



Summary :

The art of engraving gems to be used as seals or decorative artefacts flourished from the mid-6th cent. BC onwards. It is closely related to the numismatic art both in terms of iconography and technique, for signets and coins were often produced by the same engravers.

Date

6th cent. BC-Hellenistic era

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Geometric – Early Archaic period (750-600 BC)

The art of seal engraving, following its heyday during the Bronze Age, vanished altogether after the collapse of the Mycenaean centres in mainland Greece and Asia Minor in c. 1200 BC. Following a protracted period of cultural decline and financial deterioration, by the early 9th cent. BC mainland Greece experiences the first clear signs of recovery. The Greeks revisit forgotten techniques, often influenced and instructed by their neighbours in the Near East. This course will continue until the 7th cent. BC, when the first signs of oriental influences become evident in Greek Art, leading scholars to dub this period the Orientalising Revolution. Eastern Greece (the west coast of Asia Minor and the nearby Aegean islands) acted as intermediaries in this cultural exchange. Cyprus, Crete, and [Rhodes](#) also functioned as mediators, as attested by the archaeological record.

The first Geometric era signets were square, made up of marble, limestone and other similar material. They were originally crafted mainly in the Cyclades, but soon they were also produced in northeast Peloponnese. Their function was decorative rather than bureaucratic. One of the earliest examples (from c. 700 BC) comes from [Samos](#): this is a square signet measuring approx. 25X30 cm, and depicts Achilles carrying the dead body of Ajax. It is worth noting that two impressions made with this seal survive: one from Samos (on a votive offering tablet) and one from the first Greek colony in the West, the island of Ischia in the gulf of Neapolis.¹ Its theme, and its appearance on both edges of the Greek world during the late 8th cent. BC, are characteristic of the typology of early seals and the means by which their motifs spread. Other, less typical examples of signets, bore non-representational patterns and were used to imprint relief decoration on gold foil jewellery.

2. Archaic period (600-480 BC)

Greek seal engraving really begins to flourish by the late Archaic period, i.e. after the mid-6th cent. BC. During this period, Greek craftsmen learn the use of the rotating drill, whose metal point they now employ to carve hard semi-precious stones, like carnelian, agate, chalcedony, jasper and other members of the quartz family.

This new know-how arrived from the Near East. Greek craftsmen studied under Oriental masters, and there is archaeological evidence for the migration of artists to the Greek areas. At the same time, their iconography, especially in the early years, reveals the strong influence of Phoenician and Egyptian engraving. Like in the case of other cultural shifts in the early history of the Greeks, Cyprus and the islands in southeast Aegean (with Rhodes in a leading role) acted as mediators for people and artefacts; on the contrary, Asia Minor and Crete appear to be on the periphery of these developments, at least until the Late Archaic period. By 575 BC, when the production of seal gems really becomes a high-standards art, the islands of the Aegean (the Cyclades and 'Eastern Greece') take on a leading role, with Attica seemingly excluded. The production of signet gems in Asia Minor is attested by the discovery of distinctive specimens in areas like [Clazomenae](#), [Pergamon](#), [Smyrna](#), [Troy](#) and [Sardis](#), as well as in the islands facing the coastline of Asia Minor, like [Lesvos](#), Samos and, of course, Rhodes.

3. Scarabs from Etruria and Asia Minor

The typical shape of Archaic Greek signet gems is the scarab. This is an artefact of symbolic value, with a long history and widely used in Egypt. It came to Greece via the Near East, more specifically through the 'mediation' of the Phoenicians. The type of the scarabs found in Greece constitutes an evolution of the earlier Phoenician type, which by the 8th cent. had become very popular in the coasts of Syria and Palestine, and in Cyprus. A similar type was used in Etruscan seal engraving. The Etruscan craftsmen, though, always rendered the insect's back in great detail.

The signet's theme is engraved on the flat ellipsoid base of the scarab. This limited and peculiar area places a number of restraints on the engraver's artistic freedom and largely imposes a predefined set of themes: solitary figures, mostly male, depicted in a contorted stance, account for the majority of themes employed in Archaic seal engraving. In many places there are evident similarities with the iconography and techniques used for coins, which were often crafted by the same engravers.

