

## BETWEEN THE WORD AND THE BODY: TANTALUS AMULETS

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### **Summary: Between the Word and the Body: Tantalus Amulets**

This article explains magical efficacy of the so-called Tantalus amulets in relationship with their materiality, iconography and language. “Tantalus amulets” are a category of hematite magical gems originating probably in the Eastern Mediterranean of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, inscribed with the text “Thirsty Tantalus, drink blood.” The purpose of these amulets seems to have been to draw out harmful surplus blood from the body. The magical potency of these carved gemstones stems from several paradoxes that are evoked in the accompanying texts. Tantalus is ordered by the spell to “drink blood” (ΔΙΨΑΣ ΤΑΝΤΑΛΕ ΑΙΜΑ ΠΙΠΕ—“Drink blood, Tantalus!”). However, the mythological narrative related to this figure is that, ultimately, he is unable to drink from the pool of water in which he stands (which is his eternal punishment) and therefore would not be able to fulfill the command of the spell. This paradox has puzzled scholars and this article proposes a possible interpretation. The magical efficacy and the various elements appearing on these gemstones are explained through the lens of both Egyptian and Greek material.

**Keywords:** Magical gemstones – Womb – Tantalus – Body – Blood

### **Resumen: Entre la palabra y el cuerpo: los amuletos de Tántalo**

Este artículo explica la eficiencia mágica de los amuletos de Tántalo en relación con su materialidad, iconografía y lenguaje. Los “Amuletos de Tántalo” constituyen

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una categoría de gema mágica, de hematita, originada probablemente en el Mediterráneo Oriental durante el siglo III, inscriptas con la leyenda: “Sediento Tántalo, bebe sangre”. El propósito de estos amuletos parece haber sido sacar el excedente dañino de sangre del cuerpo. La potencia mágica de estas gemas de piedra radica en diversas paradojas evocadas en los textos que las acompañan. Tántalo es invocado a “beber sangre” a través de un hechizo (ΔΙΨΑΣ ΤΑΝΤΑΛΕ ΑΙΜΑ ΠΙΠΕ— “¡Bebe Sangre, Tántalo!”). Sin embargo, la narrativa mitológica que se relaciona con esta figura indica que, en última instancia, él se ve imposibilitado de tomar agua del estanque en el que se encuentra (lo cual es su castigo eterno), y por lo tanto, no puede cumplir la orden del hechizo. Esta paradoja ha intrigado a los académicos, y este artículo propone posibles interpretaciones. La eficacia mágica y la variedad de elementos que aparecen en estas gemas de piedra se explican a través de materiales egipcios y griegos.

**Palabras clave:** Gemas mágicas de piedra – Útero – Tántalo – Cuerpo – Sangre

Analyses of “magical” objects rarely explore their magical efficacy. As the context for various such objects is often lacking, academics are left with the detective work of reconstructing the context of use of the object as such and interpreting the text and iconography of the object as accurately as possible. A sound strategy is to begin with one category of objects to perform such an interpretation; this article explores the relationship of the magical efficacy and the materiality of the so-called Tantalus amulets.<sup>1</sup>

### **BODY, TIME AND SPACE: THE AMULETS IN ITS MATERIALITY**

“Tantalus amulets” are a category of magical gems of unclear provenance, originating probably in the Eastern Mediterranean of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The “Tantalus amulets” share several common traits.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faraone 2009: 248–273.

<sup>2</sup> Relevant books and articles on the subject are: Bonner 1950; Michel 2001; 2004; Mastrocinque 2003.

The most apparent one is their materiality;<sup>3</sup> they are made of hematite, a stone commonly associated with blood in Antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The recto and verso of the amulet are clearly differentiated. The recto was supposed to be visible and was generally more neatly done, especially when made into a ring or pendant—this seems to have been a common use of these gemstones.<sup>5</sup> Both sides have an inscribed image and Greek text, which are analysed below, influenced mostly by Greco-Egyptian culture, Jewish and even Babylonian traditions.<sup>6</sup> The gemstones vary in height between 26–46 mm, width of 10.5–28 mm and their thickness is between 3.5–5.5 mm. Their findspot is mostly unknown and without any archaeological context. C. A. Faraone collected nine of the “Tantalus amulets,” varying only in details, several of which are available online in *The Campbell Bonner Magical Gem Database*, under the following identification numbers: CBd 753, CBd 754, CBd 755, CBd 1633 and CBd 2364. The gems which are not available online in the database are SMA 144,<sup>7</sup> D&D 364,<sup>8</sup> Auction Catalog for Frank Sternberg AG 24 (Nov. 1990) 73 no. 459<sup>9</sup> and fi-

<sup>3</sup> Faraone 2011: 57. Faraone writes about the importance of taking the materiality of magical objects into account, as they tend to be interpreted either iconographically or textually.

