

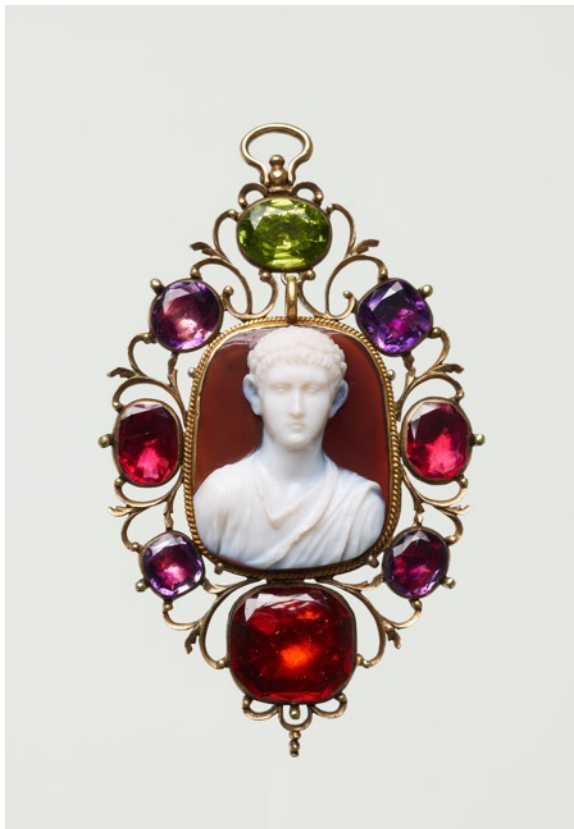
CAMEO DEPICTING AGRIPPA POSTUMUS

ROMAN, JULIO-CLAUDIEN PERIOD, CIRCA AD 37-41
SARDONYX
ENGLISH GOLD MOUNTING SET WITH SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES
FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

CAMEO - HEIGHT: 3.6 CM.

WIDTH: 3 CM.

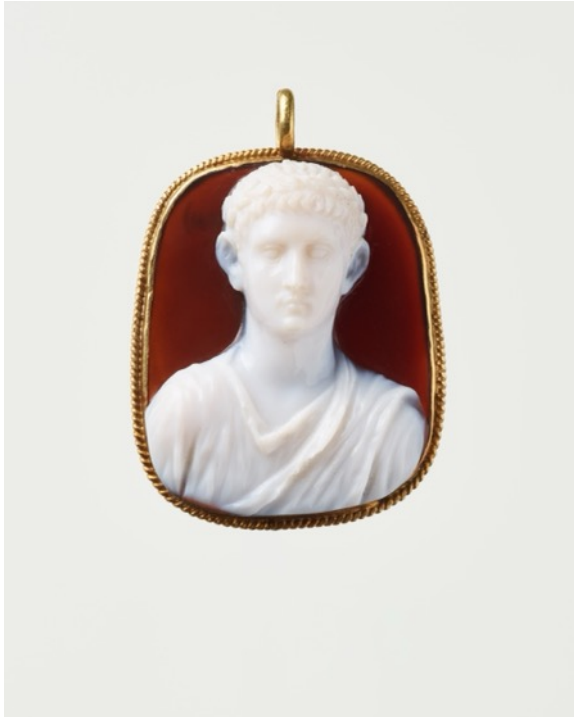
DEPTH: 0.4 CM.



