

# Sarapis invoked as Zeus Dodonaios on a magical gem used for divinatory purposes

*Serápis invocado como Zeus Dodonaios em uma gema mágica usada para fins divinatórios*

**Christopher A. Faraone\***

**Abstract:** In this article, we propose to analyze the connection between Zeus Dodonaios and Serapis in the Greek world from the analysis of some magical gems bearing representations of Zeus Dodonaios enthroned as Sarapis and reports collected from the *Greek Magical Papyri*.

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, nos propomos a analisar a conexão entre Zeus Dodonaios e Serápis no mundo grego com base na análise de um conjunto de gemas mágicas portando representações de Zeus Dodonaios entronado como Serápis e alguns relatos recolhidos dos *Papiros Mágicos Gregos*.

**Keywords:**

Magic;  
Greek World;  
Zeus Dodonaios;  
Sarapis;  
Magic gems.

**Palavras-chave:**

Magia;  
Greek World;  
Zeus Dodonaios;  
Serápis;  
Gemas mágicas.

---

Recebido em: 02/05/2017  
Aprovado em: 23/06/2017

---

\* Professor in the Department of Classics and in the College University of Chicago. Ph.D. in Classics, Stanford University (1988). Areas of specialization: Ancient Greek poetry, religion and magic.

A white agate appeared on the antiquities market in Monte Carlo in 1982 with an image of Zeus-Sarapis enthroned on the obverse and a long inscription on the reverse that seems at first glance to be just another nonsensical name or *logos* typical of the magical gems.<sup>1</sup> The deity holds a thunderbolt and gestures toward an eagle, both symbols of Zeus, but the *calathos* on the god's head and the three-headed dog at his feet ensures us that he is indeed Zeus-Sarapis.

In the field we see seven stars and a crescent moon. The inscription on the back, however, deserves closer inspection. It begins: ΟΖΕΥΔΩ | ΔΩΝΗΔΑΩ | ΝΑ which yields, notwithstanding errors of spelling common on the magical gems, the names of the sacred pair invoked almost exclusively on the hundreds of lead oracle-questions found at the sanctuary of Dodona: ὦ Ζεῦ Δωδωνῆ (= Δωδωναίε), Διώνη (‘‘O Zeus Dodonian, Dione’’).<sup>2</sup>

The nine letters that follow these names on the gemstone, ΙΕΡΑΝΑΩΣΑ, might also be rendered as an epithet for Zeus' consort: ἱερά Νάουσα (‘‘she, who causes the sacred springs to flow’’) or as ἱερά Νάπιπουσα (‘‘she, who inhabits sacred places’’) and thus would seem to be an otherwise unattested epithet of Dione, albeit one rather similar to the most popular epithet(s) of Zeus at Dodona, ‘‘Naos’’, which seems to mean ‘‘of the flowing waters’’ or in its alternate form ‘‘Naios’’, which means ‘‘who inhabits’’.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the inscription on the back of the gem so far defies decipherment, and may be, in fact, nonsensical magical words that are typical of these kinds of gems: ΜΩΘΕΤΕΜ | ΕΝΤΑΟΡΤΕΤΙ | ΙΑΧΦΑΡΧΟΥ | ΦΗΤΑΧΟΥ.

The connection between Dodonean Zeus and Sarapis in the Roman period is not odd as it might seem, at first glance, because both were sources of personal prophecy in the Greek world and because both were similar in appearance and powers.<sup>4</sup> And although Zeus' sanctuary in Dodona was in decline in this period, literary evidence reveals that the seated statue depicted on the Monte Carlo gem was in the Hellenistic period closely connected with Sarapis' reputation as a healing god, who, like Asclepius, healed visitors who came to sleep and dream in his temple, including Demetrius of Phaleron, who after becoming blind, allegedly came to the god's temple in Alexandria at the prompting of a

<sup>1</sup> Veymiers (2009) n. II AB 32, who cites Vinchon (1982) n. 506.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Dakare; Bokotopoulo; Christide (2013) n. 2220B, 2438B, 3293B and 3463A for ὦ Ζεῦ Δωδωναίε, and nos. 2261A, 2421A and 3113A for ὦ Ζεῦ Δωδωναίε καὶ Διώνη (or ‘‘Διώνη’’). Only very rarely is the καὶ missing, as it is on the gem, e.g. Parke (1967) n. 23: Ζεῦ, Διώνη.