<sup>4</sup> Ritner 1984: 213; Barb 1952: 279.

<sup>5</sup> Although some of the amulets might have been carried in a little bag or boiled in a medical recipe. See Faraone 2009: 258; Nagy 2012: 89, n. 64, 65; Dasen 2015b: 23.

<sup>6</sup> Bonner 1950: 8. More on the typology of magical gemstones, see Nagy 2012. For those found in an archaeological context, see Nagy 2012: 71, n. 8. See also Gordon 2011: 39–40 how these gems were acquired by different institutions in the past.

<sup>7</sup> I am referencing the gems in the same format as Faraone in his article, to avoid further confusion. This gem is part of the Seyrig collection as no. 65 in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris. See Faraone 2009: 250, n. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Delatte and Derchain 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Sternberg 1990.

nally A. J. Festugière (1961) 287 f. no. 1.<sup>10</sup> Images of those can be found in Faraone's article.<sup>11</sup>

The production of the gems seems to have been standardized. The process by which the amulet was created was threefold: first, the "magician" prepared a design, then, a sculptor carved the images and text, and lastly the "magician" activated the gem so it would become effective.<sup>12</sup> The magical gems are closely related to the corpus of *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM or *Greek Magical Papyri*, a corpus of texts with a magical character), however not directly.<sup>13</sup> P. Vitellozzi concludes "most of the motifs that occur on gems are never mentioned in the surviving texts [meaning in the PGM],"<sup>14</sup> although he states, based on Smith's previous research, that "it seems clear that most of our gems were not made according to the instructions in the papyri, but were certainly made following some instructions."<sup>15</sup> The reason why more gems survived rather than the "manuals" for their production lies probably in the physical character of the perishable papyrus versus the non-perishable stone.<sup>16</sup> The gems varied in details and this was probably due to the creativity of the gem-makers or local variations of the instructions.<sup>17</sup>

The previous interpretations of the amulet speculated mostly about their use as objects used to prevent excess bleeding (magical objects preventing excessive blood loss were very common in Antiquity and even in medieval Europe), or, according to Faraone, to pro-

<sup>10</sup> Festugière 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Faraone 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Michel 2004: 62–69; Nagy 2012: 80.

<sup>13</sup> Connection with PGM was already made by Bonner 1950: 9ff. See also Vitellozzi 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Vitellozzi 2018: 181.

<sup>15</sup> Vitellozzi 2018: 183. See also Smith 1979: 133; Nagy 2002: 162.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon 2011: 45.

<sup>17</sup> Vitellozzi 2018: 246; Gordon 2011: 40.

mote the production of blood in a woman's body.<sup>18</sup> Before getting to the interpretation of the image and text of the "Tantalus amulets," the totality of the object must be taken into consideration. The fact that someone decided to buy an amulet, which was probably quite expensive, meant that this object had some long-term value for buyer.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the object was a completion of that particular person at a certain point of his life. As V. Dasen states: "Leur usage concerne souvent la sphère la plus intime de la santé et témoigne d'une expérience religieuse plus personnelle, centré sur 'le soin de soi' de l'époque romaine."<sup>20</sup> In addition, different gems were used specifically on certain parts of the body, also referred to as "géographie corporelle."<sup>21</sup>

I approach these ancient amulets in a similar manner; as they were often worn on the body as jewellery, they were long-term companions of their owners. However, it is clear that they are effective only in a close proximity to the body, and even though there is little to no personalization on them as such (*i.e.* mentioning the name of the owner or target, as in other magical objects), the personalization happens through the ownership of the object and its proximity to the body of the owner.<sup>22</sup> Dasen's research confirms this idea on magical gems: "Comme toute amulette, elles devaient être mises en contact avec le corps pour lui communiquer leurs propriétés, selon une géographie corporelle précise."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Bonner 1950: 88 ff.; Rose 1951; Barb 1952; Festugière 1961: 288; Mastrocinque 2000: 137; Faraone 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Dasen 2015b: 21–23.

<sup>20</sup> Dasen 2015b: 22.

<sup>21</sup> Gaillard-Seux 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Although there are several magical gems inscribed with people's names, see *e.g.* CBd 855, 857 and 3283.