PROVENANCE:
IN THE COLLECTION OF
WILLIAM PONSONBY,
2ND EARL OF BESSBOROUGH (1704-1793),
PARKSTEAD HOUSE, ROEHAMPTON,
ACQUIRED BEFORE 1761.
THEN IN THE COLLECTION OF
GEORGE SPENCER, 4TH DUKE OF
MARLBOROUGH (1739-1817), BLENHEIM
PALACE, OXFORDSHIRE, ACQUIRED
FROM THE FORMER IN AROUND 1765.
BY DESCENT IN THE SAME FAMILY UNTIL
JOHN WINSTON SPENCER-CHURCHILL,

7TH DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH (1822-1883),
BLENHEIM PALACE, OXFORDSHIRE.
SOLD BY CHRISTIE'S LONDON, "THE
MARLBOROUGH GEMS [...]", 28 JUNE - 1
JULY 1875, LOT 392.
PURCHASED BY DAVID BROMILOW
(1809-1898), BITTESWELL HALL,
LEICESTERSHIRE.
PASSED DOWN TO HIS DAUGHTER
JULIA HARRIET MARY JARY IN 1898.
SOLD BY CHRISTIE'S LONDON,
"THE PROPERTY OF MRS. JARY",
26-29 JUNE 1899, LOT 392.
PURCHASED BY TRADER
FRANCIS E. WHELAN (1848-1907)
ON BEHALF OF WYNDHAM FRANCIS
COOK (1893-1905) LONDON.
PASSED DOWN TO HIS SON HUMPHREY
W. COOK (1893-1978), LONDON.
SOLD BY CHRISTIE'S LONDON, "[...] THE
PROPERTY OF H. W. COOK, ESQ.",
14-16 JULY 1925, LOT 65.
PURCHASED BY SPINK & SON, LONDON.
IN THE COLLECTION OF S. E. LUCAS,
ESQ. (1883-1970), LONDON.
SOLD BY CHRISTIE'S LONDON,
"THE PROPERTY OF S. E. LUCAS [...]",
14 FEBRUARY 1961, LOT 88.
PURCHASED BY H. E. BACKER,
LONDON AND ROME.
THEN IN THE COLLECTION OF TRADER
GIORGIO SANGIORGI (1886-1965), ROME,
AND TAKEN TO
SWITZERLAND IN THE 1950S.
PASSED DOWN WITHIN THE FAMILY.





This exceptional cameo, made from white on brown layered sardonyx, depicts Agrippa Postumus (12 BC-AD 14), the adopted son of Augustus. The young man is sculpted from the front, in the prime of his life. His features are delicate, his cheeks full, his cheekbones high and his neck rather long and muscled. His large, slightly sunken eyes with subtly demarcated contours and a discreetly marked brow line lend his gaze a certain intensity. His nose is long and straight, its bridge shaped by a small central bump. His mouth is small and thin, the narrow upper lip only very subtly standing out from the rest, while his lower lip is fuller. The slightly downturned corners of his mouth only add to the severity and solemnity of the portrait. Finally, his chin is small and slightly upturned, while his large ears stand out against the background.

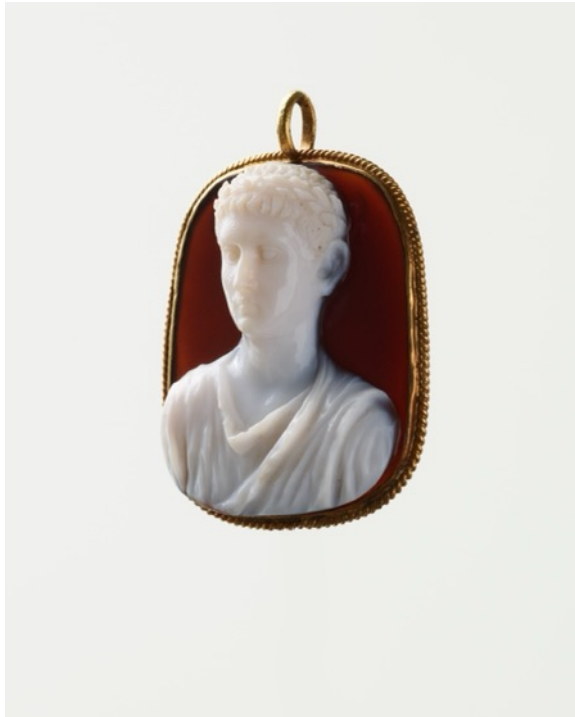
These very precise facial features, far from idealised portraits, show that the artist wanted to represent a specific individual. This desire can also be seen in the hairstyle of

