

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

This paper examines the emergence of precious stone collections at ancient Rome and argues that the trend of gem collecting influenced both the behavior of literary patrons and the development of poetry arrangements in published verse. Scholarship on precious gems in Rome, and their relation to literature, has typically focused either on their appearance in the discourse of moral decline (e.g. Bittarello 2019) or on the connection between luxury goods and imperialism (e.g. Damer 2019), but has so far failed to discuss the phenomenon of the collection as a parallel for literary patronage (whereby collecting poets, just like collecting gems, could be a source of cultural capital). This oversight limits our understanding of the ways that Latin poetry production was affected by material aspects of elite culture; by historicizing the practice of gem collecting, we can thus reveal a deeper connection to other elements of late Republican Roman life.

Gem collecting first became fashionable at Rome in the first century BCE, when first Scourus, and later Pompey and Caesar, acquired massive collections; greater public interest in the habit soon followed (Pliny, *HN* 37.12). Among the most prominent collectors was Maecenas, also a major literary patron. In a letter preserved by Macrobius (*Sat.* 2.4.12), Augustus mocks Maecenas's interest in precious gems; moreover, Macrobius understands Augustus to be making a larger jest about the literary aesthetics Maecenas preferred. The letter should be read alongside a fragmentary poem by Maecenas (Hollis 2009) also featuring a list of precious stones (and seemingly comparing gem collection to his friendship with Horace). Petrain 2005 has suggested we read these Roman discussions of gems as metapoetic engagement; I further argue that "collector culture" articulates the social relationship of patron to poet (cf. Bounia 2004, Rutledge 2012). First century BCE gem collection as a paradigm for literary patronage may also

explain how the so-called “Scipionic Circle” of the second century BCE was in fact a retrojection by Cicero of the values of his own time.

Beyond patrons, I also argue that poets themselves were influenced by the vogue of gem collections. Not only did the treatment of precious stones reflect the Alexandrian poetic aesthetics of the age (later to be called the “jeweled style”), but the idea of formal arrangement of variegated gems in one presentation box may have influenced the rise in Rome of publishing carefully arranged poetic collections (Leigh 2010) rather than tossing off nugatory verses in occasional contexts. The Milan Papyrus, in which Posidippus’s *Lithika* appears, can demonstrate how jewels could influence poetic production in this manner (Petraïn 2005, Kuttner 2005).

Individual gemstones possessed distinct cultural significance (Allen 2019).

While classical scholarship on luxury materials tends to prioritize marbles, precious metals, or pearls, I focus, as a case study, on the emerald as activating the imaginations of Roman writers. The ancient “emerald” (called *smaragdus*, vel sim.) actually referred to a range of green gems, not just the modern green beryl (Caley and Richards 1956), thus complicating judgment by collectors. More importantly, the emerald could be faked, a lucrative process which apparently had Democritean connections (Sen., *Ep.* 90) and for which explanatory treatises existed (Pliny, *HN* 37.197). This meant that connoisseurship was important in determining counterfeits and cheap imitations (as Varro jokes about in his satire *Papia Papae*). Within the new culture of the Roman gem collector, appraisal mattered more than mere acquisition: quality became superior to quantity, and emeralds in particular required expert knowledge to appraise. An analysis of Roman gem collecting which connects its rise to contemporary developments in literary culture can improve our understanding of changing attitudes in elite culture at Rome in the first century BCE.

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