

SIX FIGURAL GEMS FROM TRAPEZUS IN NORTH-EASTERN TURKEY

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Dedicated to the 89th birthday of Jutta Meischner

Cuvinte-cheie: *pietre prețioase figurative, intaglio, perioada romană, gliptice greco-romane, Trapez, Trabzon, nord-estul Turciei, bijuterii, geme falsificate.*

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Rezumat: *În această scurtă lucrare ne concentrăm pe șase geme figurative inedite (intaglio) și o pereche de cercei de aur de la Muzeul Trabzon din nord-estul Turciei. Bijuteriile sunt următoarele: nr. 1 un onix gravat înfățișând o insectă, poate o furnică, fixată într-un inel de aur; nr. 2. Zeus, așezat și încoronat de Nike cu o coroană; nr. 3. Atena stând în picioare, văzută din față; nr. 4. un vultur pe altar; nr. 5. o pereche de cercei de aur; nr. 6–7 două falsuri înfățișând un cap cu coif din profil, de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, poate realizat local. La începutul lucrării sunt compilate toate descoperirile gliptice publicate anterior din Pont și Paflagonia din nordul Turciei.*

Abstract: *In this brief paper we focus on six formerly unpublished figural gems as intaglios and a pair of gold earrings from the Museum of Trabzon in north-eastern Turkey. The gems are identified as follows: no. 1 an engraved onyx depicting an insect, perhaps an ant, set in a gold ring; no. 2. Zeus, seated and being crowned by Nike with a wreath; no. 3. Athena stands to front; no. 4. an eagle on an altar; no. 5. a pair of gold earrings; nos. 6–7 two forgeries depicting a profile helmeted head dating from the end of 19th century, perhaps locally made. At the beginning of the paper all formerly published glyptic finds from Pontus and Paphlagonia in northern Turkey are listed.*

This brief paper focuses on six formerly unpublished figural gems as well as a pair of gold earrings in the Museum of Trabzon, north-eastern Turkey (**Map 1**), as in Roman Pontus and Paphlagonia in northern Turkey. They are important because excavated glyptic finds and gems in general amongst the holdings of local museums are remarkably few¹. Very little is recorded in earlier publications, so all the

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¹ AKYAY MERİÇBOYU 2001, p. 179, fig. 2, p. 181, fig. 3, p. 182, fig. 2, p. 230, fig. 2, p. 233.

more noteworthy are the 30 gems from the Black Sea area which Sir Denis Arthur Hepworth Wright (1911–2005) acquired while serving in the British consulate at Trabzon between 1941 and 1943². The collection includes a rare fifth-century BC Phoenician green jasper scarab (on p. 9–10, no. 1), a high quality Hellenistic gem depicting a female head in profile, perhaps Arsinoe III, Queen of Egypt between 220 and 204 BC, transferred from Trabzon (on p. 14–15, no. 4), as well as Nike crowning an eagle with a wreath (on p. 40, no. 21), an eagle standing on an altar (on p. 51, no. 28), a draped bust of one of the Dioscuri (on p. 58, no. 33), two Sasanian gems of later date, one depicting a lion (on p. 65, no. 40) and the other two stylised human figures (on p. 71–72, no. 46). Other gems are recorded as coming from other nearby Graeco-Roman sites, amongst them Ordu (Kotyora), Giresun (Cerasus), Rize (Rhizaeum) and Sadak (Satala). An especially interesting gem from Ordu depicts Apollo flanked by Artemis and another female deity holding two flaming torches, perhaps Demeter (on p. 20–24, no. 8), and almost certainly representing a regional cult, probably that of Apollo Argyieus, who was the protector of the streets, public places and the thresholds of houses. There is another Artemis (on p. 25, no. 9) and a gem depicting three sows from Giresun (on p. 63, no. 38), a figure of Hermes (on p. 28, no. 11) and Tyche-Demeter-Isis (on p. 41, no. 22) from Sadak.



Map 1. Referred places in northern Anatolia referred to in the text
(drawn by F. H. Kaya, 2024).