our young man. His narrow forehead is surmounted by slightly wavy hair, each lock individually carved, giving his hair a sense of movement and making it look very lifelike. The position of the fringe enabled us to pinpoint his identity. The art historian D. Boschung classified the different hair arrangements of all known Roman portraits from the Julio Claudian dynasty in his work *Die Bildnistypen der iulisch claudischen Kaiserfamilie: ein kritischer Forschungsbericht* (1993 - "The portrait types of the Julio Claudian imperial family: a critical research paper"). According to John J. Herrmann, Jr., PhD, curator of the Ancient Greece and Rome Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, our portrait should be likened to the Ka type linked to representations of Agrippa Postumus (ill. 1). He explained that our young man is represented with a fringe that covers the top of his forehead horizontally, each lock being almost the same length. The strands of hair above his right eye are delicately parted. Three strands in the middle fall to the left, while other strands diverge from them towards the right, forming a sort of pincer above his right eye.

This specific hair arrangement can also be seen in a dozen known portraits, including a magnificent bust conserved in Rome, as well as two portraits exhibited in Paris (ill. 2-4). Finally, he is wearing a laurel crown upon his head, formed by two joined branches, their leaves delicately standing out against his hair. Our young man is wearing a tunic and a toga, with the folds of the drapery carved into the stone more or less deeply, creating a very fine set of vertical lines that contrasts with the smooth, youthful skin of his face. His shoulders are visible and stand out against

the background, again creating volume and a striking impression of movement.

The entire sculpture and the care with which the facial features of our portrait of Agrippa Postumus were shaped make our cameo a rare and extremely precious work.



Not only was the work carried out on the sardonyx exceptional, but our cameo is also a magnificent testament to the history of the Julio Claudian dynasty and the tradition of imperial portraits in ancient art.

As mentioned above, the subject represented is Agrippa Postumus (12 BC - AD 14), grandson and then adopted son of the emperor Augustus. As Augustus had no children, he first decided to adopt Agrippa's two older brothers, but they died prematurely in AD 4. The emperor then decided to adopt the youngest at the same time as Tiberius, his second wife's son from a previous union. However, Agrippa's glory would be short lived. Two years after his adoption, he was banished and

exiled to Sorrento then imprisoned on Pianosa Island, off the shore of Corsica. When Augustus died in AD 14, the young Agrippa Postumus was executed, very probably on the orders of Tiberius. The latter saw Agrippa as a rival, Augustus' descendent by blood and thus first in the line of succession. After eliminating his enemy, Tiberius became emperor and ruled until AD 37.



As John J. Herrmann, Jr., explained, our cameo is a wonderful testament to the importance Agrippa Postumus held at a certain time, despite his tragic destiny. He was a member of the imperial family, adopted by Augustus, and should have become emperor upon the death of his adoptive father. The laurel crown our young man is wearing also symbolizes the glorious future that should have been his.

In terms of the date, still according to the analysis of John J. Herrmann, Jr., our cameo is very likely not contemporary with its

subject. First from a historical perspective, it is unlikely that Agrippa, rather disliked and then exiled, would have been depicted in such a way. Then, from a stylistic standpoint, our cameo displays a very frontal portrait in which the shoulders are visible and stand out prominently from the background, with a drapery that is richly carved with folds. These stylistic features are reminiscent of the cameos sculpted under Caligula (AD 37-41) and then Claudius (AD 41-54). Gorgeous examples from that period are thus conserved in Boston and Vienna (ill. 5-6). Herrmann explained that our work stands out due to its lavish workmanship, which dates it to a high point in the history of cameos named the “Claudian baroque” by Wolf Rüdiger Megow.