By the mid-6th cent., Greek engravers are becoming more adept in rendering human anatomy, drawing on the achievements of contemporary sculpture and vase-painting. The figures of centaurs, satyrs as well as athletes and hoplites are predominant. Among them is a seal depicting a banqueting satyr, today exhibited in the British Museum.² The origin of this scarab, together with the distinctive rendering of its back suggest it originated from Etruria, yet the technique of the main depiction is Greek. It also features certain stylistic and iconographic elements that can be identified as coming from Asia Minor. The way the legs of this anthropomorphous monster are rendered is telling: while in mainland Greece Satyrs are depicted with human feet, this figure, like with many others of the same group, stands on horse hoofs, like the satyrs in Eastern Greek art. Therefore, these are the works of small group of craftsmen from Eastern Greece who had migrated and worked in Etruria, thus laying the foundations of Etruscan engraving.³



This case of a peculiar ‘bridge’ connecting Asia Minor and the Italian peninsula is not unique in Archaic Greek art. In the last thirty years of the 6th cent. BC at least one or two potters apparently settled in the Tyrrhenian city of Caerea, where they crafted and decorated the so-called Caeretan hydriae. They used local clay, but employed the techniques they had been taught in their homeland. Contrary to that of their fellow engravers, the Caeretan style was not imitated and was eventually lost when its originators retired. We find Caeretan iconography on one more scarab, today exhibited in Hannover, which depicts the rape of Nymph by a Satyr.⁴ The same theme, in a similar rendition, is found on one more Caeretan hydria⁵ and on the Archaic and Early Classical coins minted on Thasos.⁶

4. Classical period (480-323 BC)

During this period, Greek engravers gradually abandon the shape of the scarab and begin employing a simplified version of it, with a convex, yet smooth back and a flat base which contains the engraved scene. This shape is conventionally referred to as ‘scaraboid’. We observe a turn to simpler colours, while the themes change as well: the human figure continues to inhabit the imagination of the engravers and their customers, but we increasingly find depictions of females, birds and other subjects. The Greeks on the fringes of the Greek world participate actively in the dissemination of the private art form of seal engraving, as attested by the wealth of exquisite seals found in the Greek colonies at Crimea and the Black Sea coasts. Their contacts with neighbouring people (the Scythians and other northern nomads, and the Persians in the East) open up new markets to this art form.

5. Dexamenus of Chios

Dexamenus was one of the most prominent Greek seal engravers, and one of the most outstanding artists of the Classical era in general. Four seal gems bearing his inscription survive today: two of these depict herons, one a lady with her handmaid, while another bears a male head study. The artist’s signature sometimes appears in the form of the inscription ΔΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ ΕΠΙΟΙΕ (= Dexamenus created me), and other times it is limited to his name. In one occasion his name is accompanied by that of his homeland, the island of Chios. The gem seal depicting the female figure also provides her name, Mika (given in the genitive and in the Ionic dialect: ΜΙΚΗΣ). She was probably the owner of the gem. Two of the gems are red jaspers; the other two are azure chalcedonies, a variety especially popular during the Classical period. The site where the two gems depicting herons were discovered, in the area of the Crimea, and the insistence of the artist in revealing his birthplace, even if only on one of his surviving works, apparently confirm the hypothesis that Dexamenus lived and worked away from his homeland. His art and the style of his letters, especially the letter X, indicate he was trained on Chios.⁷ Another signet gem from the Black Sea simply depicts a Chian narrow-bottomed amphora. Some scholars have identified this gem as a work of Dexamenus of Chios.⁸ The establishment of a common technique and shared themes during the Classical period, and their exceptional range, does not allow us to distinguish individual Greek workshops in the artistic output of this period. Safe clues (like the unique signature of Dexamenus accompanied by the name of his homeland) are quite rare. Few are also the gems that we can, on the basis of the place where they were unearthed, attribute to the artistic output of Eastern Greece. In general, the western areas, the Greek cities of Magna Grecia, now become more prominent, where seal engraving is revitalized by the flowering of the numismatic art. In southern Italy and Sicily, Greek engravers create important works of Greek seal art on precious stones as well as on metal rings and coins.

6. Greeks and Persians

Greek art had the ability to adapt to foreign, even hostile, environments and to evolve without losing its character and alienating the virtues that rendered Greek culture so popular. The study of ancient Greek art, with the aid of archaeology, has led to the identification of a number of artefact categories originating in the singular contact of Greek civilisation with its neighbours. During the Archaic and Classical periods, large portions of Eastern Greece were under Persian control –this may account for the rather feeble artistic output of the engravers of Asia Minor in these years. Military conflicts and political fluctuations affect the place of the Greeks within the empire until its dissolution by their ‘liberator’, [Alexander of Macedon](#). In general, however, the Greeks were free to pursue their artistic interests while under the rule of the Great King or not. An inscription from Susa mentions Greek craftsmen who participated in the construction and decoration of the city’s royal palaces in c. 500 BC. Throughout the Classical period, Greek engravers were employed by Persian patrons who were especially enthusiastic about Greek seal engraving.⁹ The so-called Greco-Persian seal gems are similar in terms of shape to the scaraboid items coming from the rest of the Greek world. These date mainly to the second half of the 5th and to the first half of the 4th cent. BC. They were probably crafted in southeast Asia Minor, within the Persian Empire, but were heavily influenced by Greek art. Carnelian and azure chalcedony (the gem of choice of the Greek engravers during the Classical period) are the predominant materials. The iconography is rather peculiar; while the themes are Greek - human figures, hunting scenes, war scenes, animal studies- their rendering exhibits several orientalising elements. Absent is the palatial style of Achaemenid seal cylinders and their pompous character. It is likely that they were crafted for Persian courtiers and officials installed in Asia Minor, bearers of Achaemenid culture, but they exhibit an eclectic connection with Greek art.¹⁰

