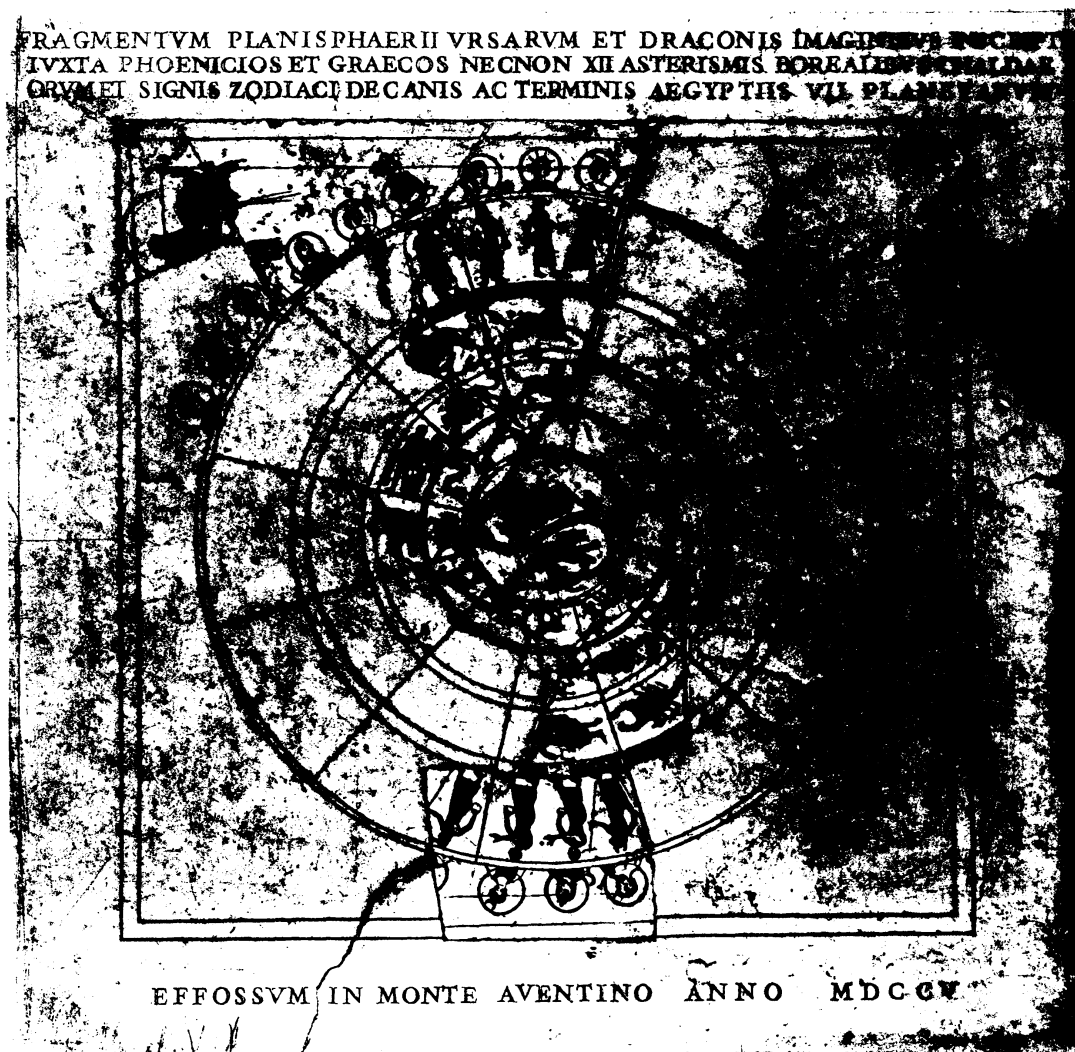


FURTHER NOTES ON
'A JEWISH-GNOSTIC AMULET
OF THE ROMAN PERIOD'

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PLATE 6 KAHN



PARIS. LOUVRE. PLANISPHERE BIANCHINI

I.

In *Greek and Byzantine Studies* for July, 1958, Professor E. R. Goodenough proposed for discussion a most interesting gem or amulet, together with some tentative suggestions as to the meaning of the inscribed figures (pp. 71–80). Since the object presents so many riddles, and since it seems to have been inspired by Greek as well as by Hebrew ideas, there is perhaps room for suggestions from readers who are not at all specialists in the history of oriental religions.

