

---

DIMITRIS PLANTZOS

## PTOLEMAIC CAMEOS OF THE SECOND AND FIRST CENTURIES BC

---

*Summary Cameos were devised some time in the Hellenistic period, and they were used in a decorative manner. In terms of style and subject matter they follow developments in the making of intaglios and other glyptic products as well as coinage. This paper examines two related series of cameos which seem to have been produced in Alexandria of the later Hellenistic period, and under direct Ptolemaic patronage. Their study is held in view of a re-appraisal of the Tazza Farnese, and the presentation here of a further argument in support of this Grand Cameo's dating in the first century BC.*

The craft of gem-engraving was intensively patronized by the Ptolemies, as can be demonstrated by the large number of surviving intaglios and, to a certain extent, cameos that can be linked with the court in Alexandria. This paper presents a number of cameos that may be attributed to Alexandrian workshops of the later Hellenistic period. Their dating is based on comparison with datable material, mainly portraits appearing in coinage. They appear to be contemporary with a sizeable group of garnet intaglios which were recently ascribed to Alexandrian workshops of the later second and first centuries BC (Spier 1989). The cameos presented here bear similar stylistic and iconographical traits, and were probably made by the same or related artists. A further assessment of the *Tazza Farnese*, the Ptolemaic Cameo *par excellence*, is also attempted, in order to re-affirm its date late in the first century BC and introduce a related group of smaller cameos.

### A: ROYAL PORTRAITS

Royal portraiture forms the back-bone of Hellenistic glyptic, as the craft was largely developed under royal patronage; for the art historian it provides a valuable basis for its classification, since identified or identifiable portraits can be arranged both geographically and chronologically. This closely knit group of cameos helps monitor a particularly under-recorded period in Ptolemaic portraiture:

#### *A<sub>1</sub> Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale*

Sardonyx in three layers; young king wearing the *porphyra* and the double crown of Egypt; the gem was cut down at a later stage (top missing) and a pseudo-Hebrew inscription added across the crown; 45 x 34; Babelon 1897, no. 144. Fig. 1.

#### *A<sub>2</sub> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts EG 153*

Glass in three layers; young king in Pharaonic dress; fragmentary, 27 mm as preserved; Vollenweider 1984, no. 18. Fig. 2.



**Figure 1**  
Sardonyx cameo; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. No A<sub>1</sub>



Figure 2

Glass cameo; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. No. A<sub>2</sub>

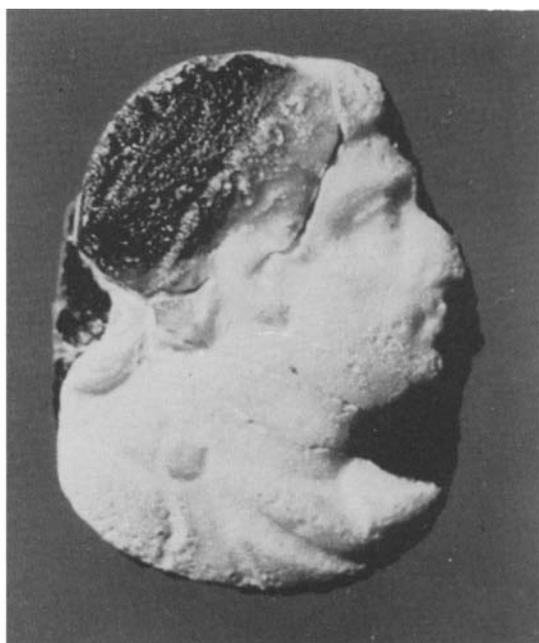


Figure 3

Glass cameo; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva. No. A<sub>3</sub>

A<sub>3</sub> Geneva. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire 70/20886

Glass in three layers (brown, yellowish brown and off-white); king in diadem and the *porphyra*; 20 x 15 x 3; Vollenweider 1979, no. 65. Fig. 3.

A<sub>4</sub> London. The British Museum 3824

Glass as above; king wearing diademed *kausia*, cuirass, and chlamys; 25 x 18; Walters 1926, no. 3824. Fig. 4.

A<sub>5</sub> Naples. Museo Nazionale 155881

Glass as above; king wearing *kausia*, cuirass, and chlamys; 26 x 20; Panuti 1983, no. 181. Fig. 5.

A<sub>6</sub> Geneva. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire 64

Glass; head of a king with diadem; 23 x 19; Vollenweider 1979, no. 64. Fig. 6.

A<sub>1</sub> (today cut-down and with a nonsense inscription added across the crown) is a

three-layered sardonyx representing a 'Pharaoh', wearing the double crown of Egypt (symbolizing the 'upper' and 'lower' parts of the country); he is dressed in the Greek *porphyra* a garment of deep purple colour worn as a tunic or chlamys that seems to have been the favourite garment of the Ptolemies in coinage and gems (cf. Figs. 7–8). Although not exclusive to royalty, the purple was a typical royal costume — fit for kings and their friends (Reinhold 1970, ch. 3; Smith 1988, 34). The Macedonian kings of Egypt observed both the Greek and the native Egyptian traditions in parallel, presumably served respectively by immigrant and local artists (see Boardman 1994, 164–74). The two traditions rarely mix, at least in official media like coinage, where the Ptolemies appear exclusively 'Greek'. There are, however, a small number of works (cf. B<sub>5–7</sub> below) where Greek attributes are mixed with Pharaonic insignia. The overall effect



Figure 4

Glass cameo; the British Museum, London. No. A<sub>4</sub>



Figure 5

Glass cameo; Museo Nazionale, Naples. No. A<sub>5</sub>

remains 'Greek', nevertheless, and the relatively advanced date of these works may suggest an eventual acceptance of Egyptianizing motifs into Greek imagery. A typical example of this integration is the gold ring in the Louvre (Pollitt 1986, 263 and fig. 284) probably portraying a second century Ptolemy (Philometor?) in Pharaonic fashion though in Greek/Hellenistic style. A<sub>1</sub> is a comparable work, and possibly dates from around the same period; it may be a portrait of Ptolemy Epiphanes (cf. Fig. 7) or Ptolemy Philometor (cf. Fig. 8).