7. Hellenistic period (323-31 BC)

The conquest of the East by the armies of Alexander of Macedon and the dissolution of the Persian Empire altered the form and extent of the Greek world. Now liberated, Asia Minor becomes the historical and political centre of Hellenism. The political developments in the three centuries that followed, affected the course and content of this art form. Seals, being by nature objects of an official and emblematic status, faithfully reflect politics, a fact which aids their analysis and interpretation. During the Hellenistic period the seal gems’ shape changes. Now they usually appear in the form of ring gems. The engravers now employ brighter, more strikingly coloured stones, which are affixed to golden, silver or bronze rings.

8. Pyrgoteles and his successors

According to [Pliny](#)¹¹ and [Plutarch](#),¹² Alexander had bestowed on specific artists the exclusive privilege of rendering his likeness in sculpture, painting and seal engraving. Pyrgoteles was the engraver of Alexander’s court, but there are no surviving works of his. Like his other colleagues, Pyrgoteles had probably also produced in numismatic art. It is possible that he lived and continued to create after Alexander’s death (323 BC), probably seeking commissions in the court of one of his successors. The first numismatic types depicting portraits of Alexander the Great minted by the Diadochi arguably exhibit influences by Pyrgoteles’ technique.¹³



9. Philaeterus of Pergamum

The historical references to Pyrgoteles reveal that Alexander and his successors were very careful in cultivating their public image, through coins as well as seals. The royal portrait now becomes a monument with political implications. The likeness of the king is often idealized, in such a manner as to showcase his physical and moral virtues. At any rate, the ruler himself and his advisors would have selected the stylistic elements and cultural symbolism to be included in a portrait. Thus, while some follow Alexander's example opting for the idealized realism of his portraits, others prefer to form a personalized tactic. A typical example of this is Philaeterus of Pergamum, who is depicted on a multi-coloured chalcedony, today exhibited in the British Museum.¹⁴ Like the coins of the Attalids, this gem seal reveals a rather alien approach to the image of the general who founded the royal house of Pergamum.

10. Greek engravers in the Hellenistic kingdoms of Asia

The evolution of numismatic art in Asia Minor during the Hellenistic period is concomitant with the development of engraving. The absence of signatures and the lack of certitude with respect to the sites where the artefacts were discovered complicate the study of local workshops in Asia Minor, and do not allow us to follow the work of specific artists. The sole category of seals that offers outward signs of their provenance and date is the one depicting rulers, members of Greek as well as 'barbarian' dynasties of the Hellenistic period. The presence of Greek artists in a given Hellenistic capital is confirmed by the fact that they sign the portraits of the local ruler. It is possible that the same individuals also worked in the local mint or crafted gems depicting other, non-recognisable themes. Among the rulers of the Hellenistic world, [Mithridates VI Eupator](#), king of Pontus (120-63 BC) was famous in Antiquity as a collector of engraved gemstones, and consequently must have been a patron of Greek engravers, as attested by the coins he minted. Appian¹⁵ mentions his huge collection and Pliny¹⁶ relates that after his defeat by Pompey the latter brought it to Rome and dedicated it to the Capitolium. Finally, Athenaeus¹⁷ mentions that one Athenian statesman, Athenion, habitually exhibited in public an engraved ring of his; it depicted Mithridates and he claimed it was a token of the latter's favour and political support.

11. Apollonius

The majority of the rulers of the Hellenistic East (irrespective of their nationality) chose to be portrayed according to Greek standards: this means donning Greek costumes employing Greek symbols. Typical examples are two seal gems signed by the engraver Apollonius. One of these, a garnet, nowadays exhibited in the Numismatic Museum of Athens,¹⁸ depicts the [Seleucid](#) king [Antiochus III](#) (223-187 BC). The second one, also a garnet, originates from the Panticapaeum area and probably portrays a local ruler of the Pontus or Bosphorus.¹⁹ The historical and archaeological evidence in our disposal on the two seal gems allow the hypothesis that Apollonius (whose homeland remains unknown) was active in the wider region of Asia Minor and specialized in the portraiture of rulers. It is almost certain that he worked on numismatic types as well, like many of his colleagues in that period.²⁰