<sup>3</sup> On Zeus Naos or Naios as ‘‘Zeus of the flowing waters’’, see Parke (1967) 67-68 and 78 n. 36, where he dismisses ‘‘as very improbable’’ the alternate understanding of Zeus Naios, at least, as ‘‘Zeus who dwells (i.e. in the oak)’’. Kent Rigsby by e-mail points out that strictly speaking ναῶσα could be a correct form, the holy one ‘‘who brings to the temple.’’ But it is rare: in one Cretan inscription (I.Cret. I xix), and in the Maroneia Isis Aretalogy προναῶσαι ‘‘to bring (a song of praise) before the temple.’’ But on the gem ἱερά ναῶσα (‘‘bringing sacred things/offerings to temple’’ would presumably refer to the actions of a mortal, rather than goddess.

<sup>4</sup> For Zeus at Dodona see Parke (1967) and for Sarapis, Renberg (2017, p. 332-59).

dream and eventually regained his sight (VEYMIERS, 2009, p. 202-03).<sup>5</sup> It is not insignificant, moreover, that when Aelius Aristides dreams that he receives surgical treatment from Sarapis, the god does so “in the form of his seated statues”.<sup>6</sup> Sarapis on his throne, in short, was a focal point of prophetic dreams that sometimes led to healing.

There is, moreover, evidence that gems like the one in Monte Carlo could be used to create a private session for dream incubation in one’s home. We begin with the following recipe for a mantic ring in a late-antique magical handbook:

On a jasper-like agate engrave Sarapis seated in front <sup>7</sup> and holding an Egyptian royal scepter and on the scepter an ibis, and on the back of the stone inscribe the name and keep it shut up (i.e. in the setting of a ring). When the need [arises] hold the ring in your left hand and in your right a spray of olive and laurel [twigs], waving them toward the lamp while saying the spell 7 times. Then you put [the ring] on the index finger of your left hand with the stone facing inwards, and thus withdraw without speaking to anyone and go to sleep holding the stone to your left ear (*PGM*, V, 447-58).

The description of this gem as a “jasper-like agate” is vague and in fact typical of the haphazard typologies of gems and minerals in the Greek world,<sup>8</sup> but since both Pliny and Dioscorides tell us that jaspers were popular media for magical amulets, the recipe here probably refers to a jasper gem.<sup>9</sup>

The image described here of Sarapis enthroned with his scepter appears, in fact, in two different poses on Roman-period gems that are mostly hematite or jasper:<sup>10</sup> there are some twenty-seven examples of the god facing the viewer (Figure 1) and twice that many in profile (Figure 2).

<sup>5</sup> Diogenes Laertius 5, 76 and Artemidorus 2, 44. For a full treatment, see Renberg (2017, p. 332-59) and 372-92, who discusses the wide reputation that Sarapis had for incubation, especially at Alexandria and Canopus in Egypt.

<sup>6</sup> Aelius Aristides 49, 47 with the discussion of Platt (2011, p. 262).

<sup>7</sup> The participle *prokathêmenon* is translated in *GMPT* as “facing forward (?)”, but the word essentially means “seated before”, for example, a city gate or an assembled people – here it probably describes a famous cult statue that is both “seated” and “presiding” with authority. See below for further discussion.

<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion of these problems, see Rapp (2002, p. 71) (“few areas of lithic nomenclature are as confusing”) and Oldershaw (2008, p. 194-206).

<sup>9</sup> Pliny NH 37, 169 notes with disapproval a book on stones written by Zacharias, who claimed that jasper was beneficial, if worn by litigants or petitioners appearing before a king, and that it was also useful against eye- and liver-disease. He also mentions at NH 37, 118 the claims of the “Magi” that a special kind of “air-colored” jasper was “useful for those who harangue the assembly”. Dioscorides MM 5, 142, however, does not limit these beliefs to the *Magoi*, when he says that “everyone thinks that jasper stones were protective amulets (*phylacteria*) when tied on, when tied around the thigh, were promoters of quick birth.”

<sup>10</sup> Noted, for example, by Gasparro in *SGG* 1. p. 27, who prints as an illustration (Figure 4) a reddish agate with Sarapis (without an ibis on his scepter) on the front with the imperative “Protect!” and Pan on the reverse with the Abermenthō-logos (= *SGG* 2 Vr6).

