

A Roman Intaglio from Abingdon

At some point in the mid to late 1990s, Mr J.R. Highsmith found a small, brightly coloured and engraved stone while digging in his garden at 62 Thesiger Road, Abingdon (SU 4982 9764). This find was subsequently brought to the notice of one of the authors of the present note (Terry Stopps), who recognised it to be an intaglio and drew it to the attention of Martin Henig. As only the second intaglio to be recorded from Abingdon,¹ this is a significant local discovery. This note describes and discusses the item, and tries to place it in its local context.

DESCRIPTION OF INTAGLIO (MARTIN HENIG)

The material is a cornelian, pale and uneven in colour, cut to an oval form, with sides bevelled inwards, the upper surface very slightly convex (Henig's Shape A4) (Fig. 1).² The object measures 11 mm x 9 mm x 4 mm. It depicts a male figure seated upon a sea-creature which sports a mane on its head and neck, and a fish-like tail swimming towards the left (this describes the actual gem; it would have been set in a ring and employed as a seal and, consequently, would be reversed in the impression). The rider is armed with a long spear, which he holds horizontally. Short cuts on the stone below the creature indicate the sea.

The subject was almost certainly intended to depict a cupid riding upon a hippocamp, a common type on intaglios, though the short body and tri-lobed fish tail are rather characteristic of a capricorn and the two projections from its head might be goat-horns rather than equine ears. The creature lacks the normal equine forelegs and instead of holding its head up it is portrayed with lowered head, as though the animal were a grazing horse. There are other omissions and departures from the standard iconography in that the rider lacks legs and the usual wings of a cupid and, secondly, the usual trident for hunting fish is here depicted as rather an ungainly spear. All of these factors suggest that the gem was apprentice work by a gem-cutter who had not quite mastered his craft. Similar deficiencies are not uncommon and comparison may be made with the rendering of a horse and its rider on a red jasper from Verulamium, Hertfordshire.³

The deficiencies in execution by no means indicate a late date; indeed, the pale colour of the gem, its shape and small size are consonant with the early, narrow Imperial ring form,⁴ and together are suggestive of a date no later than early Flavian times (first century AD). The freshness of its condition strongly implies that it was lost soon after it was engraved. For the subject and probable date compare the much finer and earlier amethyst from Alise-Sainte-Reine in the Côte-d'Or,⁵ and a cornelian from Tunisia, in both of which he holds a vertical trident.⁶

The theme of cupid riding a hippocamp is recorded on a number of intaglios from Britain, including a nicolo (onyx with blue upper layer) from Caistor St Edmund, Norfolk,⁷ glass

¹ The other is mentioned in M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (2000), p. 137. The authors are most grateful to Mr Highsmith for allowing us to publish this important find. We are also extremely grateful to Ian R. Cartwright, photographer in the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford, for his great skill and care in producing an excellent photograph of this tiny object.

² M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* (third edition, 2007), p. 9, fig. 1.

³ *Ibid.* p. 157, no. 512.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 9, fig. 1, types ii and iii.

⁵ H. Guiraud, *Intailles et camées de l'époque romaine en Gaule* (2008), vol. 2, pp. 121–2, no. 1211.

⁶ J. Spier, *Ancient Gems and Finger Rings, Catalogue of the Collections, The J. Paul Getty Museum* (1992), p. 122, no. 322.

⁷ Henig, *Gemstones*, p. 107, no. 127.

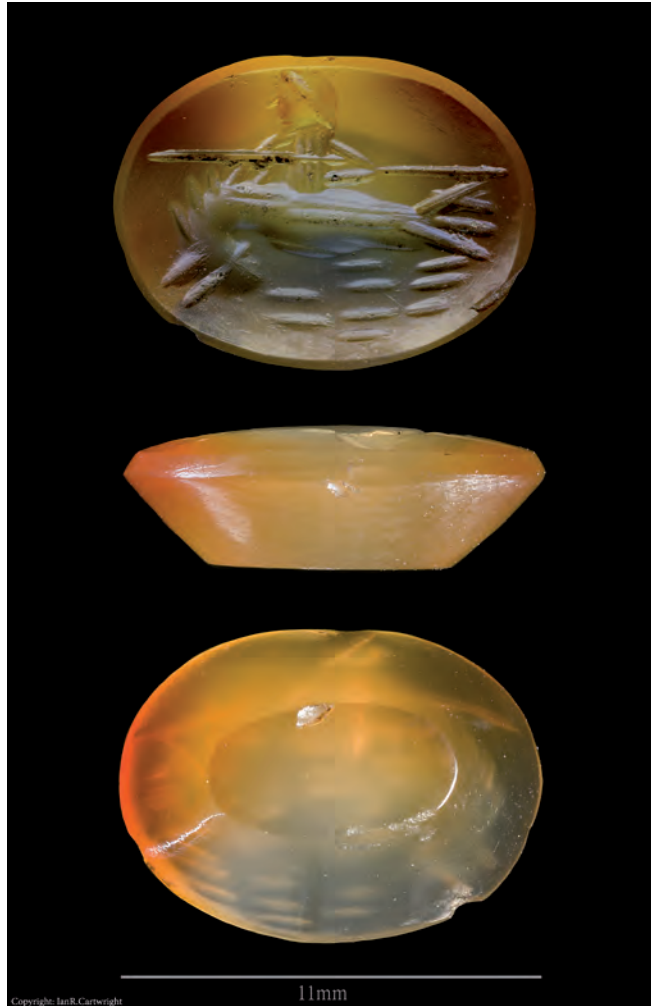


Fig. 1. Roman intaglio from Abingdon. Photograph courtesy of Ian R. Cartwright, School of Archaeology, University of Oxford.

