

IMAGES OF THE CRUCIFIXION IN
LATE ANTIQUITY
The testimony of engraved gems

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CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Declaration	iv
Acknowledgments	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter I	
THE STATE OF THE QUESTION	10
Crucifixion Iconography and Engraved Gems	
A. METHODS OF APPROACH	
I. Creating a Theory of Rejection:	16
1. Social and Political Impediments	17
2. Mystery and Idolatry	21
3. Christological Concerns	22
4. Art Historical Obstacles	24
5. The “Quasi-avoidance” Solution	26
II. An Alternative View: neglect	33
B. THE CRUCIFIXION GEMS: a survey of past scholarship	42
I. Engraved Gems	47
II. The Crucifixion Gems: some problems of disparity	51
III. The Origins and Definition of Christian Art	57
Towards a New Perspective	60
Chapter II	
THE ICONOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE c. 200 – 600	62
A Brief Review	
I. Second and Third Centuries	65
II. Third and Fourth Centuries	69
III. Fifth Century	79
IV. Sixth Century	100
Chapter III	
THE CRUCIFIXION GEMS	117
Part 1. LATE ANTIQUITY	
A. The Pereire Jasper	120
1. The Inscription	121
2. The Jasper and its Group	131
3. The Iconography	134

B. The Nott and Constanza Gems	146
1. Jesus and the Cross	150
2. The Inscriptions	159
3. Veneration Iconography	161
Part 2. BYZANTIUM	184
A. The Lewis Jasper	184
1. Jesus	185
2. The Lance and Sponge-Bearers	197
3. The Inscription	207
4. Contemporary Engraved Gems	212
B. Gaza Jasper	216
1. The Script	219
2. The Iconography:	224
a. the attendant figures: some problems of identification	229
b. the twisted and suffering Jesus	243
Part 3. PROBLEMATIC AMULETS	259
A. Orpheus Bakchikos Seal-Cylinder	259
B. Crucified-Ass Amulet	261
C. Haematite Amulet	263
CONCLUSION	266
Appendix 1: Catalogue of Engraved Gems	281
Appendix 2: The Lewis Jasper and its Group: Spier	286
List of Abbreviations	288
Bibliography	289
List of Illustrations	314
Plates	

ABSTRACT

This study takes five gemstones, each engraved with an image of the Crucifixion and previously dated to the Late Antique period, as its focus. Traditionally it has been thought that Christian images of the Crucifixion emerged in the fifth century and that prior to that time, the subject was consciously rejected by artists. Utilising the largely ignored and invariably misused evidence of the gems, this study challenges both the conventional view of the early history of the image and the theory of rejection.

Although the gems have previously been cited to indicate the portrayal of the Crucifixion prior to the fifth century, confusion about their authenticity and art-historical validity has seen them marginalised or dismissed from most iconographic studies of the subject in Late Antiquity. Yet clearly the question of the avoidance of the Crucifixion cannot be addressed until a systematic examination of the gems' iconographic as well as compositional, physical and epigraphic evidence, is carried out. This study undertakes such an examination. It demonstrates the way in which critical information regarding the evolution of the Crucifixion image in Late Antiquity has been seriously obstructed in previous studies through the dismissal, misapplication and/or misinterpretation of the gems. Focusing on iconography, it presents a revised chronology for the gems. It suggests that only three are Late Antique, with the fourth gem being early Byzantine. The Late Antique date customarily assigned to the fifth gem is rejected and a Middle Byzantine date proposed.

The core investigation of the gems is prefaced by a short review of the material and literary evidence customarily cited in iconographic studies for the representation of the Crucifixion between c. AD 200 and c. 600. The extent to which the gems augment and transform this evidence is shown to be significant. Drawing on the testimony of the gems this study proposes that at least two design models of the representation of Jesus on the cross were circulating prior to the fifth century but proved unpopular: the earliest model is "magical" and is characterised by its realism; the second, later model is Christian and is characterised by its symbolism. The focus away from the subject in art prior to the fifth century is shown to be witnessed in the small number of surviving gems and in the compositional formats and iconography adopted on them. On the strength of such discoveries the study concludes that the prevailing assumptions regarding the rejection of Crucifixion imagery in Late Antiquity need to be reconsidered.