What I find most puzzling is the snake circling an omphalos which appears within the zodiac on one of the two principal faces of the stone (p. 72, fig. 2). As Professor Goodenough points out, we would expect to find the zodiac accompanied by a celestial figure, such as Helios. The omphalos is of course the navel of the earth, but can it be the navel of the sky? Only, I think, if our snake also belongs in heaven. And of course we do not have to look far to find such a celestial serpent. Even more appropriate than the Sun in the center of the zodiac is the ancient polar constellation, the Dragon. Draco is very clearly indicated in this place on one of the best-preserved of all ancient zodiacs, the Planisphere Bianchini in the Louvre (see Plate 6), and the same symbolism is attested, in freer artistic form, on Pompeian paintings of the shield of Achilles.¹ In the more scientifically conceived Planisphere, the polar beast actually bears some resemblance to the visible constellation; while in the wall paintings (as in our amulet) it is simply shown as a snake.

If the snake is Draco, the boss on which it lies should be the pole or heavenly vault rather than the navel of the earth. Of course it may very well represent both at the same time, but the celestial reference is the more obvious and, it seems to me, the more meaningful. With the zodiac, the Sun, and the Moon unmistakably identified, it is natural to look for an astronomical explanation of all the figures on this face. The seven dots next to the Sun should symbolize either the seven planets (counting the Sun and Moon in their number) or else the spheres in which these planets stand. The outer sphere of the fixed stars has already been recognized in the zodiac and the polar constellations. The only sphere still missing from a complete representation of the cosmos is the terrestrial or sublunar region — and the only figure left unexplained on this side of the amulet is a small circle *underneath the Moon*. It naturally represents the earth.

Assuming, then, that this face of the little stone refers to heaven — or to heaven and earth taken together as God's creation (as in *Ge. 1.1*) — we may give the Adam-and-Eve scene on the other side its usual significance, as the image of man's sin. The two sides of the

¹ See O. Brendel, "Der Schild des Achilles," *Die Antike*, 12 (1936), 273ff., with Plates 16 and 20.

amulet thus present a clear and forceful image of the antithesis between Good and Evil, between the holy snake of the Lord of Heaven and the disastrous serpent of sin. The thought behind the imagery seems to correspond exactly to an idea developed by Philo Judaeus, which Goodenough has cited elsewhere in discussing the significance of snakes on amulets:

To Philo, excesses in pleasure . . . are typified in the serpent of Eve, the serpent which is the pleasure-seeking principle in life, and which "ruins the soul by vice." The cure for this ruin is to turn to Moses, like the people bitten by snakes in the wilderness, acknowledge the sin, and ask his mediation. To help them, Philo explains, God told Moses to give the people a serpent, "opposite in kind to that of Eve," and representing the principle of self-control. . . . Hence, "if the mind, when bitten by pleasure, the serpent of Eve, shall have succeeded in beholding in the soul the beauty of self-mastery, the serpent of Moses, and through beholding this, beholds God himself, he shall live."²

The imagery of our amulet is more Hellenized, less Biblical than that of Philo. Instead of the brazen snake raised aloft by Moses, we are reminded of the nocturnal brilliance of the Dragon in the sky. But the astral serpent is surely only a new symbol for this same power of the Lord to save men from sin, which was proclaimed to Moses in the wilderness: "And it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live."³

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2.

Time and the diligence of the Rabbis have combined to efface every vestige of a popular heretical Jewish Gnosticism. Therefore, when a monument of such a movement is discovered, we must of necessity have recourse to the knowledge we have of the Christian Gnostics of the first centuries of our era.

Professor Erwin R. Goodenough has shown the Jewish amulet from the de Clercq Collection (which he published in the July 1958 issue of this journal) to have certain marked Gnostic affinities, and he has employed the knowledge we have of the rites of the Naassenes to explain certain of the designs on this object. It is clear, however,

² E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 2 (New York, 1953), 266, citing Philo, *Legum Allegoria*, 2. 76-81.

³ *Nu.* 21. 8.

that the amulet does not derive from the Naassenes themselves, but rather from some Jewish sect which incorporated some of their teachings, and, as Professor Goodenough suggested, probably revered the snake of the second chapter of Genesis as the bringer of divine Gnosis to man.

I should like to suggest that there are some aspects of the amulet which are not due to the Naassene Gnostics, but rather to that sect of Simonians which Tertullian mentions as still existing in his time. It is noteworthy that whatever the relationship between Simon Magus himself and the *Megalé Apophasis* preserved for us under his name by Hippolytus in the *Refutatio* 6.9, 3-18, 7,¹ it seems likely that Hippolytus established a connection between the two, that is, if the *Megalé Apophasis* does not come from the Simonian school, just because there is no mention of redemption or of Christ in the *Megalé Apophasis*, where the important divinity is ἡ ἀπέραντος δύναμις, (i.e. Simon himself, if it is identified with ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη μεγάλη in *Acts* 8,10) also called ἡ ἐβδόμη δύναμις. It is well known that the two main figures of the Simonian system were Simon himself and the prostitute Helena, whom he identified with the divine Ennoia.²

Moreover, while Simon was identified with the "seventh power," Helena was originally a moon-goddess,³ and continued to be that in the Simonian system even after she had become the divine Ennoia, and so the mother of the archons of the Pleroma, the creators and rulers of the material world. If this modification of the Gnostic myth lies behind the figures represented beside the Zodiac on one of the main faces of the amulet, it becomes possible to relate the opposition of the seven bosses underneath the sun, arranged so that the seventh receives a special place outside the order of the first six, and the one below the moon to the seven archons of the planets and to the divine Ennoia, identified in Eustathius with the *σεληναία ἄνθρωπος*, respectively.