Historically speaking, it is more likely that our cameo was created under Caligula, as, at the beginning of his reign, he gathered the ashes of his brother and his mother Agrippina, Postumus' sister. A new wave of

commemorations was held in tribute to Tiberius' victims, which probably included Agrippa Postumus. This could explain the context in which our magnificent cameo was created.

Not only is our cameo exceptional in its subject and its historical context, but in the material used and the meticulous workmanship characteristic of glyptic art, of which it is a perfect example.

Cameo is a gem carving technique that emerged at the end of the Hellenistic period, around the 3rd century BC. Unlike intaglios, cameos are in relief and are exclusively carved from stones with layers of colours, enabling artists to create contrasts between the different parts of the subject represented. As for our cameo, it is most common to use a light layer for the subject's complexion and contrast it with a darker layer for the hair, clothes and any other attributes. Sardonyx is perfect for that purpose. The stone is a variety of onyx with coloured bands that are brown ochre in colour. Gorgeous examples of sardonyx cameos are thus conserved in various international museums (ill. 7), demonstrating how artists were able to exploit the natural properties of the stone to carry out extremely precious works.

In Antiquity, cameos were purely ornamental, worn as adornments, enriching furniture or precious objects. Rarer than intaglios, they flourished under the Julio Claudian dynasty and prospered for several centuries. In the modern age, a certain craze developed from the 15th to the 17th century, but it was in the 18th and 19th centuries that many cameos were reused in modern mounts, as attested by our jewel. The taste that developed in the 18th century could be

seen in the constitution of many European private collections, as was the case for our cameo.

The provenance of our portrait of Agrippa Postumus can be traced back to the 18th century when it was mentioned as belonging to the collection of William Ponsonby, 2nd Earl of Bessborough (1704-1793), housed at his residence, Parkstead House, in West London. A British politician of Irish descent, he was a member of the House of Lords and collected many engraved gems. His collection was published by Laurent Natter in 1761, and our cameo was mentioned as no. 4. It was then described as a portrait of Germanicus, adopted son of Tiberius (ill. 8).

In around 1765, it was added to one of the most prestigious collections of ancient and modern gems in England, the collection of the Dukes of Marlborough, at their residence Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, England. It was composed of no fewer than 780 engraved gems from the Arundel collection; collections dating back to the Renaissance such as that of the House of Gonzaga, Dukes of Mantua; Lord Bessborough's collection and pieces purchased from European traders, as well as directly from contemporary artists. Our cameo is thus confirmed as being in the collection of George Spencer, 4th Duke of Marlborough, as Jacob Bryant published a very lovely engraving of it in 1783 (ill. 9). The cameo was passed down within the family until John Winston Spencer Churchill, 7th Duke of Marlborough. It was thus photographed in the album featuring the Marlborough collection in 1875, on its 18th century mount, and was then identified as a portrait of Augustus (ill. 10).



In 1875, it was on offer at Christie's in the sale entitled "The Marlborough Gems: Being a Collection of Works in Cameo and Intaglio Formed by George, Third Duke of Marlborough", as lot 392. The purpose of the sale was to resolve the family's financial difficulties. The collection was already causing quite the stir at the time, *The Times* calling it exceptional, and stating "the whole thing is, in itself, a complete encyclopaedia of glyptics, akin to a priceless reference book". The entire collection was sold to a single buyer, David Bromilow (1809-1898), Bitteswell Hall, Leicestershire. As the High Sheriff and the owner of several mines, Bromilow was not really an art collector, so his purchase was most likely an investment, which attests to the importance of glyptics at the time. His collection was thus mentioned by A. Michaelis in 1882. It then passed to his daughter, Julia Harriet Mary Jary, until it was again offered for sale by Christie's London, in 1899. Our cameo was again presented as lot 392. The sale attracted many

