

A RING WITH A GEMSTONE DEPICTING HERMAPHRODITE FROM THE BALGAT TOMB IN ANKARA

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Keywords: cameo, intaglio, ring stone, Ankara, Galatia, engraved gems, jewellery, Asia Minor, Roman period, amulet and gem

Abstract: This paper focuses on a ring with a sardonyx stone with a depiction of a hermaphrodite carved in the cameo technique. The artefact is a piece from the jewellery collection that constituted an important group among the finds recovered from the Balgat Tomb during a rescue excavation conducted in 1998 by the Directorate of the Anatolian Civilizations Museum. The figure on the ring stone is portrayed in deep sleep on a panther skin. Based on analogies from European museum collections, and common iconographic features, the figure is considered to represent Hermaphrodite, a mythological character widely featured in Greek and Roman art. Recent studies on ring stones revealed that many of the examined pieces were acquired by museums through purchase, with limited or no information available regarding their respective findspots. The known findspot of the ring from Balgat, together with the iconographic details of the figure represented, makes it an exceptional artefact. The dating of the ring stone lies within the 1st century AD, based on its iconographic and stylistic features in correlation with the presence of the other small finds from the tomb, particularly the glass objects.

Cuvinte-cheie: cameo, intaglio, piatră de inel, Ankara, Galata, geme, bijuterii, Asia Mică, perioada romană, amuleta și piatră prețioasă

Rezumat: Prezentul articol are ca subiect un inel cu piatră din sardonix cu reprezentarea unui hermafrodit realizat în tehnica cameo. Obiectul aparține importantei colecții de bijuterii provenind din mormântul de la Balgat, recuperată în urma săpăturilor de salvare efectuate în 1998 de Direcția Muzeului Civilizațiilor din Anatolia. Personajul este reprezentat dormind pe o piele de panteră. Pe baza analogiilor cu piese similare din colecțiile muzeelor europene și a trăsăturilor iconografice comune, figura este considerată a reprezenta un hermafrodit, personaj mitologic, deseori reprezentat în arta greacă și romană. Studii recente asupra pietrelor de inel au arătat că multe dintre piesele examinate au fost achiziționate de muzee prin cumpărare, informațiile legate de locul de descoperire fiind limitate sau lipsind. Proveniența cunoscută și detaliile iconografice ale figurii fac din inelului de la Balgat un artefact excepțional. Datarea propusă este secolul I d.Hr., pe baza caracteristicilor sale iconografice și stilistice, precum și a corelației cu celelalte piese din mormânt, în special obiectele din sticlă.

INTRODUCTION

Among the finds from the Balgat Tomb¹ is a collection of jewellery that reflects the wealth and refined taste of their owners. These include gold diadems and earrings, as well as rings decorated with gemstones, some of which are semi-precious. This paper will examine one of these ring stones, made from sardonyx and showing a hermaphrodite in the cameo technique (Fig. 1). The figure will first be analysed within the context of mythology, and an attempt will be made to address why the subject represents Hermaphrodite, with the help of comparable published examples.

In Antiquity, amulets and ring stones were believed to ward off evil spirits (apotropaic) or to treat various illnesses (therapeutic), particularly in circumstances deemed to be mysterious. These objects, in addition to their function as jewellery, were also imbued with magical significance: it



Figure 1

was thought that they possessed protective and healing properties, and that the semi-precious stones used as ring stones would cure various diseases. In addition, when they were engraved in *intaglio* and were used as seals, indicating the ownership status of the person to whom they belonged. It was also believed that the mythological scenes and depictions of gods and goddesses from the Greco-Roman world carved on such gemstones would

¹ For studies conducted so far on the Balgat Tomb, see Temizsoy, Demirdelen 1999, p. 24–52; Demirdelen 2000, p. 77–91; furthermore, the Balgat Tomb is mentioned in *Ankara-Roma ve Bizans Dönemi Arkeoloji Mirası* and *Küçük Asya'nın Bin Yüzü: Ancyra* by U. Peschlow: Aydın et alii 2005, p. 94, 102; Peschlow 2023, p. 110.