-shipwrecks.html>)

We can see that the gem in the Caesarea ring is more carefully executed. The Caesarea gem is a more regular shape, and the incised lines are more neatly cut. Only the shepherd and the sheep are present, whereas the Vatican gem has a short inscription in Greek, decorations on the border, and another animal (a dog) to the right of the shepherd figure. The poses are similar, and the incising of the sheep is very similar. The Vatican gem has features that allow us to identify it as Christian. The Greek letters IX stand for Ἰησοῦς χριστός , Jesus Christ. But the Caesarea gem does not have such an inscription and so is more ambiguous. Another gem that shows the Good Shepherd but that is more clearly Christian is a gem in the British Museum (1856,0425.10) that combines the Good Shepherd with other more clearly Christian images (see Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5: Engraved gem at the British Museum (1856,0425.10), showing Jonah, the Good Shepherd, and Daniel.

(image source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1856-0425-10)

Here, we can see figures that can be identified as the prophet Jonah, a boat, the sea monster (left), a dove and the Good Shepherd (centre), and probably Daniel between two lions (right). It is assigned a date in the 3rd or 4th century. It is more clearly Christian than the Caesarea Good Shepherd gem. But we are told by Jeffrey Spier that:

Aside from the fish and anchor, the most popular image on seals of the third and early fourth centuries was the Good Shepherd. The shepherd is nearly always shown standing frontally with a sheep carried over his shoulders, as is so often found in early catacomb paintings in Rome and on a wide variety of other small objects of the later third and fourth centuries. Christians would have viewed the image as a reference to Jesus, who explicitly calls himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18) and also tells the parable of the shepherd searching for the lost sheep, which accords well with the image on the gems: “when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices” (Luke 15:5). Not

all images of shepherds in Roman art of the third century need be Christian, as is evident from a number of sarcophagi primarily from Rome, but the gems do all have a consistency of style that suggests they are closely related in origin. That they were indeed made for Christians is demonstrated by the frequent appearance of subsidiary symbols with explicit religious significance, including the fish, the anchor, the chi-rho monogram, and occasionally the name Jesus or Christ. A very high percentage of the surviving gems, around a third, bear these additional symbols or inscriptions.¹⁸³

The words Spier uses are fascinating. He says, "Christians would have viewed the image as a reference to Jesus." So it might be that we should not say the ring is or is not Christian. It could be viewed differently by different people.

5.4 The Archaeological Context

The typical person on the streets may look at material objects and think that material objects do not speak and are thus mute. Following the claim that material objects do not speak, there seems to be no possibility of understanding these material objects unless descriptive words accompany them. We do accept that most, if not all, material objects of the past do not make statements of themselves. For this reason, it seems practically impossible to make categorical statements about these material objects by simply looking at them. The study of material remains falls in the domain of archaeology. But to look at objects by themselves is not archaeology at all. The meaning of an object can only be obtained through carefully interpreting the object's archaeological context. In Simple terms, "archaeology is the study of people in the past, their activities and actions, cultural practices, tools and technological development, and in some cases (where possible) their superstitious and religious practices, expression of their cultural identity and other beliefs about themselves or the world around them"¹⁸⁴. This definition of archaeology makes us understand that archaeology involves much more than we can or might have imagined. Archaeology is concerned with finding objects in layers and other

¹⁸³ Jeffrey Spier, "Engraved Gems and Amulets," in Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2018), 141-149, quotation at 143-144.

¹⁸⁴ Matthew Mason, "Archaeology: Examining Its Past and the Future" in Environmental Science.org, <https://www.environmentalscience.org/archaeology>.

contexts (rooms, sites, pits, burials) so that their dates and meaning can be interpreted.”¹⁸⁵ What we can make of this is that once the context of an object is known, that object is no longer mute. In the case of the Good Shepherd ring, only some general information is publicly available now. The find has not yet been fully published; however, in our quest to unmute this object, we will use the little available information to make some observations. Here, we are relying much on the archaeological context of the discovery. We have seen above that the meaning of any object can be brought about by studying its context. Focusing on the context in which art is created and or experienced, we can be led to understand art's historical, social, political, and maybe economic existence.

It should be noted here that we can't possibly be categorical on the idea of the context of every art in our attempt to bring about a complete comprehension of their meaning. Notwithstanding, it is a truism that the material remains of the past provide a common focus for the work of all archaeologists in their endeavour to recount the past, which will, in turn, help us to understand and explain the historical conditions that govern people's lives as they unfolded. The point here is archaeology has long evolved from treasure hunting in its early days to be a sophisticated social science with far-reaching explanations of human behaviour¹⁸⁶. Hence, the archaeologist is not only interested in artefacts but is also concerned with several other things. To this effect, “the interpretation of meaning is constrained by the interpretation of context.”¹⁸⁷ It concerns the important things, where they were found, and what else was with them. The context of an archaeological discovery may be regarded as its setting. Therefore, we can make an archaeological interpretation from the combination of the setting/context and the other objects found in connection to the object in question. This context may be burial sites, discarded refuse, ancient buildings, ritual sites, or water, as with the Caesarea ring. ‘Heritage’ and the management of cultural resources are essential components of how we live today.”¹⁸⁸ To this effect, recovering artefacts from secure archaeological contexts gives an invaluable

¹⁸⁵ Ian Hodder, Scott Hutson, *Reading the past: Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265306742_Reading_the_Past, 4.

¹⁸⁶ Jennifer Freer Harris, Charlotte A. Smith, *what is archaeology: how exploring the past enriches the present*, Early Georgia, vol. 29, 1, 15-26. http://www.georgia-archaeology.org/EarlyGA/may2001/EarlyGeorgia_29_1_03.pdf.

