 IMAGES OF THE CRUCIFIXION IN LATE ANTIQUITY
The testimony of engraved gems

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CONTENTS

Abstract iii
Declaration iv
Acknowledgments v
INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter I
THE STATE OF THE QUESTION 10
Crucifixion Iconography and Engraved Gems
A. METHODS OF APPROACH
   I. Creating a Theory of Rejection: 16
      1. Social and Political Impediments 17
      2. Mystery and Idolatry 21
      3. Christological Concerns 22
      4. Art Historical Obstacles 24
      5. The "Quasi-avoidance" Solution 26
   II. An Alternative View: neglect 33
B. THE CRUCIFIXION GEMS: a survey of past scholarship 42
   I. Engraved Gems 47
   II. The Crucifixion Gems: some problems of disparity 51
   III. The Origins and Definition of Christian Art 57
Towards a New Perspective 60

Chapter II
THE ICONOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE c. 200 – 600 62
A Brief Review
   I. Second and Third Centuries 65
   II. Third and Fourth Centuries 69
   III. Fifth Century 79
   IV. Sixth Century 100

Chapter III
THE CRUCIFIXION GEMS 117
Part 1. LATE ANTIQUITY
   A. The Pereire Jasper 120
      1. The Inscription 121
      2. The Jasper and its Group 131
      3. The Iconography 134

i
B. The Nott and Constanza Gems
   1. Jesus and the Cross 146
   2. The Inscriptions 150
   3. Veneration Iconography 159

Part 2. BYZANTIUM 161
   A. The Lewis Jasper 184
      1. Jesus 185
      2. The Lance and Sponge-Bearers 197
      3. The Inscription 207
      4. Contemporary Engraved Gems 212

   B. Gaza Jasper 216
      1. The Script 219
      2. The Iconography:
         a. the attendant figures: some problems of identification 229
         b. the twisted and suffering Jesus 243

Part 3. PROBLEMATIC AMULETS 259
   A. Orpheus Bakhchikos Seal-Cylinder 259
   B. Crucified-Ass Amulet 261
   C. Haematite Amulet 263

CONCLUSION 266

Appendix 1: Catalogue of Engraved Gems 281
Appendix 2: The Lewis Jasper and its Group: Spier 286
List of Abbreviations 288
Bibliography 289
List of Illustrations 314
Plates
ABSTRACT

This study takes five gemstones, each engraved with an image of the Crucifixion and previously dated to the Late Antique period, as its focus. Traditionally it has been thought that Christian images of the Crucifixion emerged in the fifth century and that prior to that time, the subject was consciously rejected by artists. Utilising the largely ignored and invariably misused evidence of the gems, this study challenges both the conventional view of the early history of the image and the theory of rejection.

Although the gems have previously been cited to indicate the portrayal of the Crucifixion prior to the fifth century, confusion about their authenticity and art-historical validity has seen them marginalised or dismissed from most iconographic studies of the subject in Late Antiquity. Yet clearly the question of the avoidance of the Crucifixion cannot be addressed until a systematic examination of the gems’ iconographic as well as compositional, physical and epigraphic evidence, is carried out. This study undertakes such an examination. It demonstrates the way in which critical information regarding the evolution of the Crucifixion image in Late Antiquity has been seriously obstructed in previous studies through the dismissal, misapplication and/or misinterpretation of the gems. Focusing on iconography, it presents a revised chronology for the gems. It suggests that only three are Late Antique, with the fourth gem being early Byzantine. The Late Antique date customarily assigned to the fifth gem is rejected and a Middle Byzantine date proposed.

The core investigation of the gems is prefaced by a short review of the material and literary evidence customarily cited in iconographic studies for the representation of the Crucifixion between c. AD 200 and c. 600. The extent to which the gems augment and transform this evidence is shown to be significant. Drawing on the testimony of the gems this study proposes that at least two design models of the representation of Jesus on the cross were circulating prior to the fifth century but proved unpopular: the earliest model is “magical” and is characterised by its realism; the second, later model is Christian and is characterised by its symbolism. The focus away from the subject in art prior to the fifth century is shown to be witnessed in the small number of surviving gems and in the compositional formats and iconography adopted on them. On the strength of such discoveries the study concludes that the prevailing assumptions regarding the rejection of Crucifixion imagery in Late Antiquity need to be reconsidered.