A few Hellenistic and Roman engraved figural gems from Pontus and Paphlagonia are published in the jewellery catalogue of the Archaeological Museums of Istanbul by Yıldız Akyay Meriçboyu: they comprise a glass ring-stone depicting Eros from Alaçam, 27 km west of Bafra, dating to the second-first century BC (on p. 179, fig. 2), a gem from Bulancak (Greek Terastios) in Giresun (on p. 181, fig. 3), a gold ring with a stepped hexagonal bezel set with gems from Tokat, assigned to the first century BC (on p. 182, fig. 2), a gold ring with an engraved nicolo intaglio

² HOEY MIDDLETON 2001, p. 1–4.

depicting Thetis riding a hippocamp holding the armour to present to her son Achilles, found in Amisus of the first century AD (on p. 230, fig. 2), and from Devrek in Zonguldak, Paphlagonia a gold seal-ring of the same date set with an engraved and inscribed sard intaglio which figures Apollo standing and playing the cithara (on p. 233, figs).

There are also a few gems from the region in the British Museum. Henry Beauchamp Walters (1867–1944) usefully provides findspots where known or, rather, where the gems were acquired. Thus, from “Trebizond” there is an excellent Roman amethyst intaglio probably of first century AD date depicting Hermes standing to the front, holding his purse in his right hand and caduceus in his left hand and at his feet a ram and a cockerel³.

From Samsun (Amisus), Pontus, there is a convex garnet set in a gold ring, depicting Nemesis (?) winged and draped, with bridle (?) in her right hand, standing to the right on the stern of a ship; behind her a dolphin plunges downwards⁴. There is also a sard, i.e., dark cornelian, depicting “Fortuna”, i.e., Tyche, to the left draped holding a steering oar in her right hand and her cornucopia in her left. The gem is inscribed Φαρνάκου (= of Pharnaces)⁵. Finally, there is another sard intaglio, likewise set in an ancient gold ring, figuring a parrot to the right and below an ear of cereal⁶.

Furthermore, two tiny cameo rings made of glass, each depicting Eros, were found in an unstratified context in Room X at the Balatlar Church at Sinope, north-eastern Paphlagonia⁷. Some finds are reported from Satala, 84.3 km south-east of the province centre of Gümüşhane, but these remain unpublished⁸.

Certainly, there was more than one gem workshop in Roman Pontus and perhaps in Paphlagonia as well, most probably in one of the larger cities on the southern Black Sea coast, such as Trapezus, Amisus, Heraclea Pontica, or Sinope. Some gems from these workshops are doubtless included in unprovenanced collections in Turkey (such as in the Yüksel Erimtan Archaeology and Art Museum) or the Natsvlishvili Family Collection in Tbilisi, Georgia. For example, it would be tempting to connect a red jasper intaglio in the latter collection depicting Nike walking towards a seated Zeus in order to crown him with a wreath⁹ with our intaglio, no. 2 below, but the type is so common that this surmise would be hard to substantiate.

Historically and archaeologically, Trapezus is one of the less-known sites on southern Black Sea littoral: the city was founded in 756 BC as *Τραπεζούς* by Milesian traders from Sinope. Cyrus the Great added the city to the Achaemenid Empire, and he was possibly the first ruler to consolidate the eastern Black Sea region into a satrapy. In the second century BC, the city with its natural harbours was added to

³ WALTERS 1926, p. 156, no. 1395, pl. 19.

⁴ WALTERS 1926, p. 183, no. 1702; the ring is illustrated in MARSHALL 1907, p. 76, no. 430, pl. 13.

⁵ WALTERS 1926, p. 186, no. 1732, pl. 23.

⁶ WALTERS 1926, p. 247, no. 2480.

⁷ ERDEM KOÇEL 2014, p. 525 (without photo).

⁸ Pers. com. T. B. MITFORD (Oxford), May 2022. There are some engraved gems exhibited in the İkizevler City Museum of Gümüşhane which might have come from Satala.

⁹ GOLYŹNIAK 2022, p. 85, cat. no. 40.

the Kingdom of Pontus by Pharnaces I. Mithridates VI Eupator made it the homeport for the Pontic fleet, in his quest to remove the Romans from Anatolia. After the defeat of Mithridates in 66 BC, the city was first handed to the Galatians, but it was soon returned to the grandson of Mithridates, and subsequently became part of the new client Kingdom of Pontus. When the kingdom was finally annexed to the Roman province of Galatia two centuries later, the fleet passed to new commanders, becoming the *Classis Pontica*. Hadrian visited the city in AD 129 as part of his inspection of the eastern border (*limes*). Ammianus Marcellinus had nothing to say of Trapezus except that it was “not an obscure town” (*Rerum Gestarum Libri*, § 22.8.16).

