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To Be or Not to Be: Goethe's Ring?
A study of a paste intaglio of "Papirius and his mother" set in a gold ring

(8 illustrations)

Fig. 1: Views of the ring. The gem: 19 x 15 mm. Photo © Christie's

A large gold ring (Fig. 1), set with an oval paste-intaglio of 19 x 15 mm (Fig. 2), together with a letter by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)[1] (Fig. 3) was recently sold in New York by Christie's,[2] where purchased by Antiquariat Inlibris (Vienna) & Kotte Autographs (Rosshaupten) and published in their 2012 catalogue.[3] Both catalogues described this ring as having been previously owned by Goethe, and engraved c. 1826 by Angelica Facius (1806–1887). At a later stage (and no source of acquisition is known), it became the property of Heinrich

[1] Letter, mounted on card, signed "Goethe", dated Weimar 16 January 1826, addressed to an unnamed recipient. Goethe asks whether he could see some gems owned by Mr Facius, small carnelians or chalcedonies, or if he could be told whether they are suitable for rings: "Man wünscht die kleinsten Carneol- oder Chalcedonsteine, welche Herr Facius besitzt, zu sehen oder zu erfahren, wo dergleichen, zu Ringen geeignet, auswärts wohl zu haben wären". We are most grateful to Ian Ehling, Vice President & Senior Specialist at Christie's, for his help in researching this ring.

[2] Christie's 2011, lot 68, sold US-$ 17,000 + 25 % buyer's premium.

[3] Antiquariat Inlibris & Kotte Autographs 2012, lot 46 (€ 75,000).

Lempertz (1816–1898). Sold in the 1908 auction of his estate,[4] the letter (lot 656) and the ring (lot 657)[5] were both purchased by Theodor Sölling (information from Inlibris & Kotte), and remained in his family until 2011. According to Goethe himself,[6] "there may be nothing more difficult than a sure knowledge of engraved stones", and indeed the description of this ring should be questioned.

Fig. 2: Impression of the ring. Photo © Christie's

This ring is not a discovery for Goethe scholars, a rediscovery rather, as the reference book on Goethe's gem-collection already indicated that "a seal impression from the collection Lempertz", known only from photograph, deserves special mention as it informs us of an intaglio

[4] The 1908 auction-catalogue has two sheets added to the 1899 catalogue, but is otherwise identical. The description of the ring 657 reads: "Grosser Goldring Goethes, die ovale Platte Carnelo-Gemme, Philosoph und Schüler darstellend. Trefflichst erhaltenes, kostbares Stück. Der Carneol wurde durch Zelters Vermittlung vom Hofmedailleur u. Steinschneider Fr. Wilh. Facius gekauft u. von dessen berühmter Tochter Angelika, einer Schülerin Rauchs, geschnitten; dieselbe wohnte in Zelters Hause u. leistete Vorzügliches. Das i. d. vorstehenden No? verzeichnete Briefchen Goethes steht zu dieser No. in engster Beziehung. Vgl. Nebenstehende Abbildung nach einem Lack-Abdruck".

[5] According to a manuscript note, the lot 656 sold for 27 Mark, and the lot 657 sold for 500 Mark. We could not check these results, as all the archives of Lempertz were unfortunately destroyed in an air raid during World War II.

[6] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, letter to Amalie von Gallitzin, 20 July 1802: "nichts ist vielleicht schwerer als eine sichere Kenntniß von geschnittenen Steinen" (quoted in: Herz 2006, pp. 10–27; and in Femmel – Heres 1977, p. 193, letter 222).