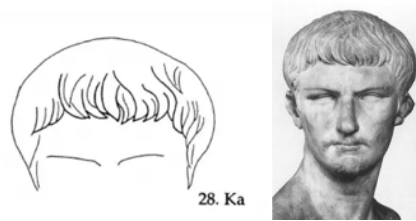
important personalities from all over Europe. The total proceeds amounted to £34,828 and most of the buyers were traders acting on behalf of private collectors. One such was Henry Walters, who purchased 107 gems, now conserved in the collections of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

One of the most active traders during the sale was Francis E. Whelan (1848-1907). He made offers for several clients including the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as private collectors. Through him, our cameo came to the London residence of Wyndham F. Cook (1893-1905), and then, by descent, to the collection of his son, Humphrey W. Cook (1893-1978), upon his death. Our piece was then mentioned by Smith & Hutton in 1908 and described as a portrait of Augustus.

The collection was finally dispersed when it was again sold by Christie's, London, in 1925. Our cameo was acquired by Spink, London, before being added to the collection of S. E. Lucas, Esq. (1883-1970). It was again put up for sale in 1961, as lot 88, and purchased by H. E. Backer, a collector based in London and Rome.

Our cameo finally joined the collection of Giorgio Sangiorgi (1886-1965), an Italian art trader based in Rome. As a trader's son, he developed a taste for glyptics and purchased countless engraved gems from the greatest European collections of the time. In the 1950s, he decided to move his collection to Switzerland. Our cameo was thus passed down in the Sangiorgi family until the present.

Comparatives:



- Ill. 1. Ka type, D. Boschung, "Die Bildnistypen der julisch-claudischen Kaiserfamilie: ein kritischer Forschungsbericht" ("The portrait types of the Julio-Claudian imperial family: a critical research paper"), *Journal of Roman Archaeology* (1993), p. 55.
 Ill. 2. Agrippa Postumus, Roman, AD 4-7, marble, H.: 61 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome, inv. no. S422.



- Ill. 3. Agrippa Postumus (detail), Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 211 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. Ma 1235.
 Ill. 4. Agrippa Postumus, Roman, 1st century AD, basanite, H.: 29 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 3498.



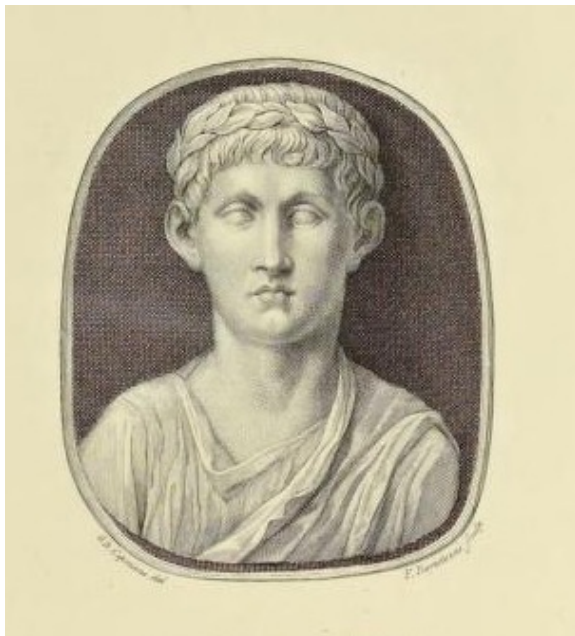
- Ill. 5. Cameo with portrait busts of an Imperial Julio-Claudian couple (Caligula and Drusilla?), Roman, AD 37-41, sardonyx, H.: 4.8 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 98.754.
 Ill. 6. Cameo originally depicting Caligula (now Claudius), Roman, AD 37-54, sardonyx, H.: 14.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. no. IXA 23.
 Ill. 7. Sardonyx cameo portrait of the Emperor Augustus, Roman, AD 41-54, sardonyx, H.: 3.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 42.11.30.



