

## A GNOSTIC AMULET

An amulet of the Gnostic or syncretistic type in green jasper was one of the many objects of minor art which came to light during the excavations of the Athenian Agora in 1932.<sup>1</sup> Dr. T. L. Shear, who conducted the excavations, and who has kindly allowed me to publish the amulet, reports that it was found in an unstratified deposit. The common design on the obverse is a hybrid of which the head and neck are those of a cock, the trunk and arms human, while the extremities are serpentine, symmetrically arranged in side view (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The human torso wears a close-fitting cuirass over a sleeved Persian (?) tunic which appears below like a kilt as on other gems. In some cases this kilt seems to be attached directly to the cuirass. It serves to mask the transition from human to serpentine form. This hybrid or Abrasax holds in his right hand a whip with pendent lash, and on the left arm a shield, the inner side of which bears the inscription: **IAW IAHI EHI DYW MIN**. Here the names of Iao above and Min below enclose a group of vowels some of which are arranged in alphabetical order. Professor Bonner, who first recognized the name of Min, states that he knows of no other instance of its connection with the Abrasax type.<sup>3</sup> In the field are five stars, corresponding in number to the five letters which are symmetrically placed below the Abrasax. This carefully cut inscription is to be read from right to left, as is shown by the letter  $\text{Z}$ . The five letters are the initials of five deities of the Mithraic pantheon: Mithras, Helios, Selene, Zeus, and Nike. The reason for such identification lies in the fact that Gnosticism and Mithraism had much in common.<sup>4</sup> Cumont mentions a Gnostic



Fig. 1. Gnostic Amulet from the Athenian Agora

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<sup>1</sup> The amulet is 18 mm. high, 13 mm. broad, and 4 mm. thick.

<sup>2</sup> King, *Antique Gems and Rings*, pls. 17 A, 4; 26, 2-3; 37 B, 5; 43, 2.

<sup>3</sup> I am greatly obliged to Professor Bonner, who kindly gave me the benefit of his criticism of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Anz, *Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, p. 79.

sect in Gaul the members of which changed their names from Heliognosti to Deinvictiaci, *i.e.*, worshippers of the *deus invictus* (Mithras).<sup>1</sup> It is a curious coincidence that the name of Mithras spelt *Μεθρας* not only contains the same number of letters as Abrasax but that these two names have the same numerical value, 365.<sup>2</sup>

The syncretism of the two cults expressed itself in art. The Abrasax of the Athenian amulet occurs in simplified form on another Gnostic charm (Fig. 2) on the reverse of which is the name Mithrax (*Μίθραξ*) as if to rhyme with Abrasax.<sup>3</sup> Such syncretism readily explains the appearance of the abbreviated names of Mithraic gods beneath an Abrasax. The sequence of the first two names, Mithras and Helios, is that (*Μίθρον* 'Ηλιου') of the Greek inscription at Nemrud Dagh carved at the order of Antiochus,

whose family was part Persian.<sup>4</sup> The sequence of the names Helios and Selene is that of their days Sunday and Monday, and is found not only in Mithraic inscriptions<sup>5</sup> but in literature. Porphyry tells us that it is necessary to consider the sun as the leader of the gods but "to rank the moon in the second place."<sup>6</sup> Julian, in a letter to the Athenians (275 b) informs them that he was protected by Athena, who brought angels from Helios and Selene. A Mithraic inscription mentions several deities, Soli, Lunae, . . . genio Jovis, . . . genio Victoriae . . . in the order in which they occur in the inscription on

