

TWO INSCRIBED PUNIC SEALS FROM THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

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The ancient gems collection of the Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California contains only two inscribed gems. As part of the process of preparing a catalogue, they were brought to the attention of the author by Mr. Kenneth Hamma, curator of the collection, and are published here with the permission of the museum. Their importance lies in their contribution of two unique names to the Phoenician-Punic onomasticon, and in a scribal/carver peculiarity of one seal that allows for two quite different interpretations.

I. Dark Brown Sard with bust of Nike and Inscription (Fig. 1a, b).

12, 8 x 12, 2 x 2, 6 mm: provenience: Djerba, Tunisia.

Item n. 186 in the forthcoming *Ancient Gems Catalogue*.

The inscription on this gem is incised in clear letters that conform palaeographically to the pattern of standard second century BCE Punic¹. It contains a single word, *qpnt*. This appears to be a proper name, the marked feminine form of a masculine *qpn* attested only once in the known corpus of Phoenician-Punic on an inscription from Carthage (cf. RÉS, 1, p. 54).

The etymology of *qpn* is unknown. Although it has been suggested that it may be derived from Berber, no Berber etymon has been suggested². Another possibility is to connect *qpnt* with *qp'*, a term indicating some precious commodity dedicated to the gods in a fourth century BCE Phoenician inscription from Kition (KAI 37: A 3). If correct, the final *nun* could be explained as a nominal building element, cf. Hebrew *šlmh*, which may have been pronounced originally **šalāmo* but which has later dialectal variants reflected in the LXX, Salomon or Solomon, and the form *m^egiddōn* in Zech. 12: 11 for the name of the city of Megiddo. On the basis of its orthography, we may venture that Phoenician *qp'* may have been pronounced **qapo*, **qopo* or the like; *qpn*, **qopon*; and *qpnt*, **qoponit*.

II. Carnelian Seal (Fig. 2a, b)

9, 8 x 7, 3 x 3, 2 mm; provenience: Tunisia.

Item n. 308 in the forthcoming *Ancient Gems Catalogue*.

¹ J. B. Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts*, Cambridge, Mass. 1968, pp. 186-87, pl. XVI.

² F. L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions*, Rome 1972, p. 406.

This seal presents some interesting difficulties which can be resolved by pursuing two different interpretative paths. The first assumes that everything inscribed on it is in one language; the second that it contains inscriptions in two languages.

The monolingual interpretation.

Two words are inscribed in fairly clear letters on the seal, but in different directions. The lower letters on the impression, read right to left, spell *zhb/p* (i. e. the last letter could be either a *bet* or a *pe*, a fact which would not affect the interpretation of the word). This may be translated «gold». The impression of the top word can only be read from left to right, against the normal direction of reading and against that of the lower word. It reads *hykt*. The final *t*, the regular feminine ending, enables us to assume that it is a woman's name of unknown meaning. The name is unattested in the Phoenician-Punic onomasticon. The base of the name, *hyk*, may not be semitic.

The carver of this seal erred in his work. Initially, the top line containing the name *hkyt* was not carved in mirror writing so that it could be impressed, but as if it were intended to be read as is; then he carved the lower word so that it could be read properly only when impressed.

The inscription may be dated cautiously on palaeographic grounds to the second century BCE³. The usual significant distinction between *b* and *p* in this period would have been the presence of a closed loop, either curved or triangular at the head of *b* which would have been absent in the case of a *p*. However, open headed *b* is also attested⁴.

The only letter particularly difficult to locate within this chronological horizon is the second one, identified as a *yod*. Its closest affinities appear to be with *yods* of the third century BCE and earlier⁵. Despite this, the preponderance of data supports a second century date.

Also noteworthy is the fact that two different forms of *he* are used, one as the first letter of the top word and the other as the middle letter of the lower one (Could this indicate that two different carvers worked on the gem?).

In addition to the unique personal name, this seal contains the first attestation of the common semitic word for gold, *zhb*, in an inscription which belongs unmistakably to the Phoenician-Punic corpus.

The bilingual interpretation.

J. Spier, who is preparing the antique gems catalogue for the Getty Museum, concurs that the first line is Punic but opines that the second is Latin SEC and

³ J.B. Peckham, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-85, pl. XV.