12. Nicias and Demas

Another Hellenistic garnet bears the inscription of the engraver Nicias.²¹ Judging from similar representations of this ruler on coins, the portrait probably depicts Mithridates, king of Pontus (169-150 BC). A slightly later gem,²² a creation of the engraver Demas, exemplifies a different tendency in Hellenistic hegemonic portraiture. Ariarathes VI of Cappadocia is depicted in oriental attire, yet this is a Greek work of art, as is also attested by the artist's signature. The case of a tourmaline seal stone,²³ a mineral originating from modern Afghanistan, is also characteristic; it depicts the head of Alexander III of Macedon after the model of [Lysimachus'](#) coinage. The gem bears a minuscule inscription, perhaps written in an early Indian alphabet, which remains undeciphered. Its existence, paired with the origin of its material, suggests it was commissioned by an oriental person and crafted by a Greek engraver.

13. From Hellenistic east to Roman West

Roman presence in Greece and Asia Minor had intensified by the 2nd cent. BC. Their involvement in the political affairs of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and their pivotal role in the dissolution of most of these, brought Roman patrons into contact with Greek artists. Roman generals and officials would often commission these artists, just like the Hellenistic rulers did. More specifically, Roman officials responsible for the minting of coins for the needs of a campaign in Greece and Asia Minor apparently hired local engravers. Thus they adopted Greek mythological elements like Gorgon, and other figures from the repertoire of Greek art.²⁴ In the Late Hellenistic period some artists probably decided to seek their fortunes in Rome. These migrations, as well as the transfer of the artefacts themselves (like the abovementioned case of Mithridates' treasure), influenced once more seal engraving in the West. The Augustan era gem seals, often signed by Greek engravers or Romans bearing Hellenized names, betoken the strong influence of Hellenistic art.²⁵

1. Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), p. 112, no. 166.

2. Boardman, J., *Archaic Greek Gems. Schools and Artists in the Sixth and Early Fifth Centuries BC* (London 1968), no. 93.

3. Boardman, J., *Archaic Greek Gems. Schools and Artists in the Sixth and Early Fifth Centuries BC* (London 1968), p. 59.

4. Boardman, J., *Archaic Greek Gems. Schools and Artists in the Sixth and Early Fifth Centuries BC* (London 1968), pp. 53-59, no. 107.

5. Boardman, J., *Early Greek Vase Painting* (London 1998), pp. 221-222, pl. 495.2.

6. Οικονομίδου, Μ., *Αρχαία Νομίσματα* (Αθήνα 1996), p. 223, pl. 73.



7. On Dexamenus and his work see Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), pp. 194-199.
8. Cf. Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), p. 196.
9. Boardman, J., *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (London 1994), pp. 21-48.
10. Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), pp. 303-357.
11. Pliny, *HN* 7.125.
12. Plutarch, *Alex.* 4.1.
13. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), pp. 60-62.
14. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 90, pp. 56-57; Burn, L., *The British Museum Book of Greek and Roman Art* (London 1991), p. 132, pl. 113.
15. Appian, *Mithr.* 115.
16. Pliny, *HN* 37.11-12.
17. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 5.212d-e.
18. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 71, p. 54. It bears the inscription: ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΟΣ.
19. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 101, p. 58. It bears the inscription: ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙ[ΟΣ].
20. See the views in Vollenweider, M.-L., "Deux Portraits inconnus de la dynastie du Pont et les graveurs Nikias, Zoilos, et Apollonios", *Antike Kunst* 23 (1980), pp. 146-153. She recognizes the signature of Apollonios on Seleucid mints. These, however, are monograms of the mint's officials and not artists' signatures, as we know from other sources, cf. de Callatay, F., "Un tétradrachme de Lysimaque signé et le problème des signatures à la période hellénistique", *Revue Archeologique* (1995), pp. 23-37, and Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), pp. 64-65.
21. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 91, p. 57. It bears the inscription: ΝΙΚΙΑΣ.
22. Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 94, p. 57. It bears the inscription: ΔΗΜΑΣ ΕΠΙΟΕΙ.
23. Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), p. 360 and 37; Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), no. 142, p. 60.
24. Crawford, M.H., *Roman Republican Coinage* (London 1974), pp. 411, 603.
25. Vollenweider, M.-L., *Die Steinschneidekunst und ihre Künstler in spätrepublikanischer und augusteischer Zeit* (Baden 1966); Boardman, J., *Greek Gems and Finger Rings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical* (London 1970), Chapter 7; Plantzos, D., *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford 1999), pp. 83-97.

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	The Beazley Archive: Gems http://www.cvaonline.org/gems/styles/etruscan/default.htm
	Un tétradrachme de Lysimaque http://kbr.academia.edu/FrancoisdeCallatay/Papers/314262/Un_tetradrachme_de_Lysimaque_signe_et_le_probleme_des_signatures_a_la_periode_hellenistique



Glossary :



amphora, the

from the greek words "αμφι" (on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.