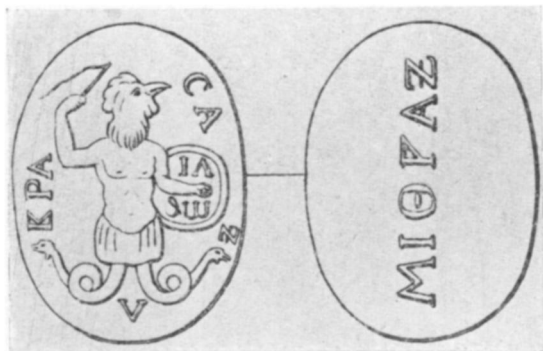


Fig. 2. Syncretistic Amulet formerly in the Capello Museum at Venice

the Athenian amulet.<sup>7</sup> The concluding names, Zeus and Nike, recall the watchword *Ζεὺς σωτήρ καὶ Νίκη* which the soldiers of Xenophon used with the approval of the Persian Cyrus.<sup>8</sup> Their sequence is the equivalent of Zeus Nikator, the Olympian Zeus with Nike as his attribute. Since the Abrasax carries a shield, and since the Mithraic cult was preëminently a soldier's cult, the presence of Nike in the list of deities invoked is quite logical. Nike is represented writing on shields in Greek and Roman art, especially

<sup>1</sup> *Textes et Monuments*, I, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, I, p. 201. An amulet bearing the form *Μεθρας*, is suspected (Cumont II, p. 452).

<sup>3</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, II, p. 451; in Venice in 1702.

<sup>4</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, II, p. 90. In a relief found at Virunum (Cumont, II, p. 336) a subordinate position of Helios with reference to Mithras is suggested. Mithras seizes Helios by the hair and seems about to strike him. Helios touches the knee of Mithras in supplication (?). The Persian costume of the one and the Greek of the other confirm the interpretation of the scene as a conflict between the Persian and Greek solar god. Above this scene is represented the reconciliation of the two.

<sup>5</sup> Cumont, II, pp. 108, 114, 126, 128, 157, 166.

<sup>6</sup> *De Abstinentia*, II, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Cumont, II, p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> *Anabasis*, I, 8, 16.

on gems and coins.<sup>1</sup> The shield of the Abrasax frequently bears an inscription. The initials NZJHM are suggestive of the Christian acrostic ΙΧΘΥΣ although the former do not spell a symbol.

The Abrasax of the Athenian amulet invites close attention. Its elements are all to be found in Mithraic art. The cock which contributes head and neck to the Abrasax appears in several monuments, though not as part of a hybrid.<sup>2</sup> As the herald of the rising sun, the cock is appropriate in the monuments of a solar god. It was sacred to Helios.<sup>3</sup> The Greeks regarded the cock as a Persian fowl. Aristophanes called it *Περσικὸς ὄρνις*,<sup>4</sup> and Cratinus *Περσικὸς ἀλέκτωρ*.<sup>5</sup> The torso of the Abrasax is that of a warrior with



Fig. 3. Lead Tablet from Aegina

whip and shield. The whip with pendent lash is found in Mithraic representations of the sun-god.<sup>6</sup> The sleeved tunic is probably borrowed from representations of Persian warriors. The third element of the Abrasax is the serpentine extremity. The serpent plays a very important part in Mithraic cult, appearing in both the tauroctony and the Kronos. Even the anguipede giant occurs in Mithraic relief.<sup>7</sup>

The Mithraic associations of the Abrasax are strikingly illustrated by a lead plaque which was found many years ago in the island of Aegina (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> The Abrasax of this

<sup>1</sup> Mironow, *Die Siegesgöttin in der griech. Plastik*, pls. III–IV; pp. 157 (coins), 158 (gems).

<sup>2</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 207, 221, 238, 377; I, 210. The example on p. 238 shows the cock associated with Kronos.

<sup>3</sup> Pausanias, V, 25, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Birds*, 485, 707. Athenaeus, XIV, 655 A, says the cock came from Persia.

<sup>5</sup> Meineke, *Frag. Com. Graec.*, I, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, II, p. 202 (from the Esquiline). In the relief from Virunum dated by Cumont (II, p. 338) to the second century, the sun god holds the whip in two successive scenes.