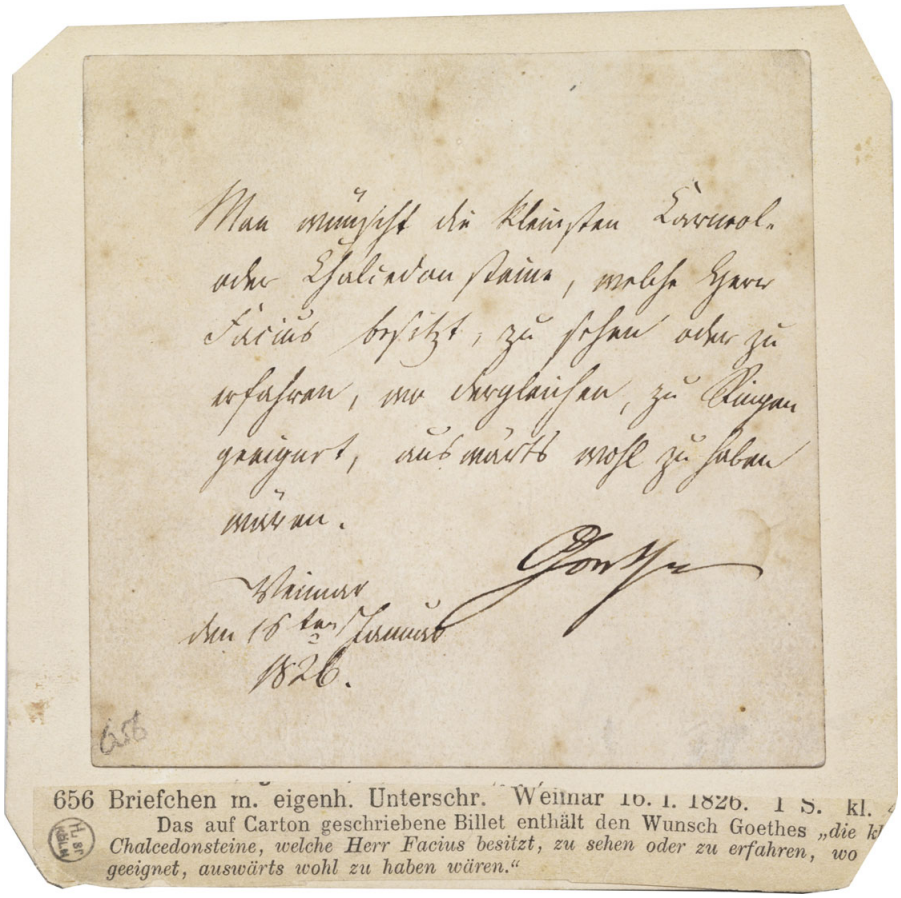

Fig. 3: Goethe, signed letter, Weimar 16 January 1826, addressed to an unnamed recipient. Photo © Christie's

belonging to Goethe, which did not survive in the original, made by Angelica Facius and depicting "A philosopher and his student".[7] The depiction was misunderstood, as the engraving's subject is the well-known group of "Papirius and his mother", a sculpture 192 cm high[8].

[7] Femmel – Heres 1977, p. 125: "Besonders zu erwähnen bleibt ein nur im Foto überlieferter Siegellackabdruck der Sammlung Lempertz …, weil er uns mit einer im Original nicht überkommenen Gemme Goethes bekannt macht, einer Arbeit der Angelica Facius, das Motiv: ‚Philosoph und Schüler'".

[8] The anecdote of Papirius, known from Aulus Gellius, describes "the ingenuity with which the young Papirius, nicknamed Praetextatus, had, in the early days of Rome when sons were allowed to accompany their fathers to the Senate, fobbed off his mother's curiosity about what had been discussed there by telling her that the debate had centered in the issue as to whether it was better for the State for a man to have

The original marble, in the Ludovisi collection since before November 1623,[9] remained in their Palazzo Grande on the Pincio in Rome – where Goethe must have seen it during one of his 1786–1787 visits.

Why should one assume that Goethe owned this ring, considering that it has only been associated to the writer since 1899?[10] Although Lempertz was an authoritative collector, why did he describe the gem as depicting "A philosopher and his student" rather than "Papirius and his mother"? Goethe himself would most certainly have understood the scene, already published correctly by Raspe in 1791,[11] so this suggests that Lempertz's source was neither very close to Goethe, nor very reliable. Goethe's interest in gems (since his teenage years) is well known: his collection has been studied; his letters, diaries, and publications contain many references to gems. Of this specific ring, no mention is ever made. And Goethe used several gems from his collections as seal-matrixes, but apparently never this one. This would suggest, in the least, that this was not one of Goethe's most favoured possessions; but was it even his?

The intaglio is not signed. The Lempertz catalogue attributes it to Angelica Facius (1806–1887), but without proving information. Goethe knew her well indeed,[12] and she did carve herself some shell cameos,[13]

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two wives or one woman two husbands" (Aulius Gellius, Noctes Atticae 1, 23). The story of Papirius was known, but for example Angelica Kaufmann (1741–1807) depicted it quite differently (oil on canvas, 62.75 cm diameter, Berger Collection. Publ.: Roworth 1992, p. 182). Very successful, and much discussed between antiquarians, the sculpture was often copied (see: Haskell – Penny 1998, p. 288).

[9] Purchased from the Ludovisi descendants in 1901, it is since then in the Museo nazionale romano.

[10] The Lempertz catalogue-description was used for various articles: described as "Ein grosser Goldring Goethes ist beigegeben mit einer ovalen Carneol Gemme Philosoph mit Schüler darstellend ein trefflich erhaltenes kostbares Stück" (Schnorrenberg 1900, p. 397), or even illustrated with the gem's impression and the legend "Impression of Goethe's ring, mounted with carnelian, engraved by Angelica Facius" (Forrer 1901, reprinted in Forrer 1904).

[11] Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 10764.

[12] Goethe had been introduced to her in 1823 by painter Johann Peter Kaufmann, and he in-turn introduced her to the sculptor Christian Daniel Rauch under whom she became apprenticed 1827–1834. It is as medallist that she met Goethe, and she created a medal with his portrait as early as 1825. This is the items 1461/1462 (silver and bronze) in Klauß 2000, which lists ten medals by Angelika (sic) Facius in Goethe's collection (nrs 1403, 1408–1411, 1461, 1462, 1512–1514).