The fragmentary, light-brown glass cameo A<sub>2</sub> presents a young Ptolemy dressed in the Pharaonic tradition. Several Ptolemies ruled at a young age, often in their childhood, and it would seem that the two most likely candidates for the identity of the king portrayed here are Ptolemy V Epiphanes (b.

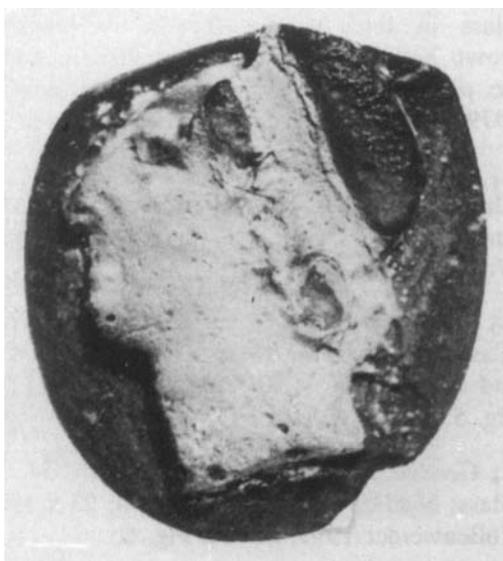


Figure 6

Glass cameo; Musée d' Art et d' Histoire, Geneva. No. A<sub>6</sub>



Figure 7  
Ptolemy V (Epiphanes); silver tetradrachm



Figure 8  
Ptolemy VI (Philometor); gold octradrachm

209; ruled 204–180 BC) and his son Ptolemy VI Philometor (b. c.185; ruled 176–145 BC). The portrait of Ptolemy Epiphanes is known from his coinage (Fig. 7); he was in his late twenties when he died. The portrait of Ptolemy Philometor, Epiphanes' son, is first represented on the reverse of the 'regency octodrachm' (Fig. 8) dating from the period between 181 and 176 BC, when Kleopatra I, Philometor's mother, was reigning on his behalf. The preserved height of the Boston cameo is 27 mm, which gives us an estimated full height in excess of 5 cm for the cameo when it was complete. **A<sub>1</sub>** and **A<sub>2</sub>** display a number of characteristics that seem to define the Alexandrian/Ptolemaic style in Late Hellenistic glyptic: they appear graceful and sombre (like their contemporary coinage and Ptolemaic art in general), but also rather harsh, especially in technical details, like the lining of the eye (particularly in **A<sub>1</sub>**) or the area around the nostrils. These seem to translate their more articulate counterparts on coins, and the less successful renderings in stone might be attributed to differences in

technique (coin-dies were cut in metal).

**A<sub>3-5</sub>** are also made from glass, very similar in colour (brown, white and off-white), technique, and subject matter: **A<sub>3</sub>** represents a diademed king, with corpulent features. This could be Ptolemy Physkon (ruled 144–116 BC) recognized from his coin portrait (Fig. 9). In **A<sub>4</sub>** the bust is in cuirass and the royal (purple?) chlamys is worn over it. The man is wearing a *kausia diadematophoros*, a broad felt cap sometimes also made from purple-dyed material, adorned with a diadem when worn by royalty (Reinhold 1970, 28



Figure 9  
Ptolemy VIII (Physkon); silver didrachm



Figure 10

Portrait of a Ptolemaic king; clay seal-impression from Edfu; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

and n. 4; Saatsoglou–Paliadeli 1993, 138). The *kausia*, of Macedonian origin, was often included in Ptolemaic headgear (cf. Smith 1988, 37). In **A<sub>4</sub>** we have a good demonstration of the way in which the diadem was tied over the *kausia*'s wide head-band, the *tainia*. The profile of the man, stocky, with deep-set eyes and fleshy cheeks, heavy jaw and big nose, appears in several different types in the Edfu hoard of clay sealings, dating from the later second century onwards (Fig. 10).<sup>1</sup> Although it is not clear which Ptolemy is portrayed, it seems almost certain that he should be one of the late Ptolemies, between the VIIIth and the XIIth, who reigned between c. 120 and 80 BC, and more specifically Ptolemy IX Soter II (ruled 116–107 and 88–81 BC) or his brother Ptolemy X Alexander (ruled 107–88 BC). A third king, Ptolemy XI Alexander II, ruled for a few turbulent days in 80 BC and should not be a serious candidate (cf. Smith 1988, 95–6).

**A<sub>5</sub>** was found in 1936 in Herculaneum and

is today kept in Naples. It is not certain whether it depicts a king — the man portrayed wears a *kausia*, but because of its coarse quality it is not clear whether it is a diademed one. Its resemblance with **A<sub>4</sub>**, however, and the fact that the man is depicted in cuirass (there are some rough ridges preserved over his shoulder) seem to support the identification of the man in **A<sub>5</sub>** as the Ptolemy portrayed in **A<sub>4</sub>**.

**A<sub>6</sub>** is similar to **A<sub>3</sub>** and **A<sub>4</sub>** and might be connected to the Ptolemies, although with less probability. It represents not the bust but the head of a king wearing a wide diadem. The size of the diadem indicates a possible Ptolemaic origin of the portrait, since such diadems were worn by the later kings of the dynasty (cf. also no. **A<sub>3</sub>**, and the clay seal impression in Fig. 10). The representation of a bust-less head, however, is usually to be found with other dynasties: on coins and intaglios the Ptolemies were usually portrayed in full bust. One of the kings that broke with that tradition, as with many others, was Ptolemy Auletes (ruled 80–51 BC). His coins (Fig. 11) depict him slim and slight, with angular features and pointed nose and chin. He is wearing his typical wide diadem and is not depicted in full bust.