<sup>7</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 264, 336; I, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Arch. Eph.*, 1862, p. 302; pl. 45, no. 1. For other examples of the Abrasax on lead tablets v. A. Procopé-Walter, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft.*, 1933, p. 45.

plaque is tripartite like that of the Athenian amulet, except that it has the head of the crow. The "crow" was the title of the first degree of the Mithraic initiation, and the initiate of that degree wore a crow's head as a mask, being so represented in art.<sup>1</sup> On the shield of the Aeginetan Abrasax is the name Iao which is the epigraphical counterpart of the Zeus upon the shield of Hyperbius described by Aeschylus.<sup>2</sup> Instead of a whip, the Abrasax holds a temple-key such as appears in the hands of a priestess in Attic grave stelae<sup>3</sup> and as a sepulchral symbol in Attica in Roman times.<sup>4</sup> Two keys are a regular attribute of the Mithraic Kronos, but they are not of the temple type. It is possible that the artist who first conceived the Abrasax type combined the benevolent Ophiomorphus of the Phrygian Gnostics with Mithraic elements. This hybrid seems to incorporate two at least of the Mithraic degrees: "crow" and "soldier." On the reverse of the Aeginetan amulet are seven names of angels: Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael, Ananael, Proseraiel, and Umsael(?). This list corresponds exactly in the first six names with that on an Abrasax amulet published in 1647 by Macarius.<sup>5</sup> The name Uriel occurs also on the Athenian amulet in two successive lines:  $\text{I}\text{H}\text{\AA}$   
 $\text{P}\text{O}\text{Y}$ .

The Abrasax type which is of frequent occurrence was probably created at some important centre of art. The Mithraic elements of the type raise the question whether it may have been carved at Pergamon, which gave Mithraism the sculptured version of its very important tauroctony.<sup>6</sup> The model for the Abrasax may have been the Pergamene anguipede giant which found its way not only to Aphrodisias in Caria<sup>7</sup> but even to remote Gandhara.<sup>8</sup> An inscription on a Gnostic amulet in private possession at Syrian Antioch, which Professor Bonner reads as follows:  $\gamma\iota\gamma\alpha\nu\tau\omicron\kappa\alpha\nu\tau\omicron\rho\eta\mu\alpha$ ,  $\beta\alpha\rho\beta\alpha\rho\phi\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha$   $\beta\alpha\rho\omega\phi\acute{\iota}\tau\alpha$  and translates: "utter destroyer of giants, slayer of barbarians, crusher of serpents," sounds like a description of Zeus in the frieze on the great altar at Pergamon. The title "slayer of barbarians" is especially suggestive because the gigantomachy of the frieze is a version in terms of gods and giants of the great struggle between the Pergamenes and the barbarians of Galatia. It is quite possible that the Abrasax type was carved also at Tarsus, the coins of which in the third century represent Mithras in a scene of the tauroctony wearing the same kilt as the Abrasax.<sup>9</sup>

The figure on the reverse of the Athenian amulet is Harpocrates seated upon a lotus-flower. On either side of him are inscriptions in which the seven vowels appear:

<sup>1</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, I, p. 175, fig. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Septem*, 512.

<sup>3</sup> Conze, *Die attischen Grabreliefs*, II, CLV.

<sup>4</sup> Daremberg et Saglio, *Dict. Ant.*, s. v. sera, p. 1242.

<sup>5</sup> Cabrol, *Dict. Chrét.*, s. v. Anges, p. 2157 (LeClercq). The last name is Yabsae(I).

<sup>6</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 182-3, 214.

<sup>7</sup> Texier, *Description de l'Asie Mineure*, III, 158; pl. 158ter.

<sup>8</sup> Foucher, *L'Art Gréco-Bouddhique du Gandhara*, I, 245.

<sup>9</sup> Leipoldt, *Die Religion des Mithra*, fig. 14.

EH	V
IDY	Q
WH	N
IHA	NI
PQY	PH
PΔ	WΦ
XAP	W
ITW	

Below Harpocrates are the letters YWYWCW  
 EHIQY  
 W

The inscription on the bevel is AΔWNAIE ABPACAΞ AEHIQYW IAW CABAWΘ  
 Adonai, Abrasax, AEHIQYΩ, Yahweh of hosts.

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