Figure 1



Reference: Veymiers (2009, p. 280-293).

Figure 2



Reference: Veymiers, 2009, p. 280-293.

Veymiers (2009, p. 280-93), with a few additions in (2011): types II.AA 1-26 (trónant de face), II.AB 1-38 (trónant de trois-quarts) and II.E 1-16 (trónant dans une composition magique). In the last category, all of the images are “de trois-quarts”. For the sake of simplicity I refer to the three-quarter types as profile: the have a profile head, but their torso and legs are turned slightly toward the viewer.

Roughly one-third of these gems carry magical words that show they were used as amulets or for some other ritual purpose,<sup>11</sup> and it is probably significant that an ibis perches on Sarapis’ scepter on only eight gems, all of which also carry magical words.<sup>12</sup> Three of these magical gems are inscribed with acclamations or prayers that suggest they were used as amulets for protection or to acquire charm,<sup>13</sup> but only four of them can be linked with some divinatory or prophetic purpose.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the 17 listed in Veymiers (2009); (2011) under type II.E – see previous note – there are 8 others with magical names: II.AA 8, AB 3, 12, 13, 17, 27, 32 and 43.

<sup>12</sup> The ibis appears six times on the god’s scepter only on gems that also have magical words on them (II.E.2, 6, 7, 14, 16 and 17). On two other gems with magical words we find a herald’s staff with two birds, E.5 and 13. On the latter they are identified as an ibis and a rooster (?). Michel (2004, p. 324-25) has slightly different numbers: of a total of 19 examples, 9 have the ibis.

<sup>13</sup> Two gems with magical names seem to aim at the acquisition of “charm”: II.E 3 (= SMA 355) is a hematite that was broken and then reshaped for a smaller setting; it has on the reverse a magical name and then “[Give cha]rm to the one who wears (it)!” (this use is probably connected with the image on the reverse where the inscription lies: Harpocrates on the lotus, who often appears on amulets for gaining charm; see Faraone (2013, p. 33-34) and AB 2, a green gem in Bologna without any magical words or symbols, whose reverse reads “the charm”.

The first is, of course, the Monte Carlo gem under discussion, but three other magical gems of this type may also have been used for prophecy: a hematite or magnetite gem from Syria (Figure 3) and lapis-lazuli gems in New York and London (Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 3**



**Reference:** Veymiers (2009, p. 283).

**Figure 4**



**Reference:** Lapis-lazuli gem in New York and London.

They each carry magical inscriptions that are similar to one another and to a section of a series of magical names used in another divinatory ??? connected with Sarapis (*PGM*, V, 1-10):<sup>15</sup>

Sarapic Oracle: [By means of] a boy, by means of a lamp, saucer and bench. "I call upon you, O Zeus, Helios, Mithras, Sarapis unconquered, Meliouchos, Melikertes, Meligenetor, Abraalbachambêchi Baibeizôth Seriabebôth Amelchipsith."

Here, although the rubric refers to Sarapis alone, the deity invoked is initially addressed as Zeus. The scribe who wrote this recipe apparently had more than one copy

<sup>14</sup> Mouterde (1930-1931, p. 83-85, n. 15), Veymiers (2009, p. 283), n. II.AA 8 (frontal image a hematite or magnetite gem from Syria and now in a private collection in Hamburg); AB 13 (three-quarter turned image on a lapis-lazuli gem in the Metropolitan Museum in New York); and *BM* 32 (frontal image with radiant solar nimbus on a lapis-lazuli gem in the British Museum).

<sup>15</sup> This papyrus recipe is basically a long invocation and although it lists a boy, a lamp, a saucer and a bench, we are not given any instructions about how to use them.

of it in front of him and he carefully noted how the words in the invocation should be divided.<sup>16</sup> We can compare, as follows, the last four of these magical names with those inscribed on the three Sarapis gems:

PGM V:	Αβρααλ Βαχαμβηχι <sup>17</sup>	Βαιβειζωθ	Σεριαβεβωθ	Αμελχιψιθ
Syria:	Αβραβααα Βαχαμβηχι	Βιθεθιωθ	Βεριεβωθ	Μελχιψκ <sup>18</sup>
London:	Αβραλμαα	Βαλαμβηχει		Βεριαεβωθ <sup>19</sup>
New York:	Αβραμα Κραχανβηχει	Βαιβωθ	Βελιαβοθ	Μεαχεαχι