<sup>23</sup> Dasen 2015b: 23. As Nagy pointed out, the gems are often interpreted either from an archaeological or iconographical perspective and decide to "reintegrate these objects into the wider context of ancient magical practice, in particular, of healing." (Nagy 2012: 72). I would like to follow Nagy's steps and interpret the Tantalus

### THE OUTSIDE: WARRIOR-FIGURE AND DISAPPEARING TEXT

Let us now proceed to the interpretation of what is carved on the “Tantalus amulets,” starting with the recto, or the “visible” side. Seven of the amulets bear an image of a soldier, with a helmet, shield and spear, sometimes wearing a cape (the other two have an image of a “demon” figure instead—see below). This figure has been interpreted as a warrior figure, as Ares/Mars and as Tantalus himself.<sup>24</sup> It is not Tantalus, as he would probably be depicted with some specific traits and not like a warrior or Ares usually are; furthermore, he is described as an old man in the *Odyssey* (see below). However, two other Tantalus-warriors did indeed exist—Tantalus the Spartan, a commander taken captive by the Athenians, is mentioned by Diodorus Siculus (*Library* 12, chap. 65) and Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War* 4, chap. 67) and a second Tantalus, mentioned by Ap-pian who took part in the Viriathic War (*Wars in Spain*, chap. 12. 75). It is improbable that the amulet would depict either of the two warriors, as the Tantalus referred to in the text on the amulet is clearly the mythological one, through the association with drinking.

Comparing the figure to other amulets from this time and area depicting warriors, only a few in the *Campbell Bonner Database* depict a warrior figure in the same manner as the Tantalus ones, most importantly CBd 756 and CBd 757. These two represent, without a doubt Ares, as the text on them explicitly name him on CBd 756: “Ares, cut the pain in the liver” (Ἄρης ἔτεμεν τοῦ ἥπατος τὸν πόνο<ν>). The verb τέμνω evokes aggressive cutting or cutting off—that is why the association with an aggressive deity. The figure depicted on the “Tantalus gemstones” thus seems to be Ares.

amulet type of the magical gems from a standpoint that takes into consideration its materiality, temporality, relationship to the owner’s body and iconography.

<sup>24</sup> This figure is sometimes also called Mars ultor. For Mars ultor on magical gems, see Vitellozzi 2018: 208, no. 2. 9.

What does Ares have to do with the liver? Galen seemed to think that liver was the organ in which blood originated and from which it was transported throughout the body.<sup>25</sup> Similar ideas survived until the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century AD, as they were transmitted in the writings of the Byzantine doctor and philosopher Stephanus.<sup>26</sup> The pain is an object of Ares' aggression and the amulet as a whole is the liminal token of Ares' aggression towards pain—freeing the liver from it. In this case, it will suffice to state that Ares was a figure able to “cut the pain,” kill the pain harming the liver and could be somehow related to the production of blood (through the association with liver). A surplus of blood in the body was considered unwanted and harmful in general, for men and for women. Women were, according to *Epidemics*, more likely to survive a fever or other illnesses, because of their regular ability to purge their bodies from excess blood.<sup>27</sup>

Ares also appears together with Aphrodite on love amulets (CBd 483, CBd 484, CBd 664, CBd 1365, CBd 1727, CBd 1728 and CBd 3980). On these amulets, it is not Ares' aggressive aspect which is highlighted, but the meaning lies in the relationship between him and Aphrodite. Thus, the same figure might have different meanings in various contexts.<sup>28</sup> The warrior-figure is a powerful being able to neutralize evil forces and which possibly has some relation to blood/bleeding.<sup>29</sup>

Left of the warrior is written the phrase ΔΙΨΑΣ ΤΑΝΤΑΛΕ ΑΙΜΑ ΙΙΙΕ, in various variants, translated by Festugière as “Tu as

<sup>25</sup> Boylan 2007: 209 for references to Galen's texts; Jouanna and Allies 2012: 185.

<sup>26</sup> Jouanna and Allies 2012: 185.

<sup>27</sup> Dean-Jones 1994: 143; King 1998: 50–52.

<sup>28</sup> Ares also appears on several other amulets, some of them post-Antique and some of them are difficult to interpret or their purpose is unclear. See CBd 78, CBd 854, CBd 1131, CBd 1824, CBd 1912.

