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The Emerald City: Gem Collecting and Literary Patronage in First Century BCE Rome

[all translation Loeb except where noted]

A. Origins of Roman gem collecting

<p>1. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.11-12 Gemmas plures primus omnium Romae habuit—quod peregrino appellant nomine dactyliotheacam—privignus Sullae Scaurus, diuque nulla alia fuit, donec Pompeius Magnus eam quae Mithridatis regis fuerat inter dona in Capitolio dicaret, ut Varro aliique aetatis eius auctores confirmant, multum praelata Scauri. hoc exemplo Caesar dictator sex dactyliotheacas in aede Veneris Genetricis consecravit, Marcellus Octavia genitus unam in aede Palatini Apollinis. <u>Victoria tamen illa Pompei primum ad margaritas gemmasque mores inclinavit, sicut L. Scipionis et Cn. Manli ad caelatum argentum et vestes Attalicas et triclinia aerata, sicut L. Mummi ad Corinthia et tabulas pictas.</u></p>	<p>The first Roman to own a collection of gemstones (for which we normally use the foreign term ‘dactyliotheaca,’ or ‘ring cabinet’) was Sulla’s stepson Scaurus. For many years there was no other until Pompey the Great dedicated in the Capitol among his other offerings a ring cabinet that had belonged to King Mithridates [61 BCE]. This, as Varro and other authorities of the period confirm, was far inferior to that of Scaurus. Pompey’s example was followed by Julius Caesar, who during his dictatorship consecrated six cabinets of gems in the temple of Venus Genetrix, and by Marcellus, Octavia’s son, who dedicated one in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine. However, <u>it was this victory of Pompey over Mithridates that made fashion veer to pearls and gemstones.</u> The victories of Lucius Scipio and of Cnaeus Manlius had done the same for chased silver, garments of cloth of gold and dining couches inlaid with bronze; and that of Mummius for Corinthian bronzes and fine paintings.</p>
<p>2. Suet., <i>Jul.</i> 47 Britanniam petisse spe margaritarum, quarum amplitudinem conferentem interdum sua manu exegisse pondus; gemmas, toreumata, signa, tabulas operis antiqui semper animosissime comparasse.</p>	<p>They say that [Caesar] was led to invade Britain by the hope of getting pearls, and that in comparing their size he sometimes weighed them with his own hand; that he was always a most enthusiastic collector of gems, carvings, statues, and pictures by early artists.</p>
<p>3. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.10 divus Augustus inter initia sphinge signavit. duas in matris anulis eas indiscretae similitudinis invenerat. altera per bella civilia absente ipso signavere amici epistulas et edicta quae ratio temporum nomine eius reddi postulabat, non inficeto lepore accipientium, aenigmata adferre eam sphingem. <u>quippe etiam Maecenatis rana per collationes pecuniarum in magno terrore erat.</u> Augustus postea ad devitanda convicia sphingis Alexandri Magni imagine signavit.</p>	<p>Augustus of Revered Memory at the beginning of his career used a signet engraved with a sphinx, having found among his mother’s rings two such signets which were so alike as to be indistinguishable. During the Civil Wars, one of these was used by his personal advisers, whenever he himself was absent, for signing any letters and proclamations which the circumstances required to be despatched in his name. The recipients used to make a neat joke saying ‘the Sphinx brings its problems.’ <u>Of course, the frog signet belonging to Maecenas was also greatly feared because of the contributions of money that it demanded.</u> In later years Augustus, wishing to avoid insulting comments about the sphinx, signed his documents with a likeness of Alexander the Great.</p>