⁴ Cf. M.G. Amadasi Guzzo, *Scavi a Mozia - Le iscrizioni*, Roma 1986, tabella 2, where the examples all come from stratum III and fig. 7 where the unmistakable *b* is completely congruent with that on this gem. Cf. also G. Garbini, *The Question of the Alphabet*, in S. Moscati (ed.), *The Phoenicians*, New York 1988, p. 97.

⁵ J.B. Peckham, *op. cit.*, p. 181, pl. XIII and p. 183, pl. XIV.

probably stands for *Secunda* or the like⁶. This interpretation has two advantages over the monolingual one. It resolves the issue of carving in two different directions by positing that the inscription was not intended to be read in impression: each line was written in the direction appropriate to its own language. It eliminates the strangeness of the two very different forms of *he* by positing that one of them is a letter in a different alphabet.

Evaluating the degree of credence that we may attribute to this explanation must await an analysis of the second line by a scholar of palaeographic Latin. The two determinations that this scholar must make are whether the shapes of the 'Latin' letters are attested on the same chronological horizon, and whether this horizon is the same as that of the Punic letters.

⁶ Spier's view was expressed in a letter to Kenneth Hamma, curator of the gems collection at the Getty Museum. Mr. Hamma quoted it in a letter to me dated 27 January 1992.



Fig. 1a: the Gem



Fig. 1b: the Impression



Fig. 2a: the Gem

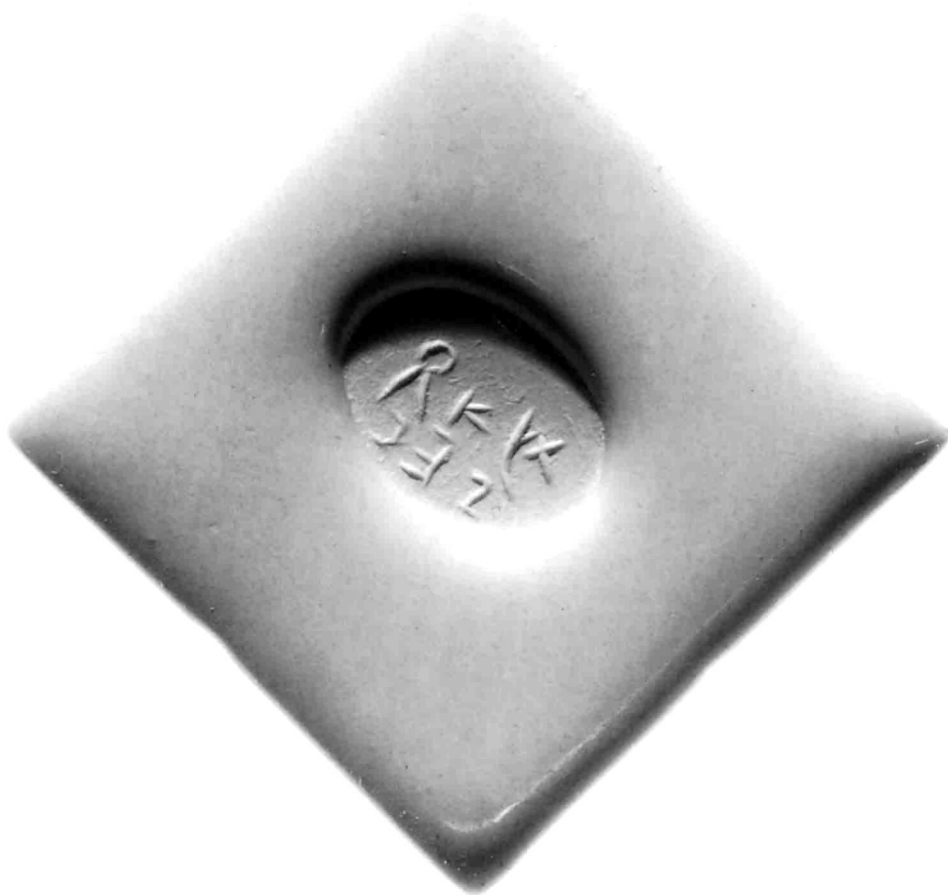


Fig. 2b: the Impression