¹⁸⁷ Ian Hodder, Scott Hutson, *Reading the past: Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Kevin Greene, Tom Moore, *Archaeology: An Introduction*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), xv.

opportunity to its study as relevant cultural artefacts. The Good Shepherd ring doesn't just exist as a ring but also bears an image to which many interpretations or meanings have been given. This double value adds to the relevance of the Good Shepherd Gold Ring found in the Caesarea waters. The Roman ring found as part of finds is a material artefact (heritage) showing previous activity from which attempts could be made towards understanding the past. The ring was found in shallow water off the coast of Caesarea Maritima during the recovery of objects from two shipwrecks more than a thousand years apart.¹⁸⁹

The city of Caesarea Maritima was founded by Herod the Great along the coast at the site of Straton's Tower in the first century BCE. It was a thriving Roman port with an inner and outer harbour (see Figure 5.6.).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹“IAA survey off the coast of Caesarea recovers treasure from two ancient shipwrecks,” (<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/general/iaa-recovers-treasure-from-two-ancient-shipwrecks-22-december-2021>)

¹⁹⁰ General information about Caesarea is found in Kenneth G. Holum, *King Herod's Dream: Caesarea on the Sea* (New York: Norton, 1988).

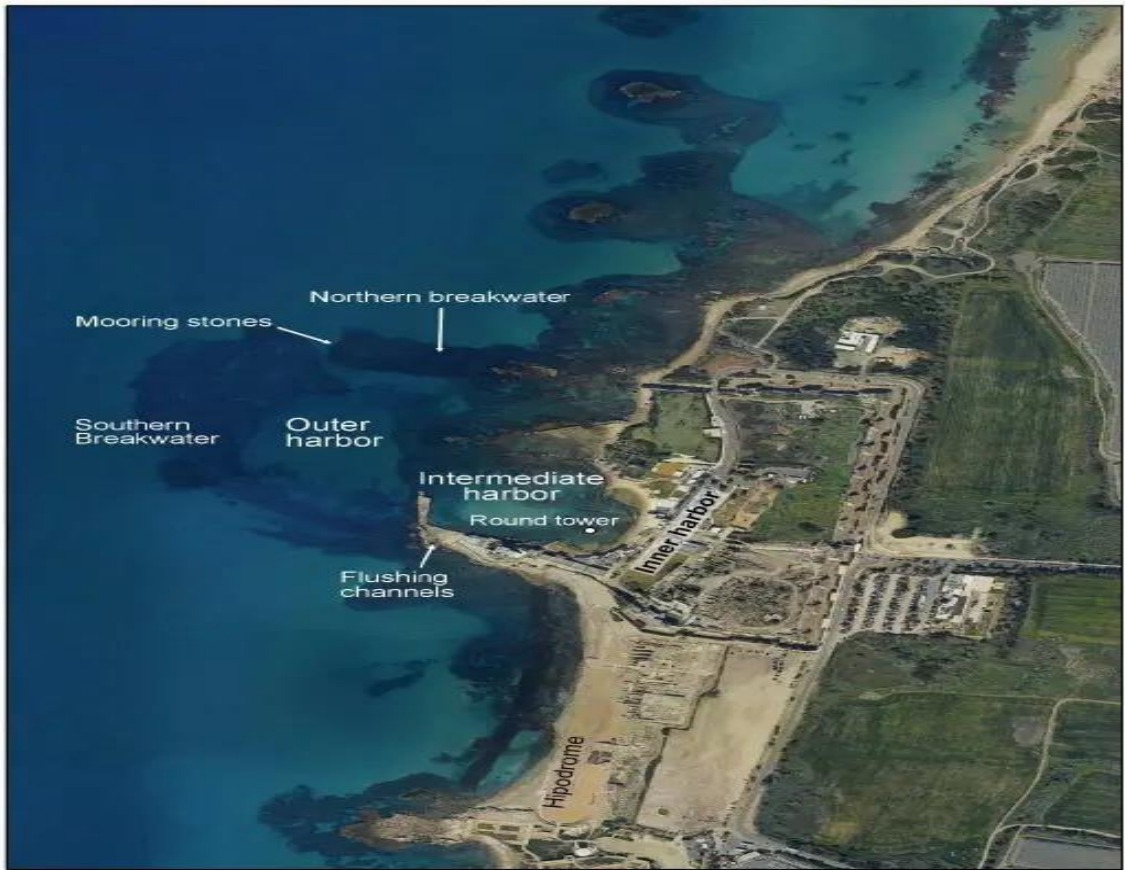


Figure 5.6: Caesarea Sebaston, Herodian built.

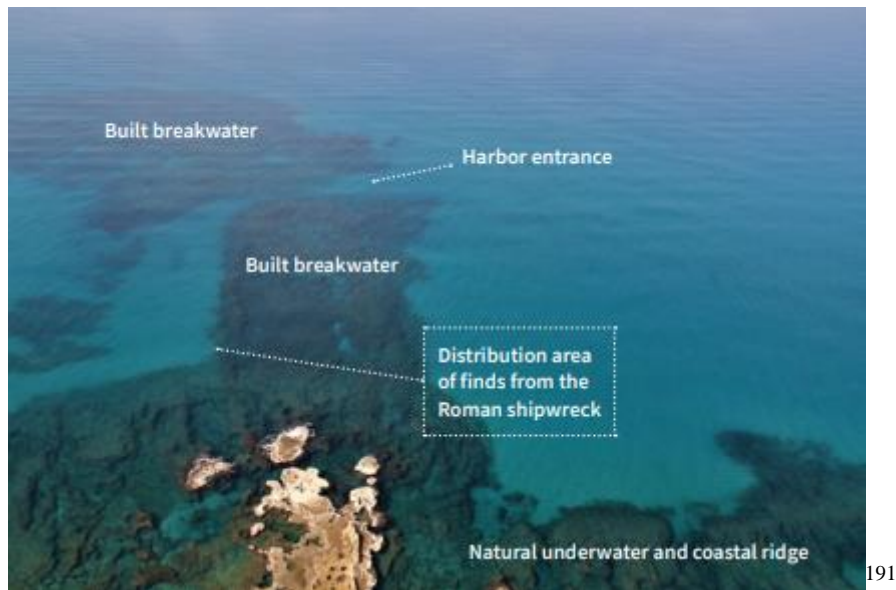


Figure 5.7: The harbour where the shipwreck occurred and the finds discovered.