A well-preserved, over life size, statue of Hermes in bronze, iconographically very similar to glyptic representations of Hermes¹⁰, was excavated in April 1994 at the “Tabakhane Yokuşu” (tawery ramp) in the Republic (Cumhuriyet) district of Trabzon on the eastern shores of the southern Black Sea littoral, a site which also yielded four Roman bronze coins. In AD 131 Arrian of Nicomedia (Lucius Flavius Arrianus), one of the most distinguished writers of his day, was appointed by Hadrian as legate (governor) of Cappadocia, where he served for six years and in one of his letters he reported that on his way to Satala there was a “square temple with the statue of Mercury” (Arrian, *Peripl.* P. E. 17); the excavation revealed that this was a *templum-in antis* of the Corinthian order¹¹.

In the second century AD, Satala, located 175 south of Trabzon, became the Roman legionary base first for Legio XVI Flavia and then from the time of Hadrian until Shapur’s destruction of the site in 256 of Legio XV Apollinaris (“Apollo’s Fifteenth Legion”), which was recruited by Octavian in 41/40 BC. In AD 115, war with Parthia broke out and the legion was sent to the front, reinforced with elements from Legio XXX Ulpia Victrix. After the conflict was over the unit remained in the east with a new headquarters at Satala, with some vexillations stationed at Trapezus as well as at Ancyra in Galatia. From this base the XVth legion helped to repulse an invasion of Alans in 134. Three of the gems in our small selection Zeus, Athena and the eagle are likely to have been worn by legionaries serving in XV Apollinaris¹².

The Museum of Trabzon, also known as Kostaki Mansion, is a large regional archaeological and ethnographic museum. At the beginning of the 20th century it was built by an Italian architect as a private residence for Mr Constantine Theophylact, a notable banker of local Greek-Pontic origin who was also mayor of Trabzon for a while. As Theophylact went bankrupt in 1917, all his properties were confiscated, among them his mansion. The building was acquired by the Turkish Nemlioğlu Family in 1920s, and in 1987 the building was finally handed over to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism to be transformed into a museum. As one of the outstanding examples of civil architecture in north-eastern Turkey, it was restored between 1988 and 2001. On April 22, 2001, it was opened to public as the Museum

¹⁰ The statue is illustrated in LAFLI, HENIG 2024, pl. 1.

¹¹ Cf. e.g., MITFORD 2021, p. 355.

¹² An intaglio depicting an eagle between standards, inscribed LEG XV APOLLINARI found in Paphos, Cyprus, may date earlier, from the early Flavian period, before the legion was stationed in the neighbourhood of Trapezus, but at least it emphasises the importance of the eagle to legionaries in this (and other) legions and is a reminder that the gems from Trapezus depicting eagles were likely worn by legionaries too. Cf. DASZEWSKI 1973.

of Trabzon. A total of 3.651 items forms the collections of the museum with a large archaeological section which owns numerous ancient coins and a wide range of local artefacts from the Bronze Age to the end of Byzantine periods with a majority of finds of the Roman period.

Catalogue of the six figural gems and a pair of earrings in the Museum of Trabzon

Most of the glyptic finds in Trabzon were added to the collection through acquisition so that their provenances are not secure. All of them date from the Roman period, and only no. 1 is set in a gold ring, although this is modern. The rest of the gems are unset. Two gems are modern forgeries (cat. nos. 6–7). Beside these seven examples presented below, there are two further engraved gems which are part of the museum's collection, i.e., a red carnelian intaglio depicting an animal (a quadruped of some sort, possibly a boar) and a chrome rich green chalcedony intaglio (the subject not identifiable). In this corpus, the rationale for assigning a gem to one century or another is based on general observations, parallels and style; therefore the dates assigned here are conservative and should be considered merely as rough approximations. In our opinion, as imprecise as such proposed dates may be, it is better to assign a probable date than to offer none at all.

Intaglios

No. 1. An engraved onyx depicting an insect, perhaps an ant, set in a gold ring (Figs 1a-b).

Acc. no. 720.

The onyx intaglio is set in a modern gold ring.

18 × 13 × 6.3 mm.

An acquisition on 30th of March 1993.

The simple hoop ring is modern.

The insect, probably an ant, is engraved on a truncated dome. For ants, see DIMITROVA-MILCHEVA 1981, p. 78, nos. 218–221. Ants were associated with Demeter who was concerned with the protecting the crops and an ant is sometimes depicted with the goddess, as Johns 1997, 87, nos. 135–137. See also NEMETI 2013, p. 151, no. 12, fig. 128 (a brown agate from the collection of Numismatics Cabinet of the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest, depicting a female divinity and an ant).

Probably second or third century AD.