None of the rings show the ibis on the scepter, but in each case the *logos* seems to be addressed to Sarapis: the rings all carry his enthroned image on the obverse and the papyrus invokes him precisely as “Zeus, Helios, Mithras, Sarapis the unconquered”, [?]for mantic purposes, as the rubric, “Sarapic Oracle” makes clear. The fact, moreover, that no other magical gem or papyrus carries this invocation suggests that it was limited to gems carved with an image of Sarapis enthroned and used for mantic purposes. It may well be, then, that a recipe similar to the one for the Sarapis ring, also produced the Syrian and New York rings, which both have an enthroned Sarapis on the front and a magical name on the reverse, just as the recipe demands.<sup>20</sup>

There remain, however, differences: the recipe stresses the appearance of the ibis on Sarapis’ scepter, a detail that is only preserved on the profile images, and the recipe does not mention three other important features common to the gems: the Cerebus

<sup>16</sup> All the word-divisions here, except the first, are marked in the papyrus recipe with dots. I omit the interlinear words ἦ βαιβεβωθ (“or ‘Baibebôth’”) that were written above Σεριαβεβωθ and may be an alternate version of them, although they look more like a variant of the preceding word Βαιβειζωθ; see Kenyon (1893, p. 65).

<sup>17</sup> I omitted the first two letters of this word in the papyri (an additional β), because the scribe placed dots above them; see Kenyon (1893, p. 65): “they are no doubt meant to be omitted.” Presumably they were in his inferior exemplar.

<sup>18</sup> I have not been able to see a photograph of this gem, but only the drawing of the reverse in Mouterde (1930-1931), who read Αβρακαδαβα χαμβηχι βιθεθιωθ βεριεβωθ μελχιψκ; in the first word he was excessively eager to see the first Greek rendition of the famous Latin magical word “Abracadabra”. I follow Michel (2004, p. 325), who reread the inscription after it resurfaced in the Skoluda collection. Regarding word division, in Mouterde’s drawing (fig. 15) the words βιθεθιωθ βεριεβωθ each appear on their own line. The gem is broken off at the bottom, but the inscription seems to have continued for another whole line, at the end of which Mouterde read ννα and Michel υαφυ.

<sup>19</sup> My reading from autopsy differs slightly from Michel (2004, p. 325), which is Αβρααμα Βαλαμβηχει Βεριαεβθ. The rest of the inscription is smaller and difficult to read and Michel reads περηιανουθινιθηρ. The words νουθινιθηρ are similar to π[ν]ουτε νενθηρ τηρου that appear a bit further along in the PGM V invocation and in fact the letter crammed against the left top corner of Sarapis’ throne may well be a distorted *pi*, rather than the *alpha* that Michel reads: πνουθι νυθηρ. In the midst of a long solar invocation in another handbook, moreover, we find these words at the end of the sequence ψοειω ψοειω πνουτε νενθηρ τηρου (PGM, III, 145), which seems to phonetically transcribe the Egyptian: “Good Daimon, Good Daimon, O god of all gods”; see R.K. Ritner *ad* GMPT loc. cit.

<sup>20</sup> The design of the ring in London, however, differs slightly, because the name is carved in two spirals around the edge of the image and the reverse was left blank. Given the text of the PGM V ring-recipe, we cannot know whether the author was thinking of a frontal depiction of the god or a profile one. On the one hand, Sarapis faces us on two of the four mantic rings described above and the use of the participle *prokathêmenon* near the start of the ring-recipe could describe the seated image as “seated before” (i.e. us, the viewers).



or scorpion under the god's right hand, a crocodile under his feet or the serpent that encircles the entire scene.

But regardless of these discrepancies, it is highly likely that the four extant rings discussed in detail above were used in some kind of domestic ritual of dream-incubation, like the one recommend in the *PGM V* recipe. It is conceivable, in fact, that many of the other gems engraved with images of Sarapis enthroned and magical words were used in similar fashion. The creator of the Monte Carlo gem, however, took a further step, and as far as we know unique one, when he connected this prophetic Zeus-Sarapis with Dodona, the most famous oracular sanctuary of Zeus in the Greek world. It is not clear what might have prompted this inscription. By the Imperial Period Dodona was not, like the Alexandrian Serapeion, a thriving religious sanctuary, although there is evidence that its main festival was still being celebrated in the third century CE.<sup>21</sup>

## Abbreviations

*BM* = MICHEL, S. *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum*. London: The British Museum Press, 2001. 2 v.