The significance of this small group of glass cameos is hard to appreciate in full. Furtwängler and Walters, to name but two of the scholars who set the foundations of the study of Hellenistic gems almost a century ago, distinguished between glass- and stone intaglios and cameos, presupposing a difference in value as well as in quality. Ancient gemmologists, most notably Pliny, commented on the trivial and indeed cheap quality of glass, considering it an imitation of 'real' gems. The often quoted passage from the *Natural History* (xxxv. 48) according to which 'glass

B: THE TAZZA FARNESE AND ALEXANDRIAN  
ART OF THE FIRST CENTURY BC

Figure 11  
Ptolemy XII (Auletes); silver drachm

gems are for the masses' seems to support that. Pliny, of course, was an aesthete himself, strongly critical of the trends of his time and the values of the past. Still, it would be fair to assume that glass cameos bore no intrinsic value. Do the glass cameos presented here reflect a class of gems, like  $A_1$ , of superior value and — perhaps — quality? A group of objects cut in precious stone to which we do not have access today? The very technique of these glass cameos themselves, highly refined with meticulous 'layering' and detailing, and their choice of colours, suggest that their models were fine *sardonyses* (and also indicate the popularity of this type of chalcedonic agate in that period). Cameo-cutting in Alexandria developed in stone and glass alike, and possibly in the same workshops. This, Ptolemaic Alexandria of the first century BC, is the most likely setting for the most famous, and perhaps the most puzzling, of Hellenistic cameos, the Tazza Farnese.

The Tazza Farnese, at Naples. It is composed of a single piece of sardonyx, and is nearly a foot in diameter. The subject of the sculpture has given rise to much learned and elaborate disquisition.

Hodder M. Westropp, *Handbook of Archaeology* (1867).

Stylistic analysis of this grand Ptolemaic cameo (Figs. 12–13) suggests that it cannot be a work of the third or second centuries as has been proposed (Charbonneau 1958; Bastet 1962), but of the advanced first, from the period of Auletes or Kleopatra VII. On the other hand, the Tazza Farnese does not seem to date from the Augustan period either (Thompson 1978; Pollini 1992), although its style is *Greco-Roman*. In a recent re-examination of the piece, Eugene Dwyer (1992) suggested a first century BC date for the Tazza Farnese, prior to Actium, which seems to be most in agreement with the Tazza's style (cf. La Rocca 1984). In his article Dwyer produced a complicated and quite improbable system of allegorical and astronomical allusions which he takes the Tazza to have conveyed for an elite audience. The assumption of such an over-sophisticated message for what in fact is an extravagant luxury item is not necessarily supported by the evidence; nor is it essential in order to establish a date for the piece in the later first century BC. This can be done first on stylistic grounds, and subsequently confirmed with evidence from contemporary literature and art that seem to derive from the same religious/allegorical background as the Tazza.

#### *Stylistic Analysis*

The Nymphs or Horai attending the main



Figure 12

The 'Tazza Farnese' (view of the inside); Museo Nazionale, Naples (photograph: Archivio Fotografico dei Musei Capitolini, M.C.D./19775).

scene display classicizing features and hairstyles, as well as postures. One compares the hairstyles with that appearing on Republican coinage (Crawford 1974, no. 394/1a). The posture of the seminude Nymph seen from behind was especially Greco-Roman: it can be found on the Ahenobarbus base dating from around 100 BC (Zanker

1988, 12–14 and fig. 10b), and in a series of Greco-Roman and Augustan intaglios (Vollenweider 1966, pl. 65.1). Similarly, the two flying winds can be compared with Satyr heads from statuettes of a type that becomes more prominent from the first half of the first century onwards (cf. Fuchs 1963, pls. 19, 46–7) and intaglios and cameos of the Augustan



Figure 13  
The 'Tazza Farnese' (view of the outside; photograph: as for Fig. 12)

period (cf. Vollenweider *op. cit.*, pl. 80. 1–3). Moreover, the three youthful male heads from the Tazza Farnese — Horus and the two Winds — come very close to the slender, even skinny portrait of Ptolemy Auletes as it appears on his coinage (Fig. 11; Kyrieleis 1975, pl. 68. 1–2) and signets used by his

officials (*ibid.*, pl. 68. 3; cf. also no. A<sub>6</sub>). Finally, the representation of the seated Nile has been shown to pre-date the reclining one, favoured by the Romans (Thompson 1978, 116). Several statues of the Nile seated as on the Tazza Farnese have been found in Alexandria (cf. Adriani 1961, pl. 95).

The frontal Gorgoneion decorating the outside of the dish (Fig. 13) must also date from the first century. Although its closest parallels date from the Augustan period (*LIMC GORGONES ROMANAE* 106a and b), the type was growing in popularity from the later second century: it was employed on Republican coinage (Crawford 1974, 453/1c) and other media. It was also employed, characteristically also at the bottom of drinking vessels, on mould-made pottery found in the Athenian Agora, in late second century deposits (Rotroff 1982, no. 295).<sup>2</sup>

A first century date for the Tazza Farnese was first argued by Thompson (1978). She was justified in comparing the Tazza with works more closely relevant to it, namely gems and other miniature crafts. At first, she established quite firmly that such a daring and skilful work could not have been achieved in the third or second century BC. The Tazza is cut in a single piece of onyx and pieces of such size are extremely rare. The manufacture of the Tazza Farnese requires access to substantial resources and systematic mining, that can only be attested in first century Ptolemaic history. However, Thompson stretched her dating after Actium, in order to accommodate a rather bizarre situation where the Tazza Farnese was commissioned by an Alexandrian aristocrat as a present to a Roman, perhaps Octavian himself.<sup>3</sup> This seems highly improbable and is certainly unprovable.<sup>4</sup> Thompson's theory was recently modified by Pollini (1992) who, rejecting her historical interpretation, accepted her Augustan dating. Still, however, it seems very difficult to place the Tazza Farnese in post-Ptolemaic Alexandria, especially as a commission by Augustus. One would then expect it to be closer to the grand cameos from the Augustan period, of which the Tazza Farnese is most likely a predecessor but clearly not a contemporary

(cf. Megow 1987, nos. **A**<sub>10-11</sub>; **A**<sub>18</sub>; **B**<sub>15</sub>; and so on).<sup>5</sup>

#### *Subject — Previous Interpretations*

Although the central figures of the Tazza Farnese have been repeatedly recognized as portraits (Charbonneaux 1958; Bastet 1962), this does not seem to be the case. The types employed for Isis, the Sphinx, and the young Horus do not relate to any of the known portrait types from the time of Kleopatra I, or the period of the *Physkones* (on a resemblance between Horus and Ptolemy Auletes see below).