Herod funded the construction of the city and harbour over a period of about ten years at the end of the first century BCE.¹⁹² The site became the capital of the Roman province of Judea and, subsequently, a major centre for early Christianity and early Islam before the Crusaders captured it. As a port city, Caesarea experienced a significant influx of people from different backgrounds. Commerce was also prominent in the area until the port went out of use around the 16th century. Today, Caesarea is an important archaeological site and park on Israel's coast. This importance may be explained in the sense that as a point of contact between other towns and cultures, transportation of goods all over the Mediterranean was done via this port city. A series of excavation campaigns in the last half-century have unearthed a Roman temple, Amphitheatre, church, and other ruins.

As noted above, the ring was reportedly discovered in the remains of a shipwreck off the coast. In the media, there have been photographs of the ring near its find spot (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8), so we can expect that there is a detailed record of exactly where the ring was found.

¹⁹¹ Jacob Sharvit, "A Roman Merchant Ship Cargo of Scrap Metal and Raw Materials in the Caesarea Harbor: Preliminary Report" in *In Centro: Collected Papers*. (Eds. Guy D. Stiebel et al) Vol 1, (Tel Aviv University: The institute of Archaeology, 2022), 76.

¹⁹² Charles T. Fritsch (ed.), *The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima, Volume I: Studies in the History of Caesarea Maritima* (Missoula: Schlars Press, 1975).



Figure 5.8: The Caesarea Good Shepherd Ring shortly after being discovered (Israel Antiquities Authority Marine Archaeo).

We are dealing with the domain of underwater archaeology, which is gaining ground quickly owing to the continued interest in efficient diving. “Underwater Archaeology is the systematic documentation and recovery of information from submerged artefacts and underwater sites to interpret past human cultures”¹⁹³. In other words, it is “the systematic study of past human life, behaviours, activities and cultures using the physical (or material) remains (including sites, structures and artefacts) as well as other evidence found in the underwater (or submerged) environment.”¹⁹⁴ John Goggin on his part thinks that underwater archaeology is “the recovery and interpretation of human remains and cultural materials of the past from underwater by archaeologists.”¹⁹⁵ Here, the person who does the job of recovery and interpretation is the archaeologist and not any other person. Via these innovations, “human and cultural remains

¹⁹³ *Underwater Archaeology* A Resource by the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee <https://marineprotectedareas.noaa.gov/toolkit/underwater-archaeology.html>.

¹⁹⁴ J. P. Delgado, M. Staniforth, *Underwater Archaeology*, Vol. I <https://www.colss.net/sample-chapters/c04/E6-21-01-10.pdf>.

¹⁹⁵ John Goggin M. “Underwater Archaeology: Its Nature and Limitations.” *American Antiquity* 25, no. 3 (1960): 348–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/277518>.

underwater are being extensively exploited”¹⁹⁶ for they possess information about human behaviour and culture.

Underwater archaeology, according to John M. Goggin, can be understood as emanating from four major sites, which may include discarded refuse and ‘lost’ material; submerged sites of former human occupation; shrines or places of offerings; and finally, we have shipwrecks¹⁹⁷ which happen to be our focus. Shipwrecks are further subdivided into other groups. The division considers shipwrecks wherein ships foundered and settled relatively quickly to the bottom of the sea. These, according to Goggin, have been ideal for underwater archaeology as they usually settle quickly to the bottom with their contents and context completely intact¹⁹⁸. This is almost the same scenario we experience with the shipwreck from which the good shepherd ring has been singled out as the most important find. John Goggin says that “wrecks in harbours or other places with much traffic may well have later artefacts fall upon them. The superimposition of wrecks of different periods at critical spots has been noted in the Caribbean,”¹⁹⁹ just as is the case arising from the discovery of the good shepherd ring wherein, we are made to understand that there were two different shipwrecks which occurred at this port a thousand years apart. The situation in Caesarea, however, does not indicate any superimposition. We are made to understand that the contents of the different ships were identifiable. Notwithstanding the difficulties that may come with underwater archaeology regarding stratigraphy and context, Goggin has made us understand that shipwrecks remain the tightest context for underwater archaeologists as they remain uncontaminated from cultural materials from other times. The idea here is that underwater archaeology makes available evidence from which the context can be handled.

5.5 Description of other finds

The IAA reported that they had recovered some other essential valuables from the shipwreck, so the Good Shepherd ring was part of a cache of treasures scattered on the seabed near the wrecked hulls of two ships. The two shipwrecks are separated by a period of over a thousand years. The finds include hundreds of silver and bronze coins from the third century,

¹⁹⁶ John Goggin M. “Underwater Archaeology: Its Nature and Limitations,” 348.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 353.

Roman figurines, a bronze bell, another ring containing a carved red gemstone and a large hoard of 14th-century coins. The Israel Antiquities Authority said the remains of the ships' hulls and their cargoes were found scattered on the sea floor at about 4m (13ft).²⁰⁰

We do not yet know the precise locations of the two shipwrecks or their locations relative to one another or to previously known shipwrecks. Nor do we know how the relationships of the findspots of specific objects relate to one another, which could be pretty substantial. For instance, if the ring was found as a part of the coin hoard, this might indicate that it was an item of “treasure” rather than an ornament that was still in use at the time of the shipwreck.