intaglios imitative of nicolo from Colchester, Essex and Corbridge, Northumberland,⁸ in all three of which he guides his mount with a whip, and also a cornelian from the Fortress at York,⁹ but all of these are later, probably third century in date. In addition, note the capricorns depicted on gems, for example a yellow jasper from Harlow, Essex and a nicolo from Richborough, Kent.¹⁰

Although evidently found just outside the central area of Abingdon, this is a significant local find, perhaps belonging to a citizen of what is now recognised as an important Roman settlement, possibly a small town (see below).

⁸ Ibid. p.108, nos. 128 and 109.

⁹ Ibid. p. 200, no. App. 63.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.173, nos. 664 and 666.

THE INTAGLIO IN ITS LOCAL CONTEXT (ROGER THOMAS)

Almost nothing can be said about the immediate context of this find. The housing estate within which it was found was built in the 1930s, and (unsurprisingly at that date) there is no record of any archaeological material being noticed at the time. Whether the intaglio derives from a settlement at this spot or nearby, or was originally lost or deposited in open countryside, is unknown.

More generally, Abingdon and its environs were well-populated and quite intensively farmed in the Roman period.¹¹ Settlements in the vicinity include a villa at Barton Court Farm (about 1.2 km from the intaglio findspot),¹² evidence of a late Roman settlement at Bowyer Road (0.3 km away),¹³ and a building of some kind at the Fitzharris Arms site (0.7 km away).¹⁴ The findspot lies about 0.4 km beyond the northern edge of the major Roman settlement which lies under the modern town centre of Abingdon.

Despite much excavation over the years, the precise character of the Abingdon settlement remains uncertain, although it seems likely that it was a local centre of some kind, possibly a small town. It did not lie on any known Roman road, but covered a substantial area, perhaps some 20 hectares. It succeeded an Iron-Age enclosed *oppidum*, part of the defensive circuit of which was slighted at some point after the Roman conquest. Much of the settlement seems to be characterised by ditches and rubbish pits, although evidence of substantial buildings has been found in a number of separate locations.¹⁵

There seems to have been particularly intensive activity at Abingdon in the mid to late first century AD. This includes a number of Republican, Claudian and other first-century coins, and fine-ware pottery of the mid first century, possibly connected in some way with the Roman military (although there is no evidence at all of a military presence at Abingdon).¹⁶ At the Old Gaol site, an interim report suggests the existence of a Roman temple with masonry footings constructed, on the site of an Iron-Age predecessor, in c.60–70 AD.¹⁷ The character of the settlement seems to have changed in the early second century AD, with activity becoming less intensive.¹⁸

Whatever the precise character of the settlement at Abingdon, it was clearly not an ordinary rural settlement. Its peak of activity in the middle of the first century AD is particularly notable, and is presumably related to the importance of the late Iron-Age *oppidum*. This phase of activity provides a plausible context for the Thesiger Road intaglio, which (as noted above) dates to the first century, and possibly to the Flavian period. Engraved stone intaglios are generally associated with the higher levels of Roman society. The Abingdon intaglio could therefore have belonged to a member of the local British elite who was happy to adopt newly imported Roman material culture, or possibly to a high-ranking Roman soldier, official or merchant who had reason to visit the area. In any event, this find is an important addition to Abingdon's archaeology of this significant period.

MARTIN HENIG, TERRY STOPPS and ROGER THOMAS

¹¹ Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, fig. 4.1.

¹² D. Miles, *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon.* (1986).

¹³ D. Wilson, 'Inhumations and Roman Settlement Features at Box Hill, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 44 (1979), pp. 97–9; Abingdon Area Archaeological & Historical Society, unpublished excavation.

¹⁴ P. Riccoboni, 'An Archaeological Watching Brief: Site on Land Adjacent to the former Fitzharris Arms Public House, Thornhill Walk, Abingdon, Oxfordshire', unpublished report by John Moore Heritage Services (2012), available at: http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/arch-988-1/dissemination/pdf/johnmoor1-135088_1.pdf.

¹⁵ Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pp. 71–2; M. Parrington and C. Balkwill, 'Excavations at Broad Street, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, 40 (1975), pp. 5–58.

¹⁶ H. Peake, *The Archaeology of Berkshire* (1931), pp. 108, 172; Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pp. 75, 163.

¹⁷ S. Yeates, 'The Roman Religious Landscape of Abingdon, Oxfordshire', in R. Haeussler and A. King (eds.), *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period: Personal, Local and Global* (2017), pp. 108–12.

¹⁸ Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pp. 71–2.