Charbonneaux was the first to introduce the historical approach in the study of the piece, when he recognized in the figure of Isis the portrait of Kleopatra I, wife of Ptolemy V Epiphanes.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the Tazza depicts the royal triad, the dead king, the regent queen and the future king Ptolemy Philometor, in a symbolic manner: the sphinx stands for the dead king, Isis is Kleopatra, and the striding youth is Horus, symbolizing the forthcoming king.<sup>7</sup> The Nile, the Winds, and the Seasons, signs of the prosperity of the land of Egypt given by the divine couple of Isis and Osiris, accompany the Royal/Divine Triad. Following this interpretation, the Tazza Farnese has to be placed some time between 181 and 170 BC, a date, according to Charbonneaux, confirmed by the stylistic relevance of the Tazza to Pergamene art and mainly the Gigantomachy of the Great Altar. There are several problems with this argument, stylistic and iconographical, but perhaps most important is its lack of historical probability: Ptolemy Philometor was five or six years old when his father died and ten or eleven when his mother died five years later. After that, he passed into the custody of two palace eunuchs, until 172 BC, when he was officially crowned, at

the age of 14 or 15 (Diod. Sic., 29. 29; 30. 15). The Tazza could not have been conceived after that, since by that time Philometor was already married to his sister, Kleopatra II, and by 169 BC was forced to accept his brother, later to be called Ptolemy Euergetes II, in joint rule which lasted for the next five years (Polyb., 28. 12). One would expect to find the young queen or the co-ruler depicted in the family gathering.

Accordingly, if one has to follow Charbonneaux's time-frame and reading, the only possibility is to accept the Tazza as a work of the period between the death of Ptolemy Epiphanes in 181 BC and the death of Kleopatra in 176 BC, a period when Ptolemy Philometor was still a child. The subject of the Tazza, as interpreted by Charbonneaux, could not have been conceived in that period. Much of his interpretation is influenced by his knowledge of the historical outcome, namely that Kleopatra was to die in 176 BC, an untimely, sudden death in her early thirties, and that Ptolemy Philometor was nevertheless to survive court intrigue, and eventually rule Egypt for some 35 years. During Kleopatra's regency such a scene would have been depicted in a different manner, with a more equal emphasis on Kleopatra/Isis and Philometor/Horus, if one could ignore the fact that the king was not a youth but a child at the time.

There are more arguments against Charbonneaux's dating, based on technical and stylistic criteria. These were presented by Bastet (1962) in an article where the Tazza was placed at the end of the second century BC. The outline of Charbonneaux's interpretation was still followed, however, with the figure of Isis now taken to stand for Kleopatra III. Although Bastet's objections were justified, he was more successful in rejecting Charbonneaux's dating of the piece

in the early second century than in placing it convincingly at the end of the same century. This was mainly due to his stylistic comparisons, convincingly carried out with works that could not have been dated before the mid-second century, but on the other hand not safely dated at the end of the century rather than later. Moreover, while at the time of Bastet's article the portrait types of Kleopatra III and her sons Ptolemy Alexander and Ptolemy Soter II were a matter of speculation, they have since been recognized in gems and relevant material, and we know that their heavy and fleshy portrait types cannot be compared with the slender figures of the Tazza (cf. Spier 1989, nos. 2–6; Kyrieleis 1975, 63–75).

#### *The Tazza Farnese as a Religious Allegory*

Adolf Furtwängler (1900, II, 253–86) identified the central figure (Isis) with Euthenia, goddess of rain and inundation, as appearing in Alexandrian coinage of the first century AD and later. The conception of Euthenia, however, goddess of plenty and consort of the Nile, has been justifiably dismissed by both Charbonneaux (1958, 90) and Thompson (1978, 116–217) as a Roman one. Still, the iconography of Euthenia owes much to the Isis type of the Tazza Farnese (cf. Platz-Horster 1992), which can be shown to be of Alexandrian origin. The type of Roman Euthenia, combined with the Tazza Farnese group and similar representations from Egypt, suggests that the type of Isis leaning on a sphinx occurred in Alexandria during the Hellenistic period, probably as one of the cult images of the goddess. The content of the Euthenia cult, as well as the two ears of wheat Isis holds in the Tazza Farnese, show that the type referred to Isis as harvest goddess, which is logically connected with the sphinx, since the relation with



Figure 14  
The 'Tazza Farnese'; the figure of Isis

fertility and cultivation was one of the chthonic aspects of Isis, basis for her treatment by the Greeks as an equivalent to Demeter (see below).

The Tazza Farnese appears to be a religious allegory, focusing on the myths concerning the inundation of the Nile. According to certain versions of these myths, Isis played a significant role in the inundation.<sup>8</sup> These stories were reflected in Ptolemaic poetry of the first century BC, and mainly in the four hymns composed by a local minor poet in Fayoum, named Isidoros — the name means gift of Isis (SEG VIII, nos. 548–51; Vanderlip 1972). The poems were inscribed on two pillars in the temple found in the modern town of Madinet Madi. One of the two piers bearing the hymns also bore the dedicatory inscription of the building, to Hermounthis and Sokonopis, in the name of King Ptolemy Theos Soter (Ptolemy IX). As the inscription is dated to the 22nd year of this King's reign, the year of the dedication should be 96 BC, but as Ptolemy IX was in exile between 107 and 88

BC, the actual dedication must have taken place on his return in 88 BC or soon after (Vanderlip 1972, 9–13). The poems were inscribed in the period 88–80 BC.

In his four hymns, rather pedantic essays in divine praise but nonetheless reflecting popular beliefs at the time of their composition, Isidoros talks about the local goddess of fertility and harvest Hermounthis, identified with Isis, and associated with the deity of water, Sokonopis, the crocodile god.<sup>9</sup>

Hermounthis/Isis is the goddess who 'brought the laws and the crafts, and gave all the fruits — *karpoi* — of Nature' (Hymn I. 6–9). Thanks to her power, the canals of the Nile are filled with water in the season of the flood (Hymn I. 12) and the water brings 'the fruit to earth' (Hymn I. 13). Elsewhere 'she is the giver of life' (Hymn III. 15) — a common epithet of Isis along with that of *Agathe Tyche* (Hymn I. 2) — and even more explicitly is referred to as the power that brings the flood of the Nile, the gold-giver, at the right season (*hora*: Hymn II. 17).