<sup>29</sup> As he does not have a feminine companion, his symbolism in love amulets are irrelevant in this case.

soif, Tantale? Bois du sang!”<sup>30</sup> Scholars offered other translations as well, but this one seems to be the most accepted one.<sup>31</sup> This text is written in an unusual manner, in a wing-like formation. On the first line, the text appears in its entirety, and with each line, one of the letters is removed and the text ultimately disappears. This technique is often used in the magical papyri to make a disease or threat disappear.<sup>32</sup> The warrior, however, does not look at the wing-shaped text on his left, he looks on the right. As we shall see, he protects the disappearing text; or, to put it more clearly, his presence ensures the command will happen.

This brings us to a variation on the Tantalus gemstones—in- stead of the warrior figure, two of them are decorated with a bound figure with an animal head (lion and ass; CBd 753 and CBd 2346). This “demon” looks directly at the wing, in fear, as Faraone pointed out.<sup>33</sup> The question now is; what is this demon afraid of? This might help us understand the warrior-figure’s precise role. To answer this question, we need to understand the text “Are you thirsty Tantalus? Drink blood.” This clearly refers to the mythological hero Tantalus, who is described by Odysseus (Hom. *Od.* 11.567, 582–584):

*I saw Tantalus in violent torment, standing in a pool, and the water came nigh unto his chin. He seemed as one athirst, but could not take and drink; for as often as that old man stooped down, eager to drink, so often would the water be swallowed up and vanish away, and at his feet the black earth would appear, for some god made all dry.*<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For different translations, see Faraone 2009: 258.

<sup>31</sup> A summary of those can be found in Faraone 2009: 259–260.

<sup>32</sup> PGM I. 11; PGM II. 1–64; PGM VII 703–26; PGM CXX 1–13 and others. See also Faraone 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Faraone 2009: 261.

<sup>34</sup> Homer in translation by Murray 1919.



Tantalus has an abundance of what he is lacking, that is water, but as soon as he acts to use this abundance, it disappears. This story is puzzling and contains an underlying contradiction. Tantalus is trapped in an eternal loop. The fact that this amulet was probably related to women's bleeding hints that the owner of the amulet was also trapped in a loop and this loop needed to be cut—that's the role of the warrior and of the disappearing wing-text. The "magic" must act against the demon causing the loop. A firm resolution is required. But of what?

At this stage, we need to look at parallel medical texts from the Egyptian and Greek contexts. The idea of surplus or lack of menstrual blood (which was also the nourishment of the child in the womb)<sup>35</sup> was a crucial one for the health of women. On some occasions, a surplus was required (menstrual blood that was flowing out of the body), and on others feared (loss of blood during pregnancy). This is also a sort of "loop" in which the woman is trapped. The woman wants to be in control of her gynaecological functions like Tantalus of water; the warrior figure symbolizes this control and the demon figure stands for the chaos of the disease. That is the message of the gem; it symbolizes the being in control of the liquids, in the mythical case of water and in the case of the gem of (menstrual) blood. The amulet is a token of "good blood," of a healthy menstruation. By having the object close to the body, in case the menstruation does not go well, the amulet can somehow correct it. It keeps the menstruation and gynaecological processes "in check," as a key keeps the door locked. It is something that does not need to be there for a process to go correctly, but when it is there, it clarifies what is and should be happening (*i.e.* locking the door protects the room, having the amulet ensures safe menstruation; not locking the door does not mean the room

<sup>35</sup> For Egyptian texts on the matter, see for example Frandsen 2007: 86. For Greek sources, see Sissa 1990: 159–161.

is not protected—the key is there to reinforce and ensure the feeling of safety). Simply put, it is a *liminal object* whose purpose is precisely to create boundaries and to clarify the chaotic situation.

If we wished to look at the true consequences of this “loop,” I suggest we look at a Latin spell from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, *Codex Vossianus L. Q. 9*, also containing such a contradiction: “[S]icut terra non tangat, ita sanguem viventale Tantale vives sanguine Tantale”<sup>36</sup> which Faraone translates as “Just as [sc. the amulet] does not touch the earth, so drink blood Tantalus! Tantalus drink blood, drink Tantalus!”<sup>37</sup> This spell is the key to interpret the puzzle. The Latin amulet must not touch the ground, or else the spell will be neutralized. Tantalus suffers a similar interdiction; his lips must not touch the water, or else it vanishes. There is a liminal area of interdiction, which must not be crossed. Therefore, as long as the amulet does not touch the ground, Tantalus’ lips can touch the water, as the amulet magically *substitutes* for Tantalus’ fate and by imitation performs the task for him. Thus, Tantalus could finally drink the excess blood. This would be a case of effectiveness of the amulet through a *historiola*.<sup>38</sup> Usually, the *historiola* in a healing ritual provides a synchronic mythological example which should be mimicked in the particular, diachronic, situation.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the Tantalus gemstones, the synchronic example is being followed, but an inversion needs to be made first for it to be effective. Another possible interpretation would be that his “distance” created between the earth and the amulet somehow mimics the inability of Tantalus to drink (*i.e.* the distance between the water and his lips would be parallel to the distance between the earth and the amulet), making the water/blood disappear.