No. 2. Zeus, seated and being crowned by Nike with a wreath (Fig. 2).

Milky chalcedony. Fairly frequently employed for intaglios depicting the god.

14 × 9 × 3 mm.

Zeus is seated to the right on a *diphros* (a low stool without a back of distinctive design). He wears a himation over his loins. He holds his sceptre upright in his right hand; his left arm is outstretched. A small Nike flies towards him holding out a wreath. There is a ground line.

Comparanda. For Zeus Nicephorus see DIMITROVA-MILCHEVA 1981, p. 32, no. 13, also a milky chalcedony, from Vardim near Svishtov, Bulgaria. HOEY MIDDLETON 1991, p. 45–47, nos. 28 (from Epidaurum, Croatia) and 29 from Salona, Croatia. Also note HOEY MIDDLETON 2001, p. 18, no. 7 acquired in Belgrade by Wright in which the upper field of the gem depicts Zeus Nicephorus and the lower part an eagle between standards.

On these intaglios Nike stands on his hand, as is usual.

Second century AD.

No. 3. Athena stands to front (**Fig. 3a-b**).

Sardonyx, three layers.

14 × 10 × 3 mm.

Athena, wearing a helmet and belted chiton, stands with her body to the front, supporting her shield on the ground with her right hand.

Comparanda. KONUK, ARSLAN 2000, p. 50–52, nos. 26–28 show the goddess holding an upright sceptre in her left hand.

Second century AD.

No. 4. An eagle stands on an altar (**Fig. 4a**).

A red carnelian intaglio.

13 × 9 × 3 mm.

An eagle stands on an altar.

In neighbouring Paphlagonia in the Roman road monument of Kuşkayası near Amastris, the depiction of eagle on a column reminds us of this composition on the Trabzon gem (**Fig. 4b**).

Comparanda. HOEY MIDDLETON 2001, p. 51, no. 28 (Wright Collection, from Trabzon); KONUK, ARSLAN 2000, p. 146, no. 122; HENIG, WHITING 1987, p. 33, no. 338 (from Gadara, Jordan) in all of which there is also a palm of victory in the field. Also note KONUK, ARSLAN 2000, p. 145, no. 121, p. 147–148, nos. 123–124, without palm.

The eagle was the familiar of Zeus but also of Roman Imperial power and victory and frequently appears with legionary standards as KONUK, ARSLAN 2000, p. 149, no. 125 and see DASZEWSKI 1973 for an intaglio from Paphos, Cyprus of this type inscribed Leg XV Apollinari. As stated above, nearby Satala became the legionary base of Legio XV Apollinaris in the second century.

Second-third century AD.

No. 5. A pair of gold earrings (**Fig. 5a**).

Acc. no. 648.

Solid gold.

An acquisition on 21st of October 1988.

14 × 3.5 × 2 mm. Wg. 2.83 g.

15 × 4 × 2.2 mm. Wg. 3.07 g.

The earrings have simple wire hoops. There are circular settings with beaded frames which almost certainly in each case held a convex boss, or shield.

There are some typological and dimensional differences between the two earrings: one is thicker and rougher in workmanship than the other.

Comparanda. KAYA *et alii* 2024, p. 187, no. 10, p. 188, no. 12 from Nicaea in Bithynia; also RUSEVA-SLOKOSKA 1991, p. 111–112, no. 21 from Lisets, Lovech region in Bulgaria. See also for similar finds from Constanța in Romania, LUNGU, COVACEF, CHERA 2012, p. 43–44, cat. nos. 43–47, pl. 15 (**Fig. 5b**).
Second-third century AD.

Two forgeries depicting a profile helmeted head

In the collection of the Museum of Trabzon there are two forged carnelian intaglios figuring the head of Athena. Similar examples in the Wright Collection no. 53, gathered from Trabzon and no. 35 from Rize, ca. 80 km east of Trabzon are modern¹³.

No. 6. A head of Athena (**Fig. 6**).

Acc. no. 599.

A red carnelian intaglio.

15 × 11 × 3 mm.

An acquisition on 9th of April 1982.

Helmeted head of Athena facing to the left. The head is youthful and somewhat bland; the goddess wears an elaborate plumed helmet.

Comparanda. As said above, HOEY MIDDLETON 2001, p. 79, no. 53 though the provenance is unknown, but p. 60, no. 35 acquired at Rize provides a simpler version.

End of the 19th century.

No. 7. A head of Athena (**Fig. 7**).

An onyx intaglio.

16 × 12 × 4 mm.