The elements of Isidoros' theology have



Figure 15  
Mosaic from Leptis Magna; the procession of the Nile

long been recognized in two Late Roman mosaics (Rostovtzeff 1940), most likely copying Alexandrian mosaics or paintings (Figs. 15–16).<sup>10</sup> As their figures are inscribed, there can be little doubt as to their identity and their relevance to Isidoros' poetry: *Ge, Aroura Nilos, Potamoi, Karpoi*. One should also point out the references found in the two mosaics to Agathe Tyche, another aspect of Isiac cult, a Greek/Ptolemaic conception, and to the two female figures in one of the two mosaics (from Leptis Magna; Fig. 15), either identifiable with Memphis and Anchirrhoe, the Nymphs of the Nile in Ptolemaic mythology, or the Egyptian Nymphs Satis and Anukis who participated in the arousal of the flood with their libations. This is also the content of the Tazza Farnese, modified to illustrate the Ptolemaic version of the Isiac Myth as opposed to its local variations.

The Nile was perceived as a *persona* of Osiris, married to Isis, seen as the Earth (Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 32). The tears of Isis were thought by the Egyptians to have caused the rising of the water (Pausanias 10. 32. 18). The celestial form of the goddess' composite name Isis/Sothis (Sothis being the most

brilliant star of the constellation of the Dog, in Greek *Seirios*, and Isis' own star) was thought to be the most powerful influence on the inundation of the Nile. Its rise between the 17th and the 19th of July, coincided with the inundation, and the beginning of the Egyptian year. Sothis in Egyptian mythology was thought to shoot the streams forth from their springs toward Egypt, and it was soon connected to Isis, when she absorbed Sothis as her star. According to Plutarch (*ibid.* 21), Sothis was the name of the soul of Isis. An astronomical explanation for the iconography of the Tazza Farnese has been proposed by Merkelbach (1973), where he identifies the various figures with constellations relevant to the Isis/Osiris myth, and their configuration, as observed by Egyptian astronomers. This arrangement, however, placing the piece in the late third century BC, seems to neglect valid technical and stylistic points (as raised by Thompson 1978) as well as crucial iconographical ones: mainly the inconsistency between the Isis-on-the-Sphinx group of the Tazza and the expected presence of *Seirios* in canine form in a representation of Isis/ Sothis. Equally problematic seems to be Dwyer's cryptic reading. Although the



Figure 16  
Mosaic from Antioch; *Ge* surrounded by the *Karpoi*.

celestial character of some of the deities depicted on the Tazza is implied by their very presence, one should not attribute merely an obscure function to the cup. Isidoros' texts also employ cosmological forces and heavenly bodies, but in an imprecise manner, one that does not betray any sophisticated knowledge of astronomy, just a believer's veneration for the 'Maker of both the Earth and the star-bearing Sky' (Hymn II. 11). Furthermore, and although a reflection of apocryphal literature, as suggested by Dwyer, is evident, the exclusive 'reading' of the Tazza Farnese on the basis of the Corpus

Hermeticum is not completely justified, since the figure of Isis is the most prominent on the cup, while the Corpus largely revolves around the male deity, the *Logos*, the fundamental power behind the creation.

The Tazza Farnese contains a representation of the whole system of the cult of the Nile in its Isiac form: the central figure is Isis/Earth, linked to the Sphinx; the Nile is there to fertilize the soil. Isis holds wheat, which indicates that the harvest has already been completed. The two Nymphs are either Greek versions of Satis and Anukis, the first to call and the second to control the flood

(both functions absorbed by Isis in Greco-Roman culture) or perhaps more likely the two Egyptian Seasons, mentioned as *Horai* by Isidoros: the time of the flood represented by the figure with the bowl, and the time of the harvest indicated by the cornucopia. One is reminded of the two figures in the Leptis Magna mosaic (Fig. 15), similarly holding bowl and sack.<sup>11</sup> And finally come the winds, who according to hieroglyphic tradition bring life to the land of Egypt from the North. These were the etesian winds, whose occurrence at the time of the inundation was thought by the Egyptians already in the Middle Kingdom to be one of its causes, as was also Horus, embodying the beneficent powers of his dead father.<sup>12</sup> Horus developed an Apollonian nature in Ptolemaic Egypt, and just as Isis was regarded by the Greeks as Demeter (Herod., ii. 42; 48; 145), Horus' identification with TApotelesmos and assumption of his agricultural activities was acceptable. In the Tazza, Ptolemaic ideology finds its expression in a Greco-Roman idiom. The latter must have been familiar to Alexandrian artists since the later second century BC, yet an obvious influence on Alexandrian glyptic can be detected only later, with the reign of Ptolemy Auletes. The Tazza Farnese indicates that, at the time of its commission, Greco-Roman trends were at home in Ptolemaic Alexandria and in accord with the content of Ptolemaic Art.

Perhaps it is not without relevance that Ptolemy Auletes, king of Egypt from 80–51 BC, spent the last eight years just before his accession in 'honourable captivity' in the hands of Mithradates in Pontos and Syria (Green 1990, 553), and later, from 58 until the end of 57 BC, was residing in Rome or at Pompey's villa in the Alban hills, having been expelled from Egypt (*ibid.*, 649–50).<sup>13</sup> Ptolemy spent his exile in great luxury, and Appian (Mithr. 23) relates that when

Mithradates captured Ptolemy on Cos (where he was sent by his grandmother Kleopatra III for safety) he got hold of much of Kleopatra's treasure, including money, jewellery, and gems which he sent to Pontos. There is an obvious link between the Greco-Roman styles current in the court of Mithradates Eupator (cf. Spier 1991, pl. 10. 1–3) and the classicizing trends of the later first century BC (cf. Vollenweider 1966). Ptolemy's return to Alexandria and his close relations with Rome, promoted further by his daughter and successor Kleopatra VII, opened the Alexandrian court to these influences and also probably contributed to their dissemination. 'The Ptolemies were corrupted by their luxurious way of life' (Strabo 17. 1. 11). Any excess that the captive Alexandrians might have witnessed in Pontos or Syria would certainly follow them back home. Is it conceivable then that the Tazza Farnese was in fact commissioned on Ptolemy's advent, and that it does contain a political message after all? As shown above, the head of Horus on the cup suggests some similarity with the portrait of Ptolemy Auletes. It seems more likely, however, that the type reproduced here is general, as is also indicated by its duplication in the figures of the two Winds, and not a specific likeness of the man. Still, a comparison of the striding Horus on the Tazza Farnese with the young Ptolemy might not have been altogether out of order when the piece was on display in Alexandria. The cult of Isis was under direct Ptolemaic patronage, after all, and although past and present Ptolemies were not implicated in the Isiac mythology, the powers of the Goddess seem to have been enlisted in the service of the reigning king in Alexandria. It was noted above that the four hymns in Madinet Madi were inscribed directly below the royal dedicatory inscription of the temple. They all celebrate Isis as a

beneficent Mother Goddess, but Hymn III explicitly states her protection of 'sceptre-bearing kings' (8) and mostly the King of Egypt, 'Her favourite among sovereigns, ruler of both Asia and Europe' (12–13).