<sup>36</sup> Originally published by Piechotta 1887: 185; see also Barb 1952: 271.

<sup>37</sup> Faraone 2009: 263.

<sup>38</sup> Nagy 2012: 80–81.

<sup>39</sup> This pattern of healing rituals does not appear only in antiquity and only in the case of magical gems. See, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1963; Langdon 2007.

The question is—if the “magician” wants to make Tantalus drink (*i.e.* removing excess blood from the body), why make the command disappear on the amulet? The reason for this is that the shape in which the text is written should be understood as—to a certain degree—separate from the content. The command indeed is to make Tantalus drink the blood (of course, he fails, as blood is here equal to water, and he cannot put his lips to the liquid and drink it) and the shape visually reinforces this disappearance. The warrior figure is there to ensure this process—he is not so much connected with Tantalus’s situation as with the responsibility of looking after the wellbeing of the owner of the amulet, of what happens after the command is abolished and to make sure the command even happens. The demon figure appears on those amulets highlighting the “evil power” causing the woman’s discomfort, which needs to be “cut off.” The demon is observing the disappearing command, which causes him to disappear as well, as he is the impersonation of the hardships caused by the command.

### THE VERSO: FEMININE BODY AS A METAPHOR

The verso of the “Tantalus” amulets bear several common traits; around the central image appear the following names, in different variations: Iaō, Sabaōth, Adōnai and Thadōath.<sup>40</sup> On one version<sup>41</sup> (plate I), here is a text on top saying: “ὁ κύριος ὁ ἀπόκρυφος ἰάσε<ται> τὰ ἀπόκρυφα,” which Faraone translates as “The hidden lord will heal the hidden things.”<sup>42</sup> In this case, I would argue that “the hidden god” refers to the Jewish god and the “hidden things” the womb, as Faraone states as well.<sup>43</sup> Could it be that what happens on the verso (*i.e.* on the visible side of the amulet) of the gem concerns

<sup>40</sup> For the variations, see Faraone 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Festugière 1961.

<sup>42</sup> Faraone 2009: 256.

<sup>43</sup> Faraone 2009: 259.

“hidden” things and what appears on the recto the “outer” things? It is possible, as the recto shows the “evil forces” causing the distress and the “magic” employed to abolish them.<sup>44</sup> Beside the text, which gives us a “anchorage” of the meaning of the image, to use R. Barthes’ term,<sup>45</sup> the gems have an image of the womb in the centre.<sup>46</sup> The womb is either represented as a “sac en peau”<sup>47</sup> (resembling Italo-Etruscan terracotta ex-votos from the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC) or as a jar.<sup>48</sup> Beneath it is in several cases an object, described often as an altar, to which we will come back to later. Above the uterus is either a sun or a star. The womb is flanked by two snakes, which face the uterus. The image on the verso thus has four main elements: (a) womb (as a “sac en peau” or a jar), (b) a base on which the womb stands (either triangular or square, in several instances with a crescent shape on top), (c) the sun/star and (d) two snakes on the sides/handles of the jar. (a) and (d) are always present. My argument is that this image constitutes a female body—the womb as the belly, sun/star as a head, base as the legs and snakes/handles as hands.

The uterus was considered to be wandering around the female body in search for liquids, according to Hippocrates and other authors.<sup>49</sup> A. E. Hanson states that “when a womb is drier than it should be, it often suffers violent dislocation”<sup>50</sup> and King even writes: “to the Hippocratics, it [i.e. the wandering womb] was a central tenet of medical theory and practice.”<sup>51</sup> There are various sources confirming

<sup>44</sup> See theories on the “archeology of the body,” Joyce 2005: 149.

<sup>45</sup> “Anchorage” is a text which helps define a meaning of an image, it gives context and explanation to an image (Barthes 1977).

<sup>46</sup> This type of depiction has been described by Dasen 2015b: 121.

<sup>47</sup> Dasen 2015b: 121

<sup>48</sup> On jars and uterus association, see Dasen 2015a.

<sup>49</sup> Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women* 2.137. For further references, see also Aubert 1989: 423, n. 2; King 1998: 36.