B. Augustus's joking letter and Maecenas's gem poem

<p>1. Macr., <i>Sat.</i> 2.4.12 Idem Augustus, quia Mecenatem suum noverat stilo esse remisso, molli et dissoluto, talem se in epistulis quas ad eum scribebat saepius exhibebat et contra castigationem loquendi, quam alias ille scribendo servabat, in epistula ad Maecenatem familiari plura in iocos effusa subtexit: “vale mel gentium †meculle†, ebur ex Etruria, lasar Arretinum, adamas Supernas, Tiberinum margaritum, Cilniorum smaragde, iaspi Iguvinorum, berulle Porsenae, carbunculum habeas, ἴνα συντέμω πάντα, ἀλλαγμα* moecharum.” *or μάλαγμα, “pillow”</p>	<p>Because he knew that Maecenas had a free-and-easy writing style given to extravagance and effeminacy, he often adopted the same character in the letters he wrote to him, the opposite of the austere style he otherwise cultivated in his writing. So he rounded off a personal letter to Maecenas with the following jocular effusion (epist. fr. 32 Malc.): “Farewell, my honey of all the world, . . . my ivory of Etruria, lasar of Arretium, diamond of the Adriatic, pearl of the Tiber, emerald of the Cilnii, potters’ jasper, beryl of Porsenna, carbuncle—hope you get one!—in short, the prize of adultresses.”</p>
<p>2. Maec., fr. 185 Hollis lucentes, mea vita, nec smaragdos, beryllos mihi, Flacce, nec nitentes, <nec> percandida margarita quaero, nec quos Thynia lima perpolivit anellos, nec iaspis lapillos</p>	<p>Flaccus, my life, I ask for myself neither sparkling emeralds nor radiant beryls, nor pure white pearls, nor finger-rings which a Thynian file has polished to the uttermost, nor pebbles of jasper. (trans. Hollis)</p>

C. Emeralds as pure aesthetic objects?

<p>1. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.64 quam ob rem decreto hominum iis parcitur scalpi vetitis.</p>	<p>Because of these properties, mankind has decreed that emeralds must be preserved in their natural state and has forbidden them to be engraved.</p>
<p>2. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.8 Ismeniae aetate multos post annos apparet scalpi etiam smaragdos solitos. confirmat hanc eandem opinionem edictum Alexandri Magni, quo vetuit in hac gemma ab alio se scalpi quam ab Pyrgotele, non dubie clarissimo artis eius.</p>	<p>In the time of Ismenias, many years later, it seems evident that it had become customary to engrave even ‘smaragdi.’ This impression is supported, moreover, by an edict of Alexander the Great forbidding his likeness to be engraved on this stone by anyone except Pyrgoteles, who was undoubtedly the most brilliant artist in this field.</p>
<p>3. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.1-2 Ut nihil instituto operi desit, gemmae supersunt et in artum coacta rerum naturae maiestas, multis nulla parte mirabilior. <u>tantum tribuunt varietati, coloribus, materiae, decori, violare etiam signis</u>, quae causa gemmarum est, <u>quasdam nefas ducentes</u>, aliquas vero extra pretia ulla taxationemque humanarum opum arbitantes, ut plerisque <u>ad summam absolutamque naturae rerum contemplationem satis sit una aliqua gemma</u>. Quae fuerit origo et a quibus <u>institis in tantum admiratio haec exarserit</u>, diximus quadamtenus in mentione auri anulorumque.</p>	<p>In order that the work that I have undertaken may be complete, it remains for me to discuss gem-stones. Here Nature’s grandeur is gathered together within the narrowest limits; and in no domain of hers evokes more wonder in the minds of many <u>who set such store by the variety, the colours, the texture and the elegance of gems that they think it a crime to tamper with certain kinds by engraving them as signets</u>, although this is the prime reason for their use; while some they consider to be beyond price and to defy evaluation in terms of human wealth. Hence very many people find that <u>a single gemstone alone is enough to provide them with a supreme and perfect aesthetic experience of the wonders of Nature</u>. The origin of the use of gemstones and the <u>beginning of our present enthusiasm for them, which has blazed into so violent a passion</u>, I have already discussed to some extent in my references to gold and to rings.</p>