C: ISIS BUSTS

**B<sub>1</sub>** *St. Petersburg. The Hermitage K 35*  
Sardonyx in three layers (light brown, off-white, and dark brown); Isis bust with 'Libyan' locks, diadem and wheat wreath; 19 × 16; Newerow 1981, no. 6. Fig. 17.

**B<sub>2</sub>** *Florence. Archaeological Museum 14591*  
Sardonyx in three layers (light brown, off-white, and brown); as above, with horn-and-sundisk crown; Tondo and Vanni 1991, no. 163 (in Plates mis-labelled as no. 164). Fig. 18.



Figure 17  
Sardonyx cameo; the Hermitage, St. Petersburg. No. B<sub>1</sub>



Figure 18  
Sardonyx cameo; Archaeological museum, Florence.  
No. B<sub>2</sub>

**B<sub>3</sub>** *Tbilisi. State Museum of Georgia*  
Sardonyx; as above; Amiranachvili 1931. Fig. 19.

**B<sub>4</sub>** *The Content Family Collection*  
Sardonyx in three layers (brown, light brown, and off-white); 26 × 24 × 5; Jugate busts of Sarapis and Isis; Henig 1990, no. 86. Fig. 20.

**B<sub>5</sub>** *Boston. Museum of Fine Arts R 813*  
Sardonyx; 25 mm as preserved; Isis in vulture-headdress; background missing, details of the head broken off (neck, wings and tail of the cup, part of the bust); Beazley 1920, no. 127. Fig. 21.

**B<sub>6</sub>** *Museum of London A 14271*  
Sardonyx; as above, neck of the cup broken off; London Cat. 1928, 30 and pl. XI.2. Fig. 22.

**B<sub>7</sub>** *Collection Unknown: formerly in the Marlborough collection*  
Sardonyx in two layers; 41 × 29; Isis with



Figure 20  
Sardonyx cameo; the Content Family Collection. No B<sub>4</sub>

Figure 19  
Sardonyx cameo; State Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi. No. B<sub>3</sub>

headdress as above and horn-and-sundisk;  
Reinach 1895, pl. 114. II, 17. Fig. 23.

These cameos belong to the same context of Isiac cult in the court of the Ptolemies in the first century BC. The importance of the Edfu hoard of clay seal-impressions for the dating of late Ptolemaic gems has been mentioned above. Several types of Isis heads are represented there, the most popular being that with 'Libyan' locks and horn-and-disk crown (Fig. 24). The latter, a composite crown peculiar to Hathor, was also adopted by Isis in the Ptolemaic period (Vassilika 1989, 94). The same type is borne by several intaglios, mostly cut in garnet, that have been recognized as of Alexandrian manufacture (Spier 1989, nos. 13–24); a few have been found in Alexandria itself (e.g. *ibid.*, no. 17 =



Figure 21  
Sardonyx cameo; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. No. B<sub>5</sub>  
(Photograph of cast in Oxford)



Figure 22

Sardonyx cameo; Museum of London. No. **B<sub>6</sub>**



Figure 23

Sardonyx cameo; formerly in the Marlborough collection. No. **B<sub>7</sub>**

Brandt 1968, no. 440). **B<sub>1-4</sub>** complete the range of stylistic features identified in **A<sub>1-5</sub>** above. **B<sub>1</sub>** presents technical and stylistic features met in Edfu, mainly in the rendering of the mouth: a deep line divides the lips and a hole is drilled at its end, as several of the Edfu sealings. The shaping of the nostrils is similar to that employed for the portraits of Physkon on his coinage, but also some of the Kleopatras (cf. Plantzos forthc.). The eye is shaped by a double engraved line and heavy eye-brow, a technique also attested among the Edfu sealings (also in **A<sub>1</sub>**). These features are noticeable on **B<sub>3-4</sub>**, which must also be Ptolemaic. **B<sub>4</sub>** represents Sarapis and Isis in jugate depiction, a scheme often found in Edfu for the same deities, but also for royal couples (the gem was re-cut and the attributes



Figure 24

Isis bust; clay seal-impression from Edfu; Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam



Figure 25

Isis bust; clay seal-impression from Edfu; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

of the two figures were removed or modified).

Stylistically, and although an implausibly late date has been proposed for it (Tondo and Vanni 1991, no. 164), **B**<sub>2</sub> seems to belong with the Isis of the Tazza Farnese (Fig. 14). One notes the colour of the chalcedony, reproduced by the glass cameos **A**<sub>3-5</sub>. The soft brown and off-white tones of such stones seem to have been more popular with earlier cameos, in contrast with the white-on-black stones that become popular from the Augustan period onwards.

Although the 'Greek' Isis type, with 'Libyan' locks and wreath or crown, is the most popular among the Edfu sealings, an 'Egyptianizing' one is also present, where the goddess is depicted in full Pharaonic insignia, mainly the vulture cup topped by the horn-and-sundisk crown (Fig. 25). The vulture headdress is exclusive to female crowns, and in Egyptian art is worn by queens only after their death and deification (Vassilika 1989, 93). Significantly, in both cameos and seals the sundisk crown is shown

