

MICHAŁ KUŹMIŃSKI

Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw
mm.kuzminski@uw.edu.pl

A GLASS GEM DEPICTING A DYING NIOBID FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

ABSTRACT

The National Museum in Warsaw holds a diverse collection of glass gems, both ancient and modern. One of these, a specimen depicting a dying Niobid supported by his sister, belongs to a wider group of objects scattered throughout various European museums. Such gems were mainly produced during the 1st century BC and their decoration is derived from a fragment of a relief carved by Pheidias on the statue of Zeus in Olympia which portrays the massacre of the Niobids. The fact that these

gems were made of glass indicates that objects with such decorations were appreciated and popular. The myth of Niobe, in both Greek and Roman art, served multiple purposes highlighted by the choice of the story's motives most often used in decorations. However, the reason for the use of this particular fragment of Pheidias's relief to decorate gems as well as their popularity require additional explanation.

Keywords: gem, intaglio, glyptic art, Niobids, myth

The National Museum in Warsaw (NMW) holds an assorted collection of glass gems of different origins, both ancient and modern. Due to their formal and iconographic diversity, individual specimens of this collection have been studied by researchers such as Barbara Filarska,¹ Zsolt Kiss,² Katarzyna Suska,³ or Barbara Lichočka.⁴

By virtue of its formal characteristics as well as the iconography of its decorative elements, one of the collection's specimens⁵ may be classified as a part of a larger group of objects known from the collections of various museums throughout Europe. So far, neither the item from the National Museum in Warsaw nor this particular type of gem have been subjected to an in-depth iconographic or symbolic analysis.

The gem⁶ is made of three-coloured glass but most of its surface is green (Fig. 1). A blue band of glass, separated on both sides from the green glass by narrower white, non-translucent stripes, runs more or less across the middle of its image.

The object was transferred to the National Museum in 1954 by the Ministry of Culture and Art. It was one of more than two hundred specimens which at that time

were entrusted to the museum, moved from a repository of museum pieces. Insufficient documentation, however, makes the precise identification of the carving's original collection impossible. The archives of the National Museum's Department of Ancient and Eastern Christian Art as well as its main archives both hold surviving copies of the same document containing imprecise lists of items delivered in 1954. The inventory list indicates Greece as the gem's place of discovery. This information, however, is questionable since it is not supported by any other documentation and may refer to the mere presumption that the gem was somehow connected to ancient Greece.

The intaglio shows a pair of standing figures facing left. On the right, a woman wearing a chiton and himation is tilting her head toward the other person. On the left, a naked young man is standing with his back toward the woman, his body arching backward, his head falling back and resting on the woman's shoulder. His left arm is drooping limply along the woman's body. There is no ground line (Fig. 2).

This type of iconography is not overly common. Nevertheless, it is not unique and incomparable either.

¹ Filarska 1962.

² Kiss 1971; 1974; 1979; 1983.

³ Suska 1994.

⁴ Lichočka 2012.

⁵ Inv. no. 148372 MNW.

⁶ Dimensions: 1.4 x 1.0 cm.



Fig. 1. Intaglio with a depiction of a dying Niobid (glass, 1st century BC, National Museum in Warsaw, no. 148372 NMW). Photo by M. Kuźmiński.



Fig. 2. Intaglio with a depiction of a dying Niobid (glass, 1st century BC, National Museum in Warsaw, no. 148372 NMW). Photo courtesy of the museum.

Collections of gems from various European museums clearly show that the popularity of these types of items was moderate. Single examples of decorated gems with this type of depiction can be found, among others, in the collections of the British Museum,⁷ the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen,⁸ the National Archaeological Museum in Naples,⁹ the National Archaeological Museum in Aquileia,¹⁰ the Museum of the University of Würzburg,¹¹ or the National Numismatic Collection Museum in Munich.¹² All examples mentioned above precisely repeat the iconographic style of the gem from the National Museum in Warsaw and most were made of glass (usually of similar characteristics). The layout of figures is the same while their gestures, the proportions, position within the gem's plan, and other details are very similar. Additionally, it seems that most of these depictions were made using the same template or set of templates, since the physical differences concerning their details are so insignificant, if not downright unnoticeable, that they make the involvement of a craftsman (which would naturally lead to variations in a given depiction from piece to piece) unlikely.