<sup>50</sup> Hanson 1975: 583.

<sup>51</sup> King 1998: 36.

the idea of the wandering uterus, across different time periods—Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle (5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century BC), Aretaeus of Capadocia (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), Soranus of Ephesus (1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) and Galen of Pergamon (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) all mentioned this notion.<sup>52</sup> Hippocratic ideas were still around during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when the magical gems might have been produced. Hippocrates' treatises *Diseases of Women I* and *II* were translated to Latin (or "adapted," according to Totelin), as late as in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>53</sup> There is even a chance that these ideas influenced medieval medicine.<sup>54</sup>

The amulet clearly has to do with liquids. The mythological reference on the recto is to the thirst of Tantalus. The uterus on the verso is depicted as a jar or a bag, used to contain liquids. Blood, is, thanks to the amulet, dried up by the disappearing command, sucked up into the earth like water down the drain. Both Tantalus and the uterus are thirsty; Tantalus is desperately trying to drink, and the uterus is wandering through the body in search of liquids. Both conditions are neutralized when the command disappears; Tantalus finally drinks, and the uterus finds its place.<sup>55</sup>

To be able to further explain this "anchoring" of the womb, we need to go all the way back to the iconography of ostraca from the New Kingdom town of Deir el-Medina. A. R. Schulman compared a depiction from Memphis, probably a "birth scene," with images from Deir el-Medina, because both represent a nursing woman sitting on a particular "jarstand-like seat."<sup>56</sup> Schulman describes it as

<sup>52</sup> On the wandering womb, see chapter 11 in King 1998; Thompson 1999; Marino 2004; Faraone 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Totelin 2011: 75.

<sup>54</sup> Totelin 2011; Dasen 2015b: 57–60.

<sup>55</sup> "Anchoring" the uterus was a way to heal the wandering womb causing discomfort to the woman.

<sup>56</sup> Schulman 1985.

an unusual type of chair, appearing mostly in scenes “connected to the birthing arbor,” as he shows in the article.<sup>57</sup> Its shape is very similar to the shape of the “base” we have on the gemstones.<sup>58</sup> To strengthen the argument, I will turn to a spell from the PGM (PGM VII. 260–271) urging the wandering uterus to return to its place—which, I argue, is also the purpose of the amulet:

*I adjure you, womb, <by the one> established over the abyss, before heaven, earth, sea, light or darkness came to be, who created the angels, foremost of whom is Amichamchou and chouchaō cherōei ouiachō odou pro-seiogges, and who sits over the Cherubim, who bears his throne: return again to your seat and do not lean into the right part of the ribs nor the left part of the ribs (...).*<sup>59</sup>

The womb is divinized in the spell—perhaps, in our case of the gemstone, the womb is adjured by Iaō to “return to its seat” and not lean into both parts of the ribs? This might be an explanation of why the divine names appear around the womb. In the PGM spell, the womb is urged to return to its *seat*. This seat is perhaps represented on the gemstones. In Egyptian tradition, women probably sat on a jarstand-like stool after giving birth, according to some sources. The base with the crescent shape on top is very similar to headrests, and this similarity cannot be ignored—they have essentially the same shape. In Egyptian thought, the head is identified with the sun, and the Egyptian horizon hieroglyph *akhet*, identified with sun rising on

<sup>57</sup> Schulman 1985: 103.

<sup>58</sup> Marino 2004: 387. Marino already suggested this idea, however without giving further evidence or parallels.

<sup>59</sup> Faraone 2003: 190. For discussion and more bibliography, see Faraone 2003: 190, n. 4.

the horizon.<sup>60</sup> There might be a metaphorical analogy between these conceptions, which could have survived until the Greco-Egyptian period. It would then make sense why the image of the sun would be on the depiction as well, through its association with the head.

The order in the *PGM* VII spell “do not lean into the right part of the ribs nor the left part of the ribs” could be “secured” by the two snakes depicted next to the womb, in a similar manner in which the warrior-figure ensures the command will be fulfilled. They might be on one hand good guardians, on the other representations of the power of the spell holding the womb in its place. The association with jar-handles and hands cannot be ignored—if we accept that this image is supposed to represent a stylized woman, we need to turn to analogical images. Images of anthropomorphic figures holding snakes in both hands are very common, on magical gems, in Egyptian iconography and even in Greek thought, for example through Heracles’s association with strangling them.<sup>61</sup> I argue that their role here is apotropaic; they are beneficial, although (or therefore) extremely dangerous—they create boundaries of the body, but they themselves are frightening, so they on one hand “scare off” the womb from moving, on the other they protect the body from the outside. It seems logical that it is an ambivalent figure who makes sure the bodily boundaries are protected.