much smaller in proportion with the goddess' head than in reliefs (cf. *ibid.*, 319: TYPES FMD — FMIS). This being a traditional native Egyptian scheme, it is perhaps expected to find that such representations are often marked by a different style, more abstract and rigid, which was thought to be more suitable in this context. This does not necessarily imply that their craftsmanship was native Egyptian as opposed to Greek, nor that their function or significance was other than that of the 'Greek' types. Their inherent traditionalism, however, makes works in the Pharaonic tradition, in any medium, difficult to date using other than external criteria, like their presence in a dated context, as with the clay sealing in Fig. 25. The symbiotic nature of the 'Greek' and 'Egyptian' Isis is also suggested by a gold ring with double bezel, unfortunately unprovenanced but probably Ptolemaic, illustrating the two variations (Figs. 26a–b; Sotheby's 1989, l. 141). **B**<sub>5-7</sub> are three representations of Isis in vulture-headdress, presumably manufactured in Alexandria. The fragmentary state of **B**<sub>5</sub> and (less so) **B**<sub>6</sub> is completed by **B**<sub>7</sub>, known however only from an old drawing — although the vulture's neck and head seems to have been missing from **B**<sub>7</sub> as well, in the drawing restored as a snake. Certainty on a Hellenistic date and, further to that, Ptolemaic identity for **B**<sub>5-7</sub> (cf. Pollitt 1986, 263) is not justified. Their affinity with the Edfu Isis (Fig. 25) is not enough to date them in the late second or first century BC, and they might indeed be later, as their 'Egyptianizing' style remained fashionable in the Roman period. The history of **B**<sub>6</sub>, a cameo that was obviously kept 'in circulation' for 16 centuries or so, suggests the popularity of such pieces, probably seen as 'Cleopatras', with the Romans and until much later. **B**<sub>3</sub>, on the other hand, had an equally long career in the East, and ended up

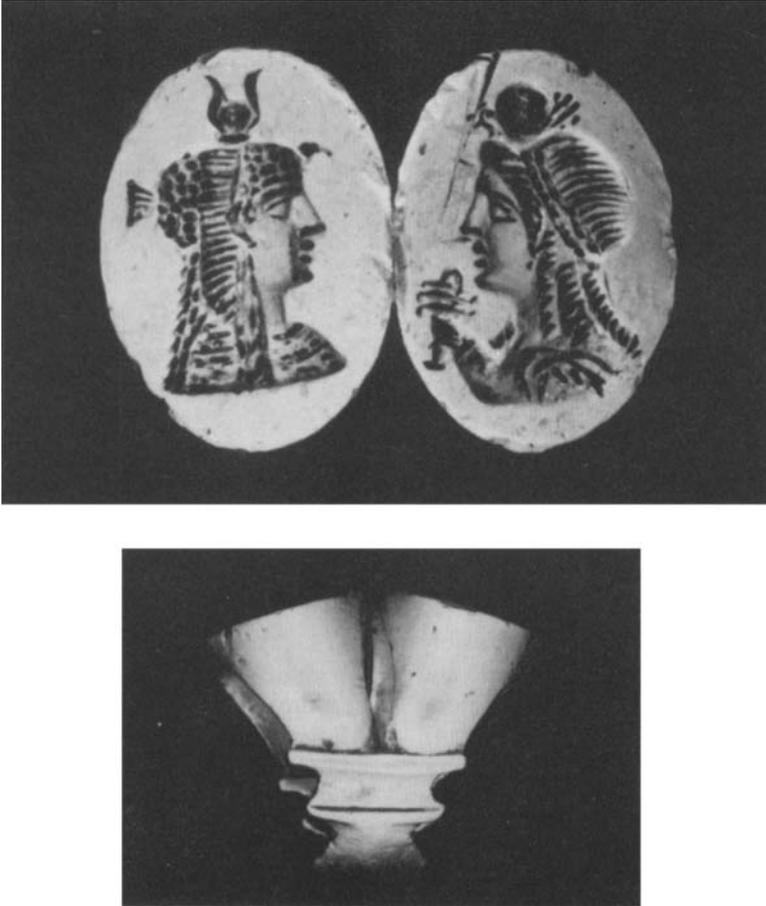


Figure 26  
Gold double-bezel ring with a double representation of Isis; London Market

on the cover of a wooden church-icon in Georgia.

*Acknowledgements*

Research for this paper was undertaken in Oxford, while in tenure of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. I wish to express my gratitude to Sir John Boardman for his support and advice and to the following for their help and constructive criticism: Martin Henig, Gertrud Seidman, Jeffrey Spier, Dyfri

Williams, and the audiences of the Greek Archaeology Group and Institute of Classical Studies seminars in Oxford and London respectively where earlier drafts of this paper were presented.

Photographs: The Museum of London; la Bibliothèque Nationale de France; the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam; Musei Capitolini, Rome; Derek Content; Oleg Neverov; Jeffrey Spier.

*Lincoln College  
Oxford OX1 3DR*

## NOTES

1 On the hoard, see Milne 1916; also Spier 1989, 36 n. 22 and Plantzos *forthc.* The hoard contains portraits of members of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and seems to date from the reign of Ptolemy Epiphanes (r. 204–181 BC) until the Roman conquest.

2 A Gorgoneion was more than expected at the bottom of a drinking vessel, to protect the drinker (cf., with variations, Thompson 1978, 114 and Pollini 1992, 298). As can be seen on the Agora mould, they can be found elsewhere. And perhaps with a deeper symbolism, it might act as apotropaic, in connection with the main scene, although I do not find it necessary for a connection between the two representations of the Tazza Farnese to exist, as such a connection rarely exists in Greek vessels from any period.

3 Her views are taken further in Koenen and Thompson 1984.

4 The Tazza is supposed by Thompson to have expressed the subtle grief of the Alexandrian intelligentsia in view of the coming of a new era, of Octavian and Rome: 'We see it (i.e. the T.F.) as a poem ... on the perennial passing of old ways ... a threnos for the departure of old gods from the defeated, as they desert to the victors.' The problems with this approach are obvious: the piece is placed in a historical vacuum where historical facts were appreciated and evaluated at ease by contemporary artists and their patrons and subsequently expressed in superb art.

5 Another point that Thompson and — to a lesser extent — Pollini make is that the Alexandrian court was in a state of poverty after the dynastic strife of the later second century BC. This view is contradicted by passages from Suetonius (*Oct.* xli) where it is stated that when the treasures of the Ptolemies were brought back to Rome, money was made so plentiful that interest fell and the price of land rose. In another passage (*ibid.* lxxi) we read that Augustus 'proved his lack of any desire for extravagance when, upon taking Alexandria, he reserved for himself nothing of the royal treasures but an onyx(?) cup, and soon afterwards (after the triumph, one would guess) melted down all the vessels of gold, even such as were intended for common use'. Dwyer (1992, 232) suggested that this very cup was in fact the Tazza Farnese. It is conventionally accepted that the Tazza Farnese was discovered in the Villa of Hadrian at Tivoli (cf. La Rocca 1984, xi). The existence, however, of a Persian drawing obviously reproducing the Cup (Blanck 1964) might indicate that the Tazza's route to the West was indirect.