The interpretation of the depiction's subject matter is somewhat problematic. Two ideas have dominated among the suggestions of various researchers, with one

being more widely accepted and seemingly more probable. According to the more plausible interpretation, the gem presents a dying Niobid supported by his sister. The alternative approach sees it as a depiction of a drunken Dionysus supported by his mother, Semele.

The Dionysus interpretation is based on a relatively distant borrowing from Etruscan art. As argued by Poul Fossing, this iconographic type has been used in depictions of Dionysus-Fufluns held up by his mother, Semele.¹³ There exist examples of bronze mirrors with figural presentations whose fragments bear quite a close similarity to the depictions from the above-mentioned gem. One such mirror, dated to the 4th century BC, shows a scene with four figures – a satyr and three Etruscan gods: Apulu, Fufluns, and his mother Semla. Fufluns, the god of plant life, health and nature was considered to be the equivalent of the Greek god, Dionysus. In the representation on the mirror, Fufluns is standing with his mother to his right, in the same pose as the figure depicted on the gem. The naked silhouette of the god is arched back with the head leaning backward and resting on his mother's shoulder. His arm, however, does not hang limply but along with the other encircles the neck of Semla¹⁴ (Fig. 3).

⁷ Walters 1926, no. 1119.

⁸ Fossing 1929, no. 390.

⁹ Pannuti 1983, no. 130.

¹⁰ Sena Chiesa 1966, no. 712.

¹¹ Zwierlein-Diehl 1986, no. 410.

¹² Schmidt *et al.* 1972, nos. 3239, 3240, 3241.

¹³ Fossing 1929, 77.

¹⁴ Simon 2006, 50; Brendel 1995, 362–363.



Fig. 3. Drawing depicting an Etruscan mirror with Fufluns and his mother (bronze, the 4th century BC, Altes Museum in Berlin, no. FR. 36). Drawing by E. Gerhard.

This is undoubtedly a significant difference in respect to the layout of the presentation depicted on the gem but not as crucial as it would seem. On all gems with this type of presentation, the left arm of the young man hangs limply. However, sometimes his right arm reaches up and embraces the woman's neck. When it comes to the gem from the NMW, this is not the case and the right arm is mostly hidden. Nevertheless, it is not out of the question that it was supposed to reach up and only due to improper pressing into the form did it become indistinguishable. This is even more probable since other examples show the right arm as forming part of the background, consequently being less pronounced in the mould and less visible when pressed into the glass.

The differences, therefore, are quite inconsiderable and the presentations show a substantial degree of similarity. The question is, however, whether the scene pressed into the gems is actually the image of Etruscan Fufluns or a theme which is iconographically similar but refers to a different subject. As previously mentioned, the second interpretation suggests that the depiction should be seen as showing a dying Niobid supported by one of his sisters. This hypothesis has already been presented by Adolf Furtwängler, according to whom the scene on the gems is inspired by a relief adorning the throne of Zeus in Olympia¹⁵ which shows the massacre of the Niobids.

This interpretation has also been advocated by Erika Zwierlein-Diehl.¹⁶

The famous statue of Zeus in Olympia, the work of Pheidias from the second half of the 5th century BC, did not survive to the present time. The way it looked can be inferred from various ancient sources – literary works (mainly a description made by Pausanias), scattered copies of the statue's decorative fragments, as well as from its drawings. According to Pausanias's description, parts of the throne of Zeus (its sides below the sphinxes) were decorated with reliefs showing Apollo and Artemis killing the Niobids.¹⁷ Other ancient works of art (mainly reliefs and vase paintings),¹⁸ which are commonly considered copies and references to the decorations from the throne of Zeus of Olympia, have also survived to present times.¹⁹ On the basis of these works, various researchers such as Wilfred Geominy²⁰ or Christa Vogelpohl,²¹ for example, attempted to reconstruct the frieze portraying the Niobids. However, although preserved copies show characteristic figures in various configurations, their original layout remains within the sphere of speculations.

One such specimen is a partially surviving relief which in 1862 found its way from the collection of Marchese Campana to that of the Hermitage Museum. Dated to the 1st century BC, it is considered a work of artists from the Neo-Attic school and may have originally served as a frieze decorating a small temple. The relief shows numerous figures, some of which also appear on other reliefs regarded as copies of Pheidias's frieze.