In relation to the Simonian myth, the tower pictured on one of the beveled off corners of the amulet (Fig. 6) could very well represent the *πύργος* from which Simon rescued Helena, also identified with the tower of Troy from which Helen shone the light to the attacking Greeks, and with the prison of the soul (Helena-anima).⁴

¹ *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, ed. Paul Wendland in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Hippolytus, 3 (Leipzig, 1916).

² Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1. 23. 2.

³ Cf. G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zurich, 1951), 64ff. and Eustathius, on the *Odyssey* 4. 121.

⁴ Might the *cheth* above the tower also perhaps stand for *hodesh*, the new moon?

It would be surprising for a Jewish-Gnostic sect of the third century, approximately, to have absorbed certain Simonian elements as well as Naassene ones. Although the snake played no part, as far as we know, in the Simonian rites, the Naassenes identified their highest god with the horn of the crescent moon as well as with the horn of the one-horned bull,⁵ and the connection between the snake-god and the moon-goddess was not far to seek for the syncretist.

We may note too that according to Hippolytus a sect closely related to the Ophites and the Naassenes, the Peratae, placed the snake within the Zodiac, or rather, "in the great ἀρχή of heaven" where the stars neither rise nor set (*Refutatio* 5.16, 14). This does not of course exclude the identification of the snake within the zodiac as a symbol of Apollo, although the divine snake of the Naassenes was identified with him whom "those who live about the Haemus call Corybas,"⁶ and thus may derive from the same Dionysiac sphere from whose worship the basket in the amulet seems to come. The vine in figure 3 may derive from the same ritual.

Figure 4 of Professor Goodenough's photographs of the amulet shows four heads with their chins facing the center. It seems to me that this representation is to be taken closely with the Paradise scene of figure 8. Four heads naturally suggest the river which "went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted and became into four heads." Together with the angel Naas, these four ἀρχαί appear in the fragment of the Gnostic Justin in *Refutatio* 5. 26, as evil principles.

For the Gnostics, and for the Naassenes in particular, the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge symbolized the attainment of the Gnosis necessary for redemption. In figure 8 Adam and Eve and the tree are flanked by the letters *cheth* and *daleth*, which if read together as the Aramaic *chad*, "one", may help to clarify the Gnostic conception of the events in the garden. According to Genesis, a man and wife "shall be one flesh." For the Naassenes, the universe appears in the symbolic form of the man who is at once male and female, and through Gnosis, in which all opposites were to be reconciled, the individual would himself encompass all contradictory principles.

If then the letters inscribed on either side of the Paradise scene in our amulet do stand for unity, they would represent that unity of opposing principles which is the result of the Gnosis the snake is in the process of imparting to Eve, not only the Gnosis of good and evil that Professor Goodenough mentions but the ultimate Gnosis of the original undisturbed state of the universe to which man might return

⁵ Hippolytus, *op. cit.* 5. 9,8: ἐπουράνιον μηνὸς κέρασ Ἑλληνίς σοφία (sc. σε καλεῖ).

⁶ Hippolytus, *op. cit.* 5. 8, 13. For the Corybantes in a syncretistic, Bacchic environment, see Strabo, 5. 3. 7.

if he became conscious of how evil had been introduced into the All.

It is obvious that the interpretations I have given are not incontrovertible. Nevertheless, I think that Professor Goodenough is right in assigning the amulet to a Gnostic milieu, albeit to one that does not conform to the description of any one known Gnostic sect. Moreover, this seems to be one of those magical charms that have always emanated from popular, non-philosophical circles open to wide influences, so that it is not out of place to record those reminiscences of contemporary religious ideas which appear on it.

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3.

In the first number of *Greek and Byzantine Studies* Professor Goodenough published an extremely interesting amulet from the de Clercq collection.¹ His brilliant explanation of its symbols — as reflecting a form of gnosis cognate to that of the Naasenes, but here without apparently Christian elements — seemed to the present writer undoubtedly correct. It could, however, have been carried further.