Nevertheless, we can say that the third-century coins are evidence that the ring might also come from the third century. And we should also look closely at the carved red gemstone (see Figure 5.9) because it might be related to the gemstone in the gold ring.



Figure 5.9: An incised gem with an image of a harp, which was among the objects found in the vicinity of the Caesarea Good Shepherd ring.

(image source: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/underwater-treasure-1700-year-old-coins-among-shipwrecked-items-found-off-caesarea/>)

²⁰⁰<https://www.breitbart.com/middle-east/2021/12/22/good-shepherd-gold-ring-found-in-roman-era-wreck-off-israel>.

Like the image of the good shepherd, the image of the lyre can also have different meanings to different people. The lyre is known as “David’s Harp” in the Jewish tradition and is also associated with Apollo, the sun god, in Greek mythology²⁰¹. The jewel was probably once set in a ring. In their own time, the depictions of gems were meaningful and often symbolic. Many of the images are no longer familiar to us, and research based on ancient literary sources is required to interpret their meanings.²⁰² But we should remember the quotation from Clement of Alexandria, who recommended that Christians should wear rings with the image of the lyre.

5.6 What Can We Say About the Good Shepherd Ring?

At this point, I think it is essential to echo the warning note made by Margaret Jensen. She states that with images, “A myriad of considerations and caveats must be laid out before a single interpreter dare say anything with confidence about meaning.”²⁰³ She adds that each viewer observes an image through the lens of a mediated tradition, memory, and the culture in which they stand.²⁰⁴ That is why we can’t even be so sure that the context of an image may be able to tell us its cultural meaning even in context. However, as of now, the context of any artefact seems to be the most reliable tool through which the meaning of an image or artefact may be constructed. The impression we make of this gives some kind of general theory which holds that meaning derives from contextual associations. The image on the ring might have been of great help in our attempt to make sense of the ownership and purpose for which the ring served. Unfortunately, the Good Shepherd image is one of the best examples to describe a syncretic image. According to Stokstad and Cothren, a syncretic image is an image that has been assimilated from one tradition either unconsciously or deliberately and given a new meaning, maybe in another tradition. With this background, we think interpreting an image from a contextual perspective is necessary²⁰⁵. In this way, the image's meaning entirely depends on the viewer. The Good Shepherd image or figure was used in Christian art and pagan settings, as we have already seen in the second chapter with Hermes and Orpheus, who were shepherds

²⁰¹<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/early-christian-ring-found-in-third-century-shipwreck-near-Israel-180979282>.

²⁰² Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 2.

²⁰³ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 8.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Stokstad Marilyn, Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014), 220-229.

among animals or personifying philanthropy. Given that images do not necessarily represent one thing, it is difficult to determine the context in which the ring was used based on the image engraved. The main factor that affects the sense we make of visual art is the cultural context in which it exists. This is so because the de-territorialization of art and artefacts has led to the appropriation of visuals, particularly artworks from different regions and eras, by others who have interpreted them to suit their present context. The Christian use of the Good Shepherd image is an excellent example. As we saw in the second chapter, this image predates the advent of Christianity. It has been allocated multiple meanings depending on the context. In ancient times, this image was known to represent Hermes. Hermes is a mythological figure believed to have been a messenger of the gods and a caretaking guide to the underworld. In another account, the youthful shepherd is compared to that of Orpheus, the tragic lyre-playing son of Apollo, who journeyed to the underworld to try and rescue his beloved Eurydice.²⁰⁶ The Good Shepherd image's flexible character has led to various viewpoints that stem from cultural beliefs. In this same light, the Good Shepherd ring found in the shallow waters of Caesarea presents a problem of ownership. In other words, to ascertain the context in which the ring was used, we need to consider factors other than the ring itself. Moreover,

Not only do classical gems follow closely the prevalent styles of their periods, but the choice of subjects represented on them is equally inclusive. These subjects comprise, in fact, the mythology and the daily life of the Greeks, the two great themes of classical art. Thus, in a representative collection of gems, we can pass in review almost every Greek god, goddess, and hero, as well as many subjects of everyday life, especially portraits and animals.²⁰⁷

Hence, the iconography of gems, as seen with the Greeks, for example, is founded on mythology and everyday life. This leads us to the difficulty we have at hand; that of being able to give the precise interpretation of an image.

²⁰⁶ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/does-an-ancient-ring-found-in-a-shipwreck-depict-jesus-christ>.

²⁰⁷ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xvii.

Another important point we need to note is the ability of the Good Shepherd ring to play the role of a symbol. Beyond their decorative purposes, engraved rings were worn by both men and women as a form of symbolism within their imagery. Richter maintains that to understand a gem's representation fully, we must bear in mind the strong character of classical art (its symbolism). Here we are looking at a perfectly obvious symbolism wherein,

“...a flower stands for a flowery meadow, waves for the sea, a chair for an indoor scene, a column for a house; in other words, by which a small concrete part stands for the concrete whole. We are familiar with such a shorthand method of expression even in Greek vase paintings; its advantage in the restricted space of a gem is apparent.”²⁰⁸

This is the same scenario we witness with the Good Shepherd ring, as it might have been worn as a form of symbolism. Apart from representing Jesus as humanity's compassionate shepherd, extending his benevolence to his flock of believers and all humanity, it might also be thought of as symbolising everyday life of the need for the care given to those in need. With this background and considering the Good Shepherd images of the third and fourth centuries painted on the catacomb walls of Priscilla and Domitilla²⁰⁹, we may agree with the IAA that the ring bears a Christian depiction.

There seems to be very little we can say about the ownership of this ring. The ring's size suggests it might have belonged to a female. But this does not in any way tell us about the owner's real identity. Here, we would have wished to know if it belonged to a lady following the guess made by the AAI and the purpose for which it was used. By purpose, here we ask whether the ring was used to fulfil any other purpose or as a Christian object. Douglas Boin maintains that it is hazardous to try to read identity from material culture given that as small as a ring may be, for example, it may be “multivocal”²¹⁰. It may represent one thing or the other. “Cultural signs, consequently, cannot be read uncritically as a source for reconstructing one's

²⁰⁸Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xix.