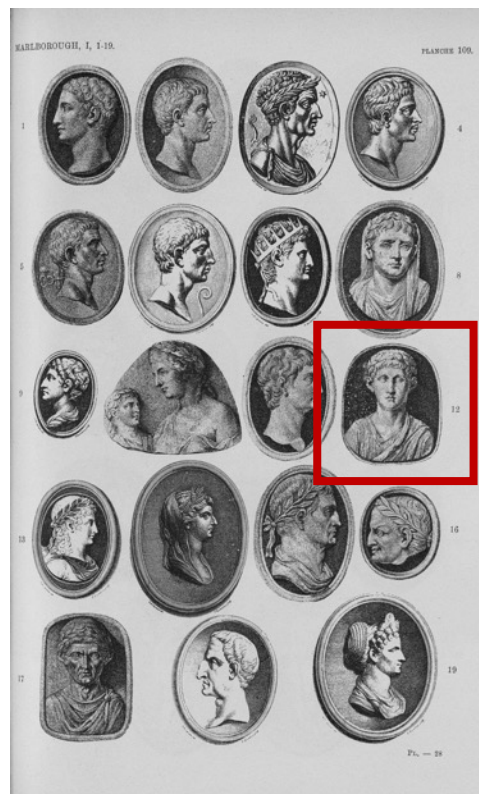
Ill. 8. L. Natter, *Catalogue des pierres gravées, tant en relief, qu'en creux de Mylord Comte de Bessborough* ("Catalogue of engraved gems, both in relief and in intaglio, of Mylord the Earl of Bessborough"), London, 1761, p. 2, no. 4.



Ill. 10. The Marlborough Gems, manuscript album and photographs, 1875, no. 372, pl. 3.2.



Ill. 9. J. Bryant, *Gemmarum antiquarum delectus ex præstantioribus desumptus, quæ in dactylithecus ducis Marlburgiensis conservantur. Choix de pierres antiques gravées du cabinet du Duc de Marlborough* ("A selection of ancient engraved gems from the cabinet of the Duke of Marlborough"), Vol. 1, London, 1783, no. 12.



S. Reinach, *Pierres gravées des collections Marlborough et d'Orléans*, Paris, 1895, p. 113, no. 12, pl. 109.

Publications:

- L. Natter, *Catalogue des pierres gravées, tant en relief, qu'en creux de Mylord Comte de Bessborough* ("Catalogue of engraved gems, both in relief and in intaglio, of Mylord the Earl of Bessborough"), London, 1761, p. 2, no. 4.
- J. Bryant, *Gemmarum antiquarum delectus ex præstantioribus desumptus, quæ in dactylithecus ducis Marlburgiensis conservantur. Choix de pierres antiques gravées du cabinet du Duc de Marlborough* ("A selection of ancient engraved gems from the cabinet of the Duke of Marlborough"), Vol. 1, London, 1783, no. 12.
- S. Reinach, *Pierres gravées des collections Marlborough et d'Orléans* ("Engraved gems from the Marlborough and D'Orléans collections"), Paris, 1895, p. 113, no. 12, pl. 109.
- M. H. Nevil Story-Maskelyne, *The Marlborough Gems. Being a Collection of Works in Cameo and Intaglio Formed by George, Third Duke of Marlborough*, 1870, p. 68, no. 392.
- The Marlborough Gems, manuscript album and photographs, 1875, pl. 3.2.
- C. H. Smith and C. A. Hutton, *Catalogue of the Antiquities (Greek, Etruscan and Roman) in the Collection of the Late Wyndham Francis Cook, Esqre.*, London, 1908, p. 66, no. 284, pl. 14.
- J. Boardman, et al., *The Marlborough Gems Formerly at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire*, London, 2009, p. 169, no. 372.
- J. Boardman and C. Wagner, *Masterpieces in Miniature: Engraved Gems from Prehistory to the Present*, London, 2018, p. 229, no. 215.
- Beazley Archive Gem Database, no. 372.