The female figure on the verso on one hand expresses what is the desired outcome of the efficacy of the gem and on the other achieving this effectiveness by representing the ideal state. The woman’s healthy womb, not wandering, seated firmly “on a seat” in her body is protected by snakes, apotropaic figures. The womb (or woman) is furthermore represented with a sun/star as its head, reinforcing the connection with the divine, the base being a representation

<sup>60</sup> Hellinckx 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Female figures holding snakes in Egyptian context: see Wegner 2009: 466, fig. 10.

of the power of Iaō, able to ground the womb in its place (the word Iaō appears written on the base). The handles serve as an anthropomorphization of the jar/sac en peau/womb, which clearly copies the feminine body with its hourglass shape.

### *Excursus: The Myth of the Heavenly Cow*

An interesting parallel could be made with the myth of the Heavenly Cow, recorded in *The Book of the Heavenly Cow*.<sup>62</sup> In this Egyptian text, whose date is speculative, but which is conventionally dated to the New Kingdom,<sup>63</sup> the sun god, now in his old age, suppresses the rebellion of mankind—opting for their destruction. He sends his daughter Hathor, who transforms into the raging goddess Sekhmet, to kill his enemies. When she returns, having slaughtered many, the sun god takes pity on humanity. The raging goddess must be appeased to stop her from slaughtering mankind. The sun god Re conceived of a trick to appease the raging goddess and to prevent further bloodshed of mankind. Beer was mixed with red ochre and poured on fields and when the goddess drank it, thinking it was blood, her thirst was finally satisfied.<sup>64</sup> Several interesting elements appear in the myth: blood (beer and red ochre), earth and the appeasement of a raging goddess

<sup>62</sup> Guilhou 2010. First attested in the tomb of Tutankhamun (KV 62) and in four other tombs in the Valley of the Kings. See also Maystre 1941; Hornung 1982. For translation, see Wente 2003: 289–298.

<sup>63</sup> See Guilhou 2010; Smith 2000: 95. The motive of the rebellion of mankind is present in *The Coffin Texts Spell* 1130 (Ghilou 2010: 5.) One of the earliest examples of the rebellion against the sun-god motive is in *The Instructions for the King Merikare*. See J. F. Quack (1992: 79) for translation of the relevant passage, (196–197) for hieroglyphic transcription. For date of *The Instructions*, see Quack (1992: 114–136).

<sup>64</sup> This version of the myth is found in the tombs of Seti I, Ramesses II, Ramesses III and Ramesses IV (fragment of end), see Hornung 1992.



through drinking.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Sekhmet was also associated with drought.<sup>66</sup> The goddess is appeased through contact with blood and earth—she literally drinks from the earth: “Then the fields became filled to a height of three palms with the liquid through the power of the Majesty of this god.”<sup>67</sup> This myth has several possible interpreta-

<sup>65</sup> Schenkel, as well as Hornung, suggested a connection of this myth with the myth of the “return of the distant/raging goddess” (Schenkel 1977: 106ff; see also Hornung 1982: 93). In this myth, the angry eye/daughter of Ra disappears to Nubia in a form of a leonine goddess, and, after some persuading, returns to Egypt. After purification rites, she becomes a beautiful woman and is welcomed by Ra (Richter 2010: 156–157). This myth exists also in Demotic—the fullest version being *P.Leiden* I 384 (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE; Feder 2013; see also Hoffmann and Quack 2018: 206–240)—as well as in a Greek version (*P.Lond.Lit.* British Library 274, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE; see Feder 2013: 7–10 for overview). If a relationship indeed existed between the two myths (for example, both goddesses are raging and have a leonine nature; for more examples, see Richter 2010: 159–160), J. B. Jørgensen’s article on a new interpretation of the myth of the distant goddess as it appears in the Saite mythological manual of the Delta (pBrooklyn 47.218.84) is of relevance. Jørgensen concludes that “[t]he myth can be seen as the coming of age of a young nubile goddess, who travels into exile at the onset of the menarche and returns as a marriageable woman who can unite with her brother or husband. In the myth this is tied to the general fertility of Egypt, which is seen as dependent on the transformation of the goddess in her menstrual rage into the pacified bringer of life” (Jørgensen 2015: 163). However, the theory that Jørgensen proposed that this myth is related to menstruation does not necessarily mean that the myth of the *Heavenly Cow* narrative does as well. Richter proposes another interesting connection between the myths, also related to fertility and blood; a way to appease Sekhmet was to let her drink from a lake, the *isheru*. These lakes existed, according to Richter, and made their way to the festival for the Return of the Wandering Goddess (Richter 2010: 159). The appeasement rituals take place when the Nile is at its lowest, when the color of the Nile has a red-brown color, which could be associated with Sekhmet’s drinking of the beer (Leitz 1994: 205–206; Richter 2010: 159). Again, these connections do not prove any tangible relationships between the myths and texts, only perhaps recurring narrative elements or patterns.