²⁰⁹ Candida Moss, “The ‘Good Shepherd’ ring caused a stir when it was unveiled last month, but things may not be so clear-cut.” <https://www.thedailybeast.com/does-an-ancient-ring-found-in-a-shipwreck-depict-jesus-christ>.

²¹⁰ Douglas Boin, *Ostia in late Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42.

‘pure’ social identity because we lack access to the motives of those who produced them.”²¹¹ To this effect, Goffman opines that a straightforward interpretation of an artefact is impossible.²¹² However, this can be a stage in the quest for more knowledge or information on the identity and ownership of the Good Shepherd ring. The information needed here will therefore be one to help us decipher why the owner of this ring may have decided to use it as a Christian symbol or a symbol of their affiliation to some other group. This brings us to notice the existence of a perennial problem of the social context of an image that keeps staring historians in the face and making interpretation difficult. According to Douglas Boin, symbols stand to mean precisely the opposite of what they could mean, and so the range of interpretive possibilities can only go a long way to demonstrate how identifications (Christian or pagan) help to obscure rather than elucidate what an object may represent in a particular environment.²¹³ He recapitulates by saying, “Recent research on ‘religion,’ including early Christianity, suggests it is hazardous to infer anything about personal belief from archaeological evidence.”²¹⁴

Everyday life and mythology are the main subjects depicted in Greek and Roman gems. The most prominent designs from these areas are pictorials depicting favourite deities, mythological heroes, or animals. Thus, via the motif depicted on the gem, we can extract more information regarding its use, provenance, ownership, etc. The depiction of the ring, which is the core of this research, is a pastoral scene. We have already seen that shepherds and shepherding were very common in ancient times and that it was commonplace to find Greek and Roman gems and animal depictions which were symbolic or representative. Therefore, one may be correct to conclude that “the devices depicted on the gems are borrowed (or supplementary to) from prevalent Greek and Roman artistic stock” as mentioned above. It might be for this reason, therefore, that the Good Shepherd ring is thought of as a Roman ring. As such prominent figures like Jesus were inspired to refer to themselves as shepherds, we can conclude that the ring is of Roman origin and probably depicts Jesus.

²¹¹ Douglas Boin, *Ostia in late Antiquity*, 42.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

Often the meaning of a scene and the engraved symbols now escapes us because we lack the historical context (as opposed to coins) to help in the interpretation²¹⁵. Archaeology is a tool through which we can, in a way, know and understand ancient societies to the extent of being able to tell a story about the past. Through archaeological findings, we can connect fragmented facts to constitute a coherent story, which is the work of the historian. “While archaeologists are excited by, interested in, and curious about artefacts and ancient constructions, archaeologists seek to understand the interplay of life, of society, of daily chores, of special rituals, of social and political power, and of why a community or region was abandoned or settled.” Many (or most) surviving ancient gems have no archaeological context. Many of those gems with an archaeological context were found in tombs. People were often buried with some of their belongings, and this often-included jewellery. We also have gems from sites of significant destruction, like Pompeii. Finally, even though gems were valuable items, it seems that sometimes they were lost. A recent report states that 30 gems have been discovered in the remains of a bath near Hadrian’s Wall. Archaeologists believe these gems probably came loose from their settings in rings while people were in the baths.²¹⁶ So, in such a case, we might have some possible information about the date the gems (and rings) were being used.

Idit Sagiv thinks, "Gems discovered in archaeological excavations can be dated to when they went out of use, based on pottery and coins found there. The existence of other finds, like the Roman coins, has made it possible for more approximations regarding the ring's provenance. Large assemblages of gems discovered in archaeological excavations made it possible to study the development of the art of engraved gems in terms of style, subjects, and types of stones."²¹⁷ However, it should be noted that the use of the archaeological context in dating gems may not be accurate as it only gives information on the latest use dates, not the manufacture date. The

²¹⁵ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 19.

²¹⁶ See “Roman Bathers’ Gems Lost 2,000 Years Ago Found Near Hadrian’s Wall,” *The Guardian* 28 January 2023 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/28/roman-bathers-gems-carved-stones-archaeologists-hadrians-wall>).

²¹⁷ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 22.

problem of interpretation art may arise because this category is often affluent in content, leading to over-interpretation²¹⁸.

As we have already seen, the Good Shepherd image depicts a young lad carrying a lamb on his shoulder. These depictions appear in various forms, as free-standing sculptures, frescoes, sarcophagi, and paintings in the Roman catacombs (given that most of these depictions have their origins in the West though we equally have some coming from the Near East, e.g., the *Criophorous* which dates to as far back as 1000 B.C.E.) oil lamps, knife handles, etc. and can be dated to as far back as the second and third century. Jeffrey Spier notes the disagreement between scholars, especially on the question of whether these artistic creations were pagan or Christian. He writes:

“Although there can be little doubt that Christian pictorial depictions of the Good Shepherd were widespread, many scholars have correctly cautioned that shepherds and bucolic scenes were common in Pagan art as well, especially in the funerary art of the 3rd century. The image of the *Kriophoros* itself is very ancient, having been used in the Near East since the Bronze Age as well as throughout the Mediterranean in the Greco-Roman.”²¹⁹

The above quote may be understood in line with Robin Margaret Jensen’s terms iconographical limitation. According to this limitation, Christian art has its origin in borrowings from the pagan religious world²²⁰. These depictions, which are regarded to be Christian, have been adapted to suit Christian teachings. If that be the case, one can thus affirm that depictions/images are open-ended as far as meaning is concerned. In the case of the Good Shepherd ring, our interest at this point is no longer at the level of determining whether the symbol is pagan or Christian. Here, we want to draw its meaning based on the context. Particular attention is given to the Roman-era gold ring bearing the image of the shepherd boy.