[13] "Zuletzt find es meist Muschelkameen mit antikischen Frauenköpfen gewesen, die sie für die damals beliebten Broschen schnitt. Aber auch eine Reihe Bildnisse von

but probably no intaglios. An attribution to her father, Friedrich Wilhelm Facius (1764–1843), would seem more plausible: at least, he did indeed engrave intaglios.[14] But in fact the accompanying letter, which seems to associate the ring to the Facius family, was sold separately in the 1908 auction, and may not have been acquired together by Lempertz.

Fig. 4: Cast of an intaglio, by Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791), red sulphur, 27 x 23 mm. Photo © Gabinetto Numismatico e Medagliere di Milano (publ.: Tassinari 2012, no. I.41)

Fig. 5: Cast of an intaglio, by Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791), Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 15613. Photo © Beazley Archive, Oxford University

The intaglio is made of glass, and it is most probably the cast of a carnelian or chalcedony intaglio.[15] Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791) carved

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Weimarer Persönlichkeiten der Goethezeit schuf sie in dieser Weise und hatte noch kurz vor ihrem Tode die Freude, dass diese vom Dresdner Grünen Gewölbe des Ankaufs für würdig gefunden wurden" (Frede 1937, p. 537). Nineteen cameos by her are now in Dresden, Grünes Gewölbe, inv. 1884/4.1–19, acquired in 1884 for 400 Mark from Dresden Court Jeweler Theodor Sachwall. These were late works: not yet all finished by October 1861 (Kappel – Weinhold 2007, p. 290; Kovalevski 1999, cat. no. B 8, pp. 92 f.).

[14] He notably carved a Meleager, a Leda, an Arion riding the dolphin, heads of Euripides and Homer, and a bust of Goethe c. 1827. It is Goethe who, in 1792, had sent F. W. Facius from Weimar to Tettelbach to be trained as a gem-engraver (Thieme – Becker 1915, p. 181; Niegsch 2003, p. 160; Weber 1996, p. 143).

[15] The Lempertz catalogue indicated that this ring was set with a carnelian, but this was most likely an innocent mistake: the gem is in fact uncoloured and foiled, and most certainly the original one for this ring. Christie's kindly provided us with high-quality photographs. Carving glass was rare and rather meaningless: it is a very hard material but nevertheless despised by collectors. Casts instead, paste-impressions, were common in the neo-classical periods, as part of dactyliothecae.

highly similar gems[16] (Figs 4–5), but these were signed and it is unlikely that his signature could have disappeared in the reproduction process. Rather: several other such gems exist[17] (even Wedgwood made cameos of this type),[18] and this paste could be the cast of another – unsigned – gem[19] (Figs 6–7), such as the one now kept in the MET (Fig. 8).[20]

Fig. 6: Cast of an intaglio, attributed to Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791), Amastini no. 26. Photo © Beazley Archive, Oxford University

Fig. 7: Cast of an intaglio, Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 10765. Photo © Beazley Archive, Oxford University

Fig. 8: Convex carnelian intaglio, 21.43 x 15.48 x 5.16 mm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 81.6.253, gift of John Taylor Johnston, 1881). Photo © Metropolitan Museum, New York

In summary, the Lempertz-Christie's ring is undoubtedly a genuine late Georgian/Biedermeier gold ring, set with a paste-impression. The Goethe-provenance is not proven, nor is Angelica Facius' authorship:

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[16] Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 10764 = Rollett 1874, p. 35, no. 179 = Amastini no. 20 = Tassinari 2012 (Milano), no. I.41 = Tassinari 2012 (Brescia), no. 10 (brown glass 20.7 x 17.1 mm) = intaglio by Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791), signed ΠΙΧΛΕΡ, chalcedony, engraved late 1768 or early 1769 for Sir Wakin Williams Wynn. Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 15613 = Rollett 1874, p. 35, no. 178 = intaglio by Giovanni Pichler (1734–1791), signed ΠΙΧΛΕΡ.

[17] The so-called Goethe gem by Angelica Facius is recorded in Tassinari's Milan catalogue (p. 177 "confronto ii" & p. 178 note 820), along with many other versions.

[18] 1779 catalogue nos. I. I. 1038, I. II. 222 and II. 62.

[19] It could be the gem Amastini no. 26 (attributed to Giovanni Pichler) or the gem Raspe – Tassie 1791, no. 10765 (carnelian intaglio, unsigned).

[20] Convex carnelian, 21.43 x 15.48 x 5.16 mm. The Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. 81.6.253, gift of John Taylor Johnston, 1881; ex King Collection, no. 172). Publ.: Osborne 1912, pl. 30, 19; Richter 1920, pl. 87, 451.

why Lempertz claimed this provenance is still uncertain. But it remains nevertheless an attractive collector's item.[21]

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[21] I am grateful to Matthias Barth, Christopher Lightfoot, Gabriella Tassinari, and Claudia Wagner for their help in researching and writing this essay.

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Zusammenfassung:

Ein jüngst im Kunsthandel als aus Johann Wolfgang von Goethes Besitz stammend versteigerter Siegelring erweist sich als attraktive Arbeit des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts. Die Provenienzangabe dürfte einer kritischen Überprüfung jedoch nicht standhalten.