It also contains a pair of figures, a naked youth and a woman, in a layout and pose analogous to the presentation on the gem under discussion. The man's body is arched and leaning backward, his head resting on the woman's shoulder. The arrangement of their arms is the same as the one on the gem's depiction – the man's left arm hangs limply while the right embraces the woman's neck (Fig. 4). This pair of Niobids, not present on any other reliefs of this type, is interpreted as a sister supporting her younger brother who is in a state of agony.

The above examples show that the representations of Fufluns as well as those of a dying Niobid both largely adhere to the iconographic type present on the series of gems which are discussed here. Even though individual gems differ slightly from one another, it is possible to identify their dominant characteristics. Firstly, in all cases the man's left arm hangs down limply. On the majority of the gems, the right arm embraces the woman's neck. Where it is not visible, presumably the pressure exerted in the mould was insufficient to make it so. Secondly,

¹⁵ Furtwängler 1900, 180.

¹⁶ Zwierlein-Diehl 1986, 172.

¹⁷ Paus. 5, 11.

¹⁸ Davison 2009, 384–394.

¹⁹ Lapatin 2001, 61–65.

²⁰ Geominy 1984.



Fig. 4. Fragment of a frieze showing the massacre of the Niobids (marble, 1st century BC, State Hermitage Museum, no. ГР-4223). Photo courtesy of the museum.

the exact placement of the young man's head may also be an important detail, for there is a slight but noticeable difference between the dying Niobid and Fufluns. The head of the former falls with clear lifelessness characteristic of the state of agony. On the other hand, the head of Fufluns is sharply bent back, resting lightly on the shoulder of Semla but, at the same time, clearly held up in that position by the god. Fufluns is not losing consciousness but looking up, towards his mother.

These differences in the details of the presentations seem to indicate that, from the iconographic point of view, the hypothesis interpreting the scene from the gem as the death of a Niobid is more justified. This is supported by the arrangement of the arms and head, since on the gem from the NMW as well as on other gems of this type (if it can be determined at all with such a small presentation and, consequently, limited scope of detail) the head of the man seems to fall limply onto the shoulder of the woman, as is the case with the relief from the Hermitage.

The iconographic interpretation of both the NMW's gem and other gems of this type is more difficult because of the material from which it was made. Firstly, the impression of images into glass usually results in reduced precision and a diminished possibility to correct the details in comparison to stone gems whose decorations are precisely carved by craftsmen. Secondly, compared to stone, glass is more susceptible to mechanical damage and deterioration resulting from the passage of time. This also applies to the gem from the National Museum in Warsaw which, compared to others with the same depiction, is not particularly well-preserved. The decoration's

surface is worn quite heavily and faded, thus rendering the contours of the figures unclear, with some parts showing damage. Additionally, the gem's surface shows indentations which are the result of negative traces of air bubbles trapped between the form and the glass during the pressing process, and which effectively impaired the precision of the final work (the material could not reflect the form of the representation faithfully).

The above-mentioned limitations call for far-reaching caution regarding the interpretation of the discussed image depicted on the gem. However, as stated before, the comparative analysis seems to support the hypothesis according to which the gem presents a dying Niobid.

The gem from the National Museum in Warsaw belongs to a larger group of objects which, although dispersed between collections of various museums, share more attributes than just the same iconographic theme. All known specimens were made of glass and the majority (just like the gem from the NMW) had three colours: green glass with one blue and two white transverse bands. Some were made with the use of dark blue glass, with a white band running across. All gems are flat on both sides and oval in shape. The above-mentioned characteristics allow to credit this group of works to Italic workshops whose heyday occurred between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD.²² It was within this period that glass gems of this shape and these specific colours were produced 'en masse'.²³

One gem allows to further narrow down the chronological horizon. This particular specimen was found

²¹ Vogelpohl 1980.

²² Maaskant-Kleibrink 1975, 108.

²³ Suska 1995, 486.

during excavations in the German town of Waldgirmes.²⁴ This site hosts the remains of Roman buildings from the turn of the 1st century BC, traces of an attempt at establishing a permanent settlement (the beginning of a town which was to be an advanced trading post as well) connected with the failed conquest of Germania during the rule of Augustus. After the Teutoburg Forest Battle, the place was abandoned. It was occasionally used during later punitive expeditions until its deliberate destruction around the year 16 AD.