*D&D* = DELATTE, A. and DERCHAIN, P. *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques, 1964.

*GMA* = KOTANSKY, R. *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae*. Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance. Papyrologica Coloniensia. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994.

*LIM* = MASTROCINQUE, A. (Ed.). *Les intailles magiques du department des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques*. Paris: Éditions de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2014.

*PGM* = PREISENDANZ, K. [and A. Henrichs]. *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*. Stuttgart: E. Heitsch/A. Henrichs, 1973-1974. 2 v.

*GMPT* = BETZ, H. D. (Ed.). *The Greek Magical Papyri: in Translation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

*SGG* = MASTROCINQUE, A. (Ed.) *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum*. Bollettino di Numismatica. Monografia 8.2.1 and 2. Rome 2003 and 2008. 2 v.

*SMA* = BONNER, C. *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*. Ann Arbor; Oxford: University of Michigan Press; Oxford University Press, 1950.

---

<sup>21</sup> Parke (1967, p. 124-25).

## Bibliography

- BOHAK, G. *Ancient Jewish magic: a History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- BONNER, C. *Studies in magical amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*. Ann Arbor; Oxford: University of Michigan Press; Oxford University Press, 1950.
- DAKARE, S; BOKOTOPOULOU, I.; CHRISTIDE, A. F. *Τα χρηστηρια ελασματα της Δωδωνης*. Athens: Σωτήρη Τσέλικα, 2013.
- DANIEL, R. W. Some magical gems in the British Museum. *ZPE*, v. 142, p. 139-142, 2003.
- DELATTE, A.; DERCHAIN, P. *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques, 1964.
- FARAONE, C. A. Notes on some Greek magical gems in New England. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, v. 53, p. 326-349, 2013.
- GASPARRO, G. S. Le gemme magiche come oggetto d'indagine storico-religiosa. In: MASTROCINQUE, A. (Ed.). *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum*. Parte 1. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato; Libreria dello Stato, 2004, p. 11-46.
- KENYON, F. G. *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*. London: British Museum, 1893.
- KOTANSKY, R. *Greek magical amulets: The inscribed gold, silver, copper, and bronze lamellae*. Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance. Papyrologica Coloniensia. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994.
- LHÔTE, E. *Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone*. Genève: Droz, 2006.
- MICHEL, S. *Die magischen Gemmen: Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit (Studien Aus Dem Warburg-Haus)*. Berlin: German Edition, 2004.
- MOUTERDE, R. Le glaive de Dardanos: objets et inscriptions magiques de Syrie. *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, v. 15, p. 53-87, 1930-1931.
- OLDERSHAW, C. *Gems of the world*. Richmond Hill: Firefly Books, 2008.
- PARKE, H. W. *The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona, Olympia, Ammon*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor*. London; Dover: Croom Helm, 1985.
- PLATT, V. *Facing the Gods: epiphany and representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- PREISENDANZ, K. [and A. Henrichs]. *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*. Stuttgart: E. Heitsch; A. Henrichs, 1973-1974. v. 2.
- RAPP, G. *Archaeomineralogy*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2002.
- RENBERG, G. *Where dreams may come: incubation sanctuaries in the Graeco-Roman world*. Leiden: Brill, 2017.



VEYMIERS, R. *Hileôs tõi phorounti*: Sérapis sur les gemmes et les bijoux antiques. Brussels: Academie Royale de Belgique, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Hileôs tõi phorounti': Sérapis sur les gemmes et les bijoux antiques. Supplément I. In: BRICAULT, L.; VEYMIERS, R. (Ed.) *Bibliotheca Isiaca II*. Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2011, p. 239-271.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Hileôs tõi phorounti': Sérapis sur les gemmes et les bijoux antiques. Supplément II. In: BRICAULT, L.; VEYMIERS, R. (Ed.) *Bibliotheca Isiaca III*. Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2011, p. 207-244.

VINCHON, J. *Glyptique*. Monte Carlo: Art Monaco, 1982.