On the astronomical face of the amulet the isolated boss outside the circle of the zodiac and below the horns of the crescent moon, almost certainly, in that context, represents a star (not a planet because the seven planets are represented, as Goodenough pointed out, by seven bosses on the other side of the circle). From Hippolytus² we learn that the Naasenes allegorized the primal (androgynous) man or universal soul as the pole star, because he it is about whom all things revolve and who causes their movement. He is properly located outside the cosmos, as this star on the amulet is outside the zodiac, though he descends into it when involved in the process of creation.³ The myth of Endymion was allegorized to show that even the moon and the other celestial bodies had need of the soul, and on the amulet this star is placed opposite the crescent, of which the arms extend toward it.⁴

On one of the smallest sides of the amulet is represented, as Goodenough explained, the Dionysiac basket, which contained the serpent which was the symbol of the deity. Goodenough says “the

¹ E. Goodenough, “A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet of the Roman Period,” *GBS*, 1 (1958), 71ff.

² Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, V. 8 (ed. E. Miller [Oxford, 1851], 114; ed. P. Wendland [Leipzig, 1916], 95).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 107, Miller; pp. 86f., Wendland.

⁴ *Idem.*, V. 7, 98-9, Miller; p. 81, Wendland.

basket is in two parts . . . and the lower part is larger, boat shaped, with seven little bosses on it.”⁵ Rather, the basket is represented as on a boat, and the boat is identified by the seven bosses as the cosmos, the seven planetary spheres. (We have just above seen the seven bosses, with this significance, on the astronomical face.) That the deity is borne or throned on the celestial spheres, is a widespread notion in this sort of material.⁶ That the cosmic spheres which bear the deity are here represented as a boat may reflect Egyptian tradition (the boat of the sun god) and so *perhaps* suggest the source of the amulet.

The four heads on one end of the amulet may be the four winds, which appear as the cortège of the saviour deity in the Naassene frescoes of the Viale Manzoni tomb, where they are also represented by four heads.^{6a}

Finally, the main inscription.⁷ The bevel which otherwise runs around it seems to be lacking on the right side. In the upper right corner there is a line, level with the top of the first preserved letter (*resh*) and running to the edge of the stone; it looks like the top of another letter, possibly of another *resh*, of which the vertical line has been lost by cutting down the stone on that side (when the bevel, too, was lost). How much was cut away is uncertain. At the right of the bottom line, beside the *peh*, there seems to be a small mark which might be either the edge of the bevel or a corner of a lost letter. It looks more like the latter and if we suppose that one letter has been lost at the bottom, one letter and a fraction of another might have been lost at the top. The size of the stone would hardly allow for the loss of more.⁸

This would yield as the first six letters שחר ע[ר, “awakener of the dawn,” which might have behind it a reference to the mysterious awakensers of the serpent Leviathan in Job 3.8 (where the same

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁶ See the references collected in my article, “The Image of God,” *Bull. of the Jn. Rylands Library*, 40 (1958), 510f.

^{6a} J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres* (Paris, 1956), 135f. and Plate 8.

⁷ Shown upside down on Plate 3, p. 72, of Goodenough’s article. I here discuss it as if it were right side up, i.e. “top line” means *bottom line* of the print, “upper right corner” means *lower left corner*, etc.

⁸ In support of this I note that the borders around the astronomical face of the stone especially seem to have been cut for a stone of slightly different shape, and in particular, if the inscription was on the vertical side beneath what is the bottom of astronomical face as printed, and if the tops of the letters were toward the astronomical face, then the angle of the cut off corner which would have been the *resh* is much more oblique than any of the others and suggests that *that* face may have been recut, for one or another reason, with some loss to the adjacent inscription.

verb is used), the serpent being interpreted as the dawn not only because it was an accepted symbol of the sun god,⁹ but also because of the Hebrew phrase *אעירה שחר* in Pss. 57.9 108.3 (where also the same verb is used).

These were translated by LXX, "I shall awake at dawn," by the Targum, "I shall awake for the morning prayer," but they could mean, "I shall awake the dawn,"¹⁰ in which case it would be natural to take "the dawn" as an epithet of the deity who is the object of the following praise and of the immediately following verb,¹¹ who is elsewhere in the Pss. exhorted to awaken¹² (with the same verb), and whose "awakeners" (still the same verb) continued to perform their function in the temple until prohibited by Johanan the High Priest (John Hyrcanus, 134–104 B.C.).¹³ If this interpretation be correct the following letters will be a spell for "awakening" (securing the attention of) the deity, here represented as a serpent.

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⁹ So on amulets, see E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 2 (New York, 1953), 247f., 261-7; also C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Ann Arbor, 1950). 142f. and 154.

¹⁰ This is the translation preferred by the Standard Revised Version.

¹¹ *אעירה שחר אודך בעמים יהוה*.

¹² Ps. 44.24, *עורה למה תישן אדני*.

¹³ Mishnah, Ma'aser Sheni 5.15; Sotah 9.10.