The date is also a *terminus ante quem* for the making of the gem with a dying Niobid found at Waldgirmes. The recovery of the intaglio in a place so distant from Italy where it was made indicates that enough time had passed for gems with this type of presentation to be produced in greater numbers and spread throughout the farthest reaches of the empire. Although it cannot be ruled out that gems decorated with the scene of a dying Niobid were also produced during the 1st century AD, it seems that the second half of the 1st century BC should be treated as the main period of their manufacture.

There is, therefore, an interpretation of the representation's theme and a relatively precisely defined geographic and chronological context in which this type of gem functioned. Such a consistent group of ancient specimens inspires more general reflection which would be impossible in the case of a unique item whose characteristics depend solely on the abilities of its maker and the tastes of its buyer. Naturally, there are questions regarding the choice of this mythological theme as the subject of the decoration of gems and the reasons for the popularity of this particular fragment of Pheidias's frieze so eagerly reproduced on numerous pieces.

The myth of Niobe enjoyed relative popularity in both Greek and Roman art. Other than the frieze of Pheidias, it is mainly represented in vase paintings²⁵ and relief carvings on sarcophagi.²⁶ There is also no shortage of full-figure sculptures representing the death of the Niobids, the most recognisable being objects from the Uffizi²⁷ Gallery in Florence and the sculptures discovered in 2013 in Ciampino.²⁸ The myth about Niobe and the punishment of her children is also present in various ancient literary works,²⁹ with two dominant motives recalled by works of visual art and ancient literature: the despair of the severely punished mother, and the cruel and violent death of her children. Individual works differed through the choice of the selected, emphasised theme, which in turn depended on the inventiveness

of their creators and the expectations of those who had commissioned them.

The gem from the National Museum in Warsaw is a part of a larger group of antiquities characterised by the use of the same iconographic theme and the similarity of materials. Noteworthy is the fact that all known specimens are made of glass, with differences within the group lying solely in the variation of individual pieces' colours. The characteristic trait of glass gems is the ease with which a particular theme can be reproduced. By pressing the decorations into the glass from ready-made forms, it was possible to create a series of objects with nearly identical parameters. As a result, mass production of gems decorated with the same iconographic theme was possible.

The above technical characteristic draws attention to the fact that gems decorated with the depiction of a dying Niobid must have enjoyed relatively strong interest. Otherwise, they would not be reproduced on such a scale. What is more, the large popularity of ancient decoration dealing with the thematic subject of the myth of Niobe is a rather unique occurrence. Its symbolic overtones certainly must have oscillated around the values mentioned above. It seems, however, that they did not have the greatest impact on its noticeable popularity.

First and foremost, the group of gems with this representation is a good example of the general tendency for reproducing, in whole or in part, the frieze of Pheidias. There are numerous surviving reliefs from the early Imperial Period which had replicated figures from the frieze with the Niobids in various configurations. Therefore, this portion of the famous statue of Zeus from Olympia must have been highly valued and easily identified by educated people.

There is still the question of why this particular fragment of the frieze enjoyed such popularity with respect to decorations. The composition of the presentation of these two figures was undoubtedly significant. Both are standing quite still, thus creating an image with strong vertical lines. The same cannot be said about all of the figures depicted on the frieze, since a significant number of them are portrayed in dynamic poses, in motion, or with their limbs extended to the side. The bodies of some of these figures are stretched out horizontally while the majority of compositions used in decoration rely on the proper natural adherence of the presentation to the customary oval shape of the gem. The figures in question are located centrally, and harmoniously fill the available space.

²⁴ Becker 2003, 340.

²⁵ Cook 2013, 42; Denoyelle 1997; Trendall 1972, 309.

²⁶ Zanker, Ewald 2012, 70–74.

²⁷ Geominy 1984, 28–32.

²⁸ Coates-Stephens 2013, 341–349.

²⁹ Hom. *Il.* 24; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3, 5; Ov. *Met.* 23; Wright 2019, 105–106.

As far as this iconographic theme is concerned, the fact that we are dealing with a compact, smaller scene within a larger representation may also be significant. The majority of the other figures on the frieze appear individually. In this case, however, two people are depicted in direct interaction with one another. Regardless of all of

the symbolic connotations possibly evoked by the image, it is simply more attractive than similar portrayals of the remaining portions of the frieze. At the same time, this motive remains so characteristic that even its separation from the original context does not make it abstract and unintelligible.

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