<sup>66</sup> Richter 2010: 159.

<sup>67</sup> Wente 2003: l. 32.

tions; one is relevant for our case.<sup>68</sup> P. Derchain has observed that the “blood” spilled on fields is in fact the fertilizing Nile flood, whose water turns red during the flood season.<sup>69</sup>

Now, could this myth be somehow relevant for the studies of amulets of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD? Elements of the myth of the rebellion against the sun god exist in *The Book of the Fayum*.<sup>70</sup> H. Beinlich states that although the text is much older,<sup>71</sup> its dissemination occurred in Roman times and it was most probably composed in the “House of life of Ra-sehet.”<sup>72</sup> It would certainly be far-fetched to suggest a direct influence of the *The Myth of the Heavenly Cow* (elements of which survive in *The Book of Fayum*, but without the “raging goddess” story) and the Tantalus amulets. However, the narrative *topos* of a female character (uterus/goddess) being displaced and raging of thirst until she eventually drinks and is appeased is present on both the Tantalus amulets and in some earlier versions of *The Myth of the Heavenly Cow*. At this point, a direct connection cannot be made, there is no proof that the “raging goddess” element of this particular myth somehow survived until Roman times. One theory could be that *perhaps*, as the amulets were requested by customers who “demanded a type of amulet analogous to these [Hellenistic intaglio in semi-precious stone] but drawing (at least indirectly) upon a prestigious tradition of temple learning,”<sup>73</sup> there could be a remote possibility that the “raging goddess” version could have somehow been known in the temples (as other parts of the myth survived). Temple priests were

<sup>68</sup> Guilhou 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Derchain 1978: 48–56.

<sup>70</sup> Beinlich 1991: 27.

<sup>71</sup> H. Beinlich suggests the creation of *The Book of the Fayum* until its completion between 304 and 30 BC. (Beinlich 2013b: 34). See also Beinlich 2013a; 2014 and 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Beinlich 1991: 34. For details on dating, see Beinlich 2013a: 35–39.

<sup>73</sup> Gordon 2011: 43.

likely responsible for writing the formulary and perhaps even the activated texts.<sup>74</sup> At this point it would be better to argue that a similar narrative *topos* appeared spontaneously in different contexts, rather than claiming that although *The Book of the Fayum* does not keep all the elements of the original myth, nevertheless the temple priests could, theoretically, have been acquainted with the older version.

So, what is the connection between the Tantalus gemstones and the appeasement of the raging goddess? The uterus is called to descend back to its place, to stop wandering through the body in search of liquids. This is done by the disappearing command on the recto and by the identification of the uterus with the God on the verso. Similarly, the goddess Sekhmet is in a rage, in search for blood to drink to satisfy her, drinks the blood from the ground—in this case, the blood is also connected to the Nile flood and the fertility it carries—the silt. The connection with the ground is important in all three cases; Tantalus can only touch the dry earth (until the command is abolished), the uterus is connected to the ground by a seat and the goddess is, opposed to Tantalus, able to drink from the blood which is on the field.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, I argue that the “Tantalus amulet” is an amulet aimed at drying surplus humidity in the body (stomach, uterus, or the belly in general),<sup>75</sup> as S. Michel has suggested,<sup>76</sup> which might be caused by different diseases. As Dasen has shown, even amulets which have a depiction of a uterus might be not only for women, but for men as

<sup>74</sup> Gordon 2011: 41.

<sup>75</sup> Marino 2004: 389. For ancient sources on connections between womb and stomach, see Marino 2004: 247.

<sup>76</sup> Michel 2001: 242; Michel 2005: 150.

well.<sup>77</sup> Considering the depiction on the verso, the amulet would seem to be targeted at women and at the anchoring of the uterus in its right place, but it could have been targeted to both genders, as an amulet designed to draw out surplus blood from the body.

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<sup>77</sup> Dasen 2015b: 49–50.

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