Helmeted head of Athena facing to the right; her face is similar to the last but the plume of her helmet differs in detail; in front of her is a spear.

Comparanda. Same as above.

End of the 19th century.

In two other Turkish local museums we have detected forged intaglios figuring the head of Athena, Museum of Marmaris, acc. no. 2015/16 (A) (**Fig. 8**) and from neighbouring Museum of Fethiye (**Fig. 9**), likewise in south-western Turkey. These two Athena heads, likewise engraved on carnelians, gems are iconographically very similar to the two forged gems from Trabzon. In addition, in the collection of the Museum of Marmaris there is a forged cameo depicting a female bust (acc. no. 2012/17 (A) (**Fig. 10**)). These three gems are all previously undetected forgeries, although we do not know when, where and who made them.

Since the 19th century, Trabzon has been famous for traditional craftsmanship and intricate designs by its artisans emanating from its local jewellery workshops. The city is especially famous for knitting silver thread and the art of *kazaz*, crafts which were supposedly inherited from the Lydians.

¹³ HOEY MIDDLETON 2001, p. 79, no. 53, p. 60, no. 35.

These forged gems were certainly created in emulation of an ancient prototype or prototypes, although whether or not they were intended by the modern gem cutter as deliberate forgeries cannot be known with certainty. There is no obvious ancient model and the busts are most likely a pastiche comprising various glyptic elements. However, it is possible that at the end of the 19th century Trabzon was also a centre of gemcutting, driven perhaps by local Greeks or Armenians, who, in particular, made intaglios figuring the head of Athena, as being reminiscent of the ancient Greek heritage of Pontus. We believe that these forged gems with generic busts of Athena wearing a crested helmet with a long crest may well be related, in subject and style to the very common Late Hellenistic coins of Amisus with their obverse portraying the helmeted Athena (**Fig. 11**). Thus, these coins may be visual numismatic sources or prototypes for local forgers in Trabzon at the end of 19th-beginning of 20th century to copy. It is notable that the distribution of this type of forgery is confined more particularly to the southern Black Sea littoral and south-western Turkey rather than elsewhere and we believe that there are many similar specimens of this type in other collections around the world.

A concluding note

Although this is only a very small parcel of finds, the representations of Zeus with an eagle and Athena might well point to official Roman military presence in the vicinity as to an extent pointed out by gems showing Nike with an eagle and an eagle with a palm in the Wright Collection.

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All photographs of the items are not to scale.

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Fig. 1a–b. An engraved onyx depicting an insect, perhaps an ant set in a gold ring, Museum of Trabzon, acc. no. 720 (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Fig. 2.** An engraved milky chalcedony depicting Zeus, seated and being crowned by Nike with a wreath, Museum of Trabzon (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Figs 3a–b.** An engraved sardonyx depicting Athena stands to front, Museum of Trabzon (photo. E. Laflı, 2010, illustration drawn by L. Özlüoğlu, 2024); **Fig. 4a.** An engraved carnelian

depicting an eagle on an altar, Museum of Trabzon (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Fig. 4b.** Depiction of eagle on a column in the Roman road monument of Kuşkayası near Amastris (photo. E. Laflı, 2009); **Fig. 5a.** A pair of gold earring, Museum of Trabzon, acc. no. 648 (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Fig. 5b.** A similar earring from Tomis (?) in the National Museum of History and Archaeology at Constanța, no acc. no.; second-third century AD (after LUNGU, COVACEF, CHERA 2012, p. 44, cat. no. 47, pl. 15); **Fig. 6.** A forged intaglio depicting the head of Athena, Museum of Trabzon, acc. no. 599 (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Fig. 7.** Another forged intaglio depicting the head of Athena, Museum of Trabzon (photo. E. Laflı, 2010); **Fig. 8.** A forged intaglio depicting the head of Athena, Museum of Marmaris, acc. no. 2015/16 (A) (photo. E. O. Tuğay, 2023); **Fig. 9.** Another forged intaglio depicting the head of Athena, Museum of Fethiye (photo. G. Ç. Keskin, 2017); **Fig. 10.** A forged cameo depicting a female bust, Museum of Marmaris, acc. no. 2012/17 (A) (photo. E. O. Tuğay, 2023); **Fig. 11.** An Early Hellenistic bronze coin of Amisus with a helmeted Athena on obverse (after <https://www.coinarchives.com/a/results.php?search=amisos&s=0>), accessed on 1st of January 2024). All dimensions are given in the catalogue (layout by F. H. Kaya, 2024).