Again, Caesarea played host to different groups of people. This is evident from the ruins that are found therein. The case of the Romans stands tall, given that the Romans had occupied

²¹⁸ Pawet Gotyźniak, *Engraved Gems, and Propaganda in the Roman Republic and under Augustus*, (Summertown Pavilion/Oxford; Archaeopress Publishing LTD., 2020), 1. ISBN 978-1-78969-540-3 (e-Pdf).

²¹⁹ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem*, 53.

²²⁰ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 9.

this area under Pompey the Great. As a result, it is a commonplace to find Roman ruins. The city has always been a cosmopolitan city with people of diverse religious, political, and historical backgrounds. Therefore, it is a fertile ground for studying the ancient world. To crown it all, Caesarea is known to have been where the Roman centurion was baptized. Following the above facts about Caesarea, that is, Caesarea being playing host to an early community of Jesus' followers, being where Peter baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius and finally being where the Christian Religion began to spread across the world, we may be right to think that the Roman ring served a religious purpose and belonged to a Christian lady. Lady because of its size. Helena Sokolov, the curator of the Israeli Antiquity Authority, thinks that even though the ring is said to bear a Christian image, it was rare to find it on rings in the early days of Christian art. Nevertheless, considering other factors, the ring is labelled a Christian ring.

It should be noted that in Mesopotamia, most depictions were of ritual scenes, while the Greeks drew inspiration from the life around them²²¹. Romans, on their part, got inspired by the Greeks, and so, in the case of the Good Shepherd ring found as part of a shipwreck finds, we can see a melange of two cultures. This is to say, at first sight, we are confronted with its beauty, from which we are faced with the problem of interpretation, which is the need to decipher whether the image represents a ritual, a bucolic, or some other scene. For us to determine the meaning of such, there is a need to understand the context in which it was produced as well as where it is found. This process begins with identifying the owner. Multiple interpretations can be advanced for a single image.

Looking at the archaeological category of art and artefacts from antiquity to the present day, one may be quick to note that the bearing taken by such artwork aimed to sell out or express some ideology. In this regard, engraved gems may be considered bearers of some propagandist ideology. This propagandist perspective is expressed via the themes/motifs engraved on the gem. As it stands, the image of the Good Shepherd is one of the propagandist instruments and shows one's affiliation to or acceptance of an ideology. Some carried this image around on rings, bracelets, necklaces, etc. These gems are known to bear iconography that expresses ideologies of various groupings. Be they political, individual, ecclesiast, or act as a medium

²²¹ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, 19.

through which class differences are exhibited. In the case of the Good Shepherd ring, this quality is very evident. Bearing in mind the location of the find and considering what the image of the Good Shepherd represents for Christians, one may be right to conclude that the ring in question is Christian.

On the other hand and drawing inspiration from the previous chapter in which we brought out some of the uses of gems, one of which was that they were used as amulets, it thus calls to question if we can be able to present facts to determine the exact purpose for which this ring was used. We remember that in the previous chapter, we had indicated that an amulet is anything that may be worn and believed to possess some supernatural powers to attract positivity to the wearer. Campbell Bonner has described this as the foundation of fetichism, terming it a vague supernatural power.

Apart from the Boston ring discussed above, other rings and gems have also been discovered in various places from which we might be able to connect facts that might be very helpful in our quest to connect with the past to be able to have an understanding of the changing meaning of these visuals. In an article published in “The Post”, Dalya Alberge has reported about incredible gems lost over 2000 years ago and found near Hadrian’s Wall. From the host of gems discovered, it is possible to make a good guess about the thirty (30) semi-precious stones discovered by archaeologists from the drain of one of the Roman bathhouses. The first thing we might want to reiterate here is that as small as gems may be (a few millimetres in diameter), they bear images whose extraordinary craftsmanship suggests they would have been expensive in their day (second and third centuries).²²² From the depiction, dating has been made possible. It is possible to say these gems are a production of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Archaeologists have also made a guess of how these 30 semi-precious stones have been in the bathhouse or swimming pool – for about 2000 years.

Again, from the number of gemstones retrieved from the pool, we can further ascertain that gems were objects of fashion and class. Hence, gems were used to adorn rings. This stresses the value and importance that was tailored towards gemstones. You won’t find such gems on

²²² Dalya Alberge, “Incredible Roman bathers’ gems lost 2000 years ago found near Hadrian’s Wall”, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/28/roman-bathers-gems-carved-stones-archaeologists-hadrians-wall>

low-status Roman sites. So they're not something that would have been worn by the poor²²³. In this case, they dropped from the rings to which they were glued and flushed into the drains when the pools and saunas were cleaned.

Images have their contexts of origin²²⁴. The ring's origin, as well as the purpose and ownership of this ring, can only be known if we know the context in which it was made and or if the other things found alongside the ring could help determine the purpose served by the ring. By this, we may want to look at the relationship between the other things found alongside the ring and the ring. What exactly can these other things tell us about the ring in question? For example, can these things help us determine if the ring served a Christian purpose? Cachia maintains that symbols do not operate in isolation²²⁵.

For this reason, we think other finds that might have been discovered alongside the gold ring can significantly help identify the context in which the ring was used. Cachia quotes Dulles, who equally maintains that we can't possibly make much from an artwork if it exists in isolation; hence, they (art) mutually condition and illuminate one another²²⁶. Barrett equally shares this view. To him, "...all art can be interpreted as to how it is influenced by other art, and that in many cases, some art is specifically about other art...An important guide to interpreting art is to see how it relates to and directly or indirectly comments upon other art."²²⁷ And so, the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) maintain that the Roman-era

Animal depictions on gems have not been studied iconographically, stylistically, and technically as one division. The gem-bearing animal depictions published then were treated the same way as other carving stones: they were documented by etching or drawing with minimal text, which in most cases was inaccurate²²⁸. So, our information about the good shepherd may

²²³ Dalya Alberge, "Incredible Roman bathers' gems lost 2000 years ago found near Hadrian's Wall", <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/28/roman-bathers-gems-carved-stones-archaeologists-hadrians-wall>

²²⁴ Nicholas Cachia, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep*" (John 10,11) 15.