D. Emeralds' pleasing properties

<p>1. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.63 quin et ab intentione alia aspectu smaragdi recreatur acies, scalpentibusque gemmas non alia gratior oculorum refectio est, ita viridi lenitate lassitudinem mulcent.</p>	<p>Indeed, even after straining our sight by looking at another object, we can restore it to its normal state by looking at an emerald; and engravers of gemstones find that this is the most agreeable means of refreshing their eyes, so soothing to their feeling of fatigue is the mellow green color of the stone.</p>
<p>2. Theophrastus, <i>On Stones</i> 24 και προς τά ὄμματα ἀγαθή, διό και τά σφραγίδια φοροῦσιν ἐξ αὐτῆς ὥστε βλέπειν.</p>	<p>It is also good for the eyes, and for this reason people carry seals made of it, so as to see better. (text and trans. Caley and Richards 1956)</p>

E. Faking emeralds

<p>1. Seneca, <i>Ep.</i> 90.33 Excidit porro vobis eundem Democritum invenisse, quemadmodum ebur molliretur, <u>quemadmodum decoctus calculus in zmaragdum converteretur, qua hodieque coctura inventi lapides in hoc utiles colorantur.</u> Ista sapiens licet invenerit, non qua sapiens erat, invenit; multa enim facit, quae ab imprudentissimis aut aeque fieri videmus aut peritius atque exercitatus.</p>	<p>It seems to have quite slipped your memory that this same Democritus discovered how ivory could be softened, <u>how, by boiling, a pebble could be transformed into an emerald,—the same process used even today for coloring stones which are found to be amenable to this treatment!</u> It may have been a wise man who discovered all such things, but he did not discover them by virtue of being a wise man; for he does many things which we see done just as well, or even more skillfully and dexterously, by men who are utterly lacking in sagacity.</p>
<p>2. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.197-198 Veras a falsis discernere magna difficultas, quippe cum inventum sit ex veris generis alterius in aliud falsas traducere...quin immo etiam exstant commentarii auctorum—quos non equidem demonstrabo—<u>quibus modis ex crystallo smaragdum tinguant aliasque tralucentes, sardonycheme sarda, item ceteras ex aliis; neque enim est ulla fraus vitae lucrosior. nos contra rationem deprendendi falsas demonstrabimus, quando etiam luxuriam adversus fraudes muniri deceat.</u></p>	<p>To distinguish genuine and false gemstones is extremely difficult, particularly as men have discovered how to make genuine stones of one variety into false stones of another....And furthermore, there are treatises by authorities, whom I at least shall not deign to mention by name, <u>describing how by means of dyestuffs emeralds and other transparent colored gems are made from rock-crystal,</u> or a sardonyx from a sard, and similarly all other gemstones from one stone or another. And there is no other trickery that is practiced against society with greater profit. I, on the other hand, am prepared to explain the methods of detecting false gems, since it is only fitting that even luxury should be protected against deception.</p>
<p>3. Varro, <i>Papia Papae</i> fr. 387 Cebe imperito nonnumquam concha videtur margarita, vitrum smaragdus</p>	<p>To the untrained eye, a shell might seem to be a pearl, glass might seem to be an emerald.</p>
<p>4. Pliny, <i>NH</i> 37.67ff. Sed et vitia demonstrari convenit in tam prodigis pretiis. sunt quidem omnium eadem, quaedam tamen nationum peculiariora, sicut in homine....</p>	<p>But since high prices are so freely paid for these stones, it is only right that we should point out their defects, some of which are common to every kind, while others are regional peculiarities, as with human beings.... [Pliny goes on to give a thorough guide to emerald appraisal]</p>

F. Tibullus (and Ovid) on gem appraisal

<p>1. Tibullus 1.6.25-26 saepe, velut gemmas eius signumque probarem, per causam memini me tetigisse manum</p>	<p>Many a time on the plea of judging her gem and its image can I remember how I touched her hand. [cf. Ovid, <i>Tr.</i> 2.451-2]</p>
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