²²⁵ Nicholas Cachia, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep*" (John 10,11) 15.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ Terry Barrett, "Principles for Interpreting Art." 12.

²²⁸ Sagiv, Idit. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems: Meanings and Interpretations*, p. 2.

also be inaccurate. For this reason, one may consider the concern Muller Valentine raised regarding the meaning of the “good shepherd” image. Muller thinks that the Hittites followed the realistic pattern of a shepherd but deviated from the notion of men caring for their sheep. To him, the Hittites changed the Good Shepherd image's meaning from profane to religious. These men are not “shepherds” caring for these animals; they are religious men taking the animals to offer as a sacrifice.²²⁹In this religious narrative, we can best understand the meaning of this image as represented in the Greek Hermes Criophorous.

We have already seen that Classical art follows the Prevalent style of their periods.²³⁰ They do not only follow the prevalent styles of their periods, but the choice of subjects representing them is an inclusive tool for dating. To this effect, Spier thinks portraits on engraved gems are of utmost importance in dating. He writes,

“The identification of early Christian gems is made possible by the appearance of inscriptions and distinctive iconographic images executed in a style of gem cutting entirely consistent with pagan gems datable to the mid-third century and employing the same materials, shapes, and mounts (usually rings)²³¹.

These mounts usually bear gems with depictions of two great classical themes: mythology and the everyday life of the Greeks. Gisela Richter is, therefore, correct to think that “...in a representative collection of gems, we can pass in review almost every Greek god, goddess, and hero, as well as many subjects of everyday life, mainly portraits and animals²³². This is the case with the Good Shepherd Ring found off the coast of Caesarea, which archaeologists have been able to situate to the Roman era around the third century. In as much as we may not want to take for granted the difficulty in determining whether these images are Christian images, as Jeffrey Spier already indicates above, we still maintain that gems of the third century can be classified based on stylistic grounds as they are often mounted on rings, hence providing chronological evidence²³³.

²²⁹ Valentine Muller, *The Prehistory of the “Good Shepherd,”* 89.

²³⁰ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xvii.

²³¹ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007), p 12.

²³² Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xvii.

²³³ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gem*, 12.

And, since this is the case for so extended a period, we have here an exceptionally comprehensive picture of the development of classical types. We shall find that varied as the subjects on the gems are, they teach us again the lesson we learn in our contact with all Greek and Roman art—that the classical mind preferred to adopt certain types and repeat these, of course, with infinite variations, rather than try to produce continually fresh models and themes²³⁴. Interpretation is much easier in the case of coins as compared to gems. Coins can be associated with a particular city, with a known history or the image on the coin, given that most coins carry images of emperors and their families. The case of gems is quite different. The reason is that these gems were produced.

5.7 Conclusions

The Good Shepherd Ring presents a number of interesting problems. Unlike many ancient rings, it has a known archaeological context (even if it has not yet been fully reported). But that context is underwater, which differs from archaeology on land, which can have transparent, distinct layers that help us know what items were deposited together. From what the IAA has said, it seems this ring was found near (or maybe as a part of) a group of third-century coins. Another gem with a symbol we think Christians used (the lyre) was found near it. Other gems with images of the Good Shepherd have clearly Christian symbols or inscriptions. It is thus possible (though not sure) that this ring was produced for a third-century Christian.

²³⁴ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of Classical Style*, xvii.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the provisional information about the archaeological context released by the IAA and on the octagonal form of the ring, we can cautiously accept a third-century date for the ring while being open to revision in light of the eventual complete publication of the ring and its archaeological context. The image of the Good Shepherd on the ring makes it possible that the ring belonged to a Christian, but we cannot be sure of this because non-Christians used the image. Also, Caesarea Maritima was a cosmopolitan city that people visited with many different religious views.

In this essay, we have tried to analyze the Good Shepherd image and metaphor through historical and analytical methods. We went down the historical path, trying to identify the various interpretations of how the image and metaphor originated and how it developed. In the analysis of these phases and taking into cognisance the archaeological context, we have been able to relate the ancient past to the present. In effect, the changing meanings of art, as we have seen with the image of the Good Shepherd, is only a revelation of a people's ethos at different periods. This is to say that each interpretation made by an individual of a work of art ends up being a revelation of their cultural context. This is so because each interpretation of a work of art is made via a mediated lens of culture, thus giving room for multiple interpretations. Like R. J. Forbes, we opine that works of art need a proper identification. This identification will then lead us to understand better how these artworks have been used over time and what they meant for their users. Hence, in the case of gems;

“...it is high time that they were properly identified by experts, for this would give us statistical-chronological data on the use of various gems all throughout Antiquity, which may enable us to write a proper history of gems and which might also help us to identify the many unknown or dubious terms (...). This identification is sorely needed to understand many ancient texts, the point of which escapes us now.

Though we have many books on ancient gems the archaeological and philological data published are not always reliable.”²³⁵

We confidently think that there is a high probability of getting things right regarding writing a good history through a proper study of artefacts and, particularly, gems. This is evidenced in the fact that an “analysis of distribution patterns of gem materials reveals cultural preferences for specific gemstones and also artists’ and workshop associations, which improved the overall picture of the gemstones used in different periods of Classical Antiquity.”²³⁶ The history of gemstones and personal seals in Roman society is quite voluminous. So they (engraved gems) display wealth and social status and gesture to religious affiliations. Most importantly, their roles as guarantors of identity. They were equally used in commerce and politics²³⁷. Gems and jewellery recovered from archaeological contexts enabled firmer dating and cultural attribution of glyptic otherwise based on iconographic or stylistic features. We are equally aware that the identity and origin of some gems have been misconstrued. However, archaeological evidence and research play a vital role in our understanding of the changing meanings of visual arts. In the same vein, artistic imagery needs to be given keen attention, for they are a reach source through which fragmented knowledge can be reconnected, thus giving room for the reconstruction of a coherent history.

The Good Shepherd image may appear simple to interpret, yet it is not. This can be explained in the sense that “...all meaning, of whatever kind, is a matter not of objective fact, but of social construction, the ideological basis of which can be unravelled, or ‘deconstructed’.”²³⁸ To this effect, this image/metaphor warrants a more careful study. The reason for the careful study is that the sheep and shepherd image, as depicted in the idea of the Good Shepherd, seemingly has a rich history which, if well exploited, will provide us with more insight into the ancient world and precisely “...further insight into early Christian meaning-making, and more broadly, is the compelling example of the flexibility and durability of a

²³⁵ Lisbet Thoresen, “Archaeogemmology and ancient literary sources on gems and their origins.” In *Gemstones in the first millennium*, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, 2015, 155-217.

²³⁶ Lisbet Thoresen, “Archaeogemmology and ancient literary sources on gems and their origins.” 155.

²³⁷ Candida Moss, “The ‘Good Shepherd’ ring caused a stir when it was unveiled last month, but things may not be so clear-cut.” <https://www.thedailybeast.com/does-an-ancient-ring-found-in-a-shipwreck-depict-jesus-christ>.

²³⁸ Susan M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting objects and collections*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

particular motif over time and in various cultures and communities.”²³⁹ As we have already mentioned above, the image of the Good Shepherd is one which cuts across every human culture and era. This is evident in its usage in almost every form of art.

The similarities between the bucolic images and the fact that the shepherd was a pagan motif meant that the ring’s interpretation was very much in the eye of the beholder. One person could look at it and see the Jesus of the Gospels, another might see Hermes. It’s a flexible and multivalent image. What this means of course, is that we cannot be certain that the ring’s owner was Christian we can only be sure that they were wealthy enough to purchase such an expensive luxury item.²⁴⁰

It has been an uphill task for archaeologists to clearly identify works of art, given that some collectors undermined the importance of details. Hence most of these works are clueless. Many rings with engraved gems that we find in museums are without clear provenance. So, the Caesarea ring engraved with the image of the Good Shepherd seemingly has limited information about its origin, given that it was not signed. However, we are able to make limited guesses based on the little of limited information available to us. One of the crucial and readily available information from which we can make suppositions has to do with where it was found. It may have been produced somewhere else, but its point of deposition, off the coast of Caesarea Maritima, is known. Because it was found underwater (not excavated in a stratigraphic context on land), we do not know its exact date of deposition, but the fact that it was said to be found with coins of the third century means we have a pretty good idea of its date. We await the official publication of the ring and the other finds, but the available information has brought us closer to some acceptable facts. It has helped us to recognize the larger group, time, region, and culture with considerable precision, one of which is that it is a third-century Roman ring.

Again, this research, I believe, has brought us to understand how a community’s ethos may be expressed via images/visual art and how such may, in turn, affect the community’s

²³⁹ Jennifer A., Freeman, *The Good Shepherd: Image, Meaning and Power*, 2.

²⁴⁰ Candida Moss, “The ‘Good Shepherd’ ring caused a stir when it was unveiled last month, but things may not be so clear-cut.” <https://www.thedailybeast.com/does-an-ancient-ring-found-in-a-shipwreck-depict-jesus-christ>.

ethos. Moreover, gems have remained the only source of evidence of imperial portraits and Greek and Roman sculptures and wall paintings that have long since been lost.

It is more difficult to say whether it is a Christian ring depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The date and location of the ring make this possible, but others besides Christians also used this image. According to Ernest Wright,

“...the Good Shepherd of the Early Christians was a very old conception both in thought and in external portrayal. For the Christians, of course, it had a very special range of meaning, derived from the Gospels; but the representation of the figure was taken over from a traditional Pagan form which seems to have had a long history behind it, not only in Greece but also in the Ancient East.”

The same is true of the lyre symbol found on another gem near the Good Shepherd ring. As we have seen, there is no single explanation for an image, and so “the best a self-conscious historian can do is try to map out the territory, noting the major arteries and bridges, recognizing that there are different routes to the same destination, and expecting that other people might find some more scenic or others more direct.”²⁴¹

In the course of this research, we have noticed that the interpretation of visual art is not very easy. Evidently, the case of visuals with animal depictions is peculiar and may be compared to that with inscriptions. The difficulty in understanding here is highly based on the time factor, incomplete information, ambiguous information, and multiple versions, which are often contradictory. Each visual representation usually has more than one meaning and more than one role. The visual and literary sources do not provide all the answers, leaving much room for speculation. The more complex the depiction, the more proposals there are for its interpretation. These have been some of the hitches that come with interpreting visuals, which, of course, have added to the difficulty level in the execution of this research. It is based on this difficulty level that I can't claim to have tackled the subject in the best way possible. I have only tried in my modest way to add a voice to the existing and limited catalogue of ideas

²⁴¹ Jensen M., Robinson, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 8.

regarding the changing meaning of symbols using the ring engraved with an image of the young shepherd boy carrying a lamb/ram on his shoulder as an example. As syncretic as the image of the Good Shepherd may be, I concede, like Goffman, that a straightforward interpretation of an artefact or artwork is impossible to talk less of a syncretic image as that of the Hence, the meaning of any artwork can only depend on the particular context in which it appears or has been used.

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