6 When Ptolemy Epiphanes died in 181 BC, at the age

of 29, his son was still five or six. Kleopatra then became regent queen of Egypt in the name of her son, until her own death in 176 BC.

7 It is especially difficult to follow Charbonneau's identifications in his interpretation of the Sphinx. This is indeed an Egyptian Sphinx, derived from the Pharaonic tradition, where the creature was used as a symbol of the dead king (cf. Pollini 1992, 287). We have no evidence, however, literary or other, to suggest that any of the Ptolemies were identified with the Egyptian Sphinx or worshipped as such. Already in the third century, the kings of the dynasty were worshipped in the divine capacity of their epithet — *Theos Euergetes*, *Theos Philometor*, etc. Some of the Ptolemies allowed themselves the privilege to be assimilated to a deity, but always a Greek one: Dionysos, or Apollo, or Hermes. A dead king might have been related to Osiris, the dead god, but there never was a *direct identification* of the dead king with Osiris. Never in the history of the dynasty can we find, with reasonable certainty, a situation where a king was portrayed as Sarapis or Osiris, or Zeus for that matter; and this in a period, after the first quarter of the second century, when the queen was systematically recognized as Isis and depicted as such, always however next to a typically non-Ptolemaic Sarapis (Plantzos *forthc.*).

8 Cf. Pausanias, x. 32. 18. On the myths about the inundation of the Nile, see Bonneau 1964; Kákosy 1982.

9 *SEG* viii, Hymn I. 1 3:

Queen Hermonthis, giver of wealth, Queen of the Gods, Ruler of all, Good Fortune, great-named Isis, Goddess most high, Deviser of all Life ...

On Isis-Hermounthis see Quaegebeur 1975, 102. For a discussion of Isidoros and his hymns, as well as other Isiac aretologies, see Žabkar 1988, 135–60.

10 A: Leptis Magna; first century AD (Fig. 15). The mosaic represents a procession of the Nile: the god, in much a similar posture as that on Tazza Farnese, is here carried on a hippopotamus, preceded by a parade of boys; two women head the procession, one holding a bowl, and the other what seems to be a sack; the procession is heading towards a stele dedicated to *Agathe Tyche*. G. Guidi, 'La Villa del Nilo', *Africa Italiana* 5 (1933)1–56.

B: Antioch; fourth century AD (Fig. 16). *Ge*, Earth (inscribed) is depicted reclining on a Sphinx, as Isis does in the Tazza Farnese. *Aigyptos* (Egypt), and *Aroura*, (Cultivated Earth), are also present. A procession is held by a number of boys with a garland, named *Karpoi*, (fruits) children of the fertilized earth. R. Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes* II (1938), 180, no. 33

and pl. 23.

11 The question of the right season for the flood of the Nile is often met in texts on the subject: cf. Aristeides' hymn to Sarapis, where the god is credited with the flood (Or. XLV 29 [IIP 360 Kiel]): 'He (i.e. Sarapis) leads the Nile in the summer season, and he calls him back in the winter season.'

12 Cf. a text of 1500 BC (Bonneau 1964, 152): 'the Nile was calm, until the South wind encountered that from the North.' On Isis being the force that sent the North wind to Egypt, cf. a hieroglyphic text from Denderah (III 54, 3; *ibid.*, n. 6): 'you (i.e. Hathor-Isis) make it that the sky produces the North wind, so that the inundation comes...'

13 On Ptolemy's captivity: App., *Mithr.* 23 and Cicero, *De Reg. Alex.*, where the king is referred to as 'a boy in Syria' (he was in his late twenties in 80 BC); see Bevan 1968, 344–45 (where Ptolemy Auletes is numbered 'Ptolemy XI', following an old canon for the dynasty, now modified). Ptolemy in Rome: Dio Cass., 139. 13. 1 and 57. 1; Strabo, 17.1.11.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

(other than those for periodicals, for which the standard abbreviations apply)

AGDS *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen*

LIMC *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*

SEG *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*

#### REFERENCES

- ADRIANI, A. 1961: *Repertorio d' arte dell' Egitto Greco-Romano* Aii (Palermo).
- AMIRANACHVILI, A.J. 1931: Un camée antique a Tiflis. *RA*, 41–6.
- BABELON, E. 1897: *Catalogue des camées antiques et modernes de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris).
- BASTET, F.L. 1962: Untersuchungen zur Datierung und Bedeutungen der Tazza Farnese. *BABesch.* 37, 1–24.
- BEAZLEY, J.D. 1920: *The Lewes House Collection of Ancient Gems* (Oxford).
- BEVAN, E.R. 1968: *The House of Ptolemy* (Chicago; first published: 1927).
- BLANCK, H. 1964: Eine persische Pinselfzeichnung nach der Tazza Farnese. *AA* 307–12.
- BOARDMAN, J. 1994: *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (London).
- BONNEAU, D. 1964: *La Crue du Nil* (Paris).
- BRANDT, E. 1968: Staatliche Munzsammlung, München. *AGDS* II (Munich).
- CHARBONNEAUX, J. 1958: Sur la signification et la date de la Tasse Farnèse. *Mon. Piot* 1, 85–103.
- CRAWFORD, M.H. 1974: *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge).
- DWYER, E.J. 1992: The temporal allegory of the Tazza Farnese. *AJA* 96, 255–82.
- FUCHS, W. 1963: *Der Schiffsfund von Mahdia* (Tubingen).
- FURTWÄGLER, A. 1900: *Die Antiken Gemmen* (Berlin).
- GREEN, P. 1990: *Alexander to Actium* (London).
- HENIG, M. 1990: *The Content Family Collection of Ancient Cameos*. (Oxford).
- KÁKOSY, L. 1982: The Nile, Euthenia, and the Nymphs. *JEA* 68, 290–8.
- KOENEN, L. and THOMPSON, D.B. 1984: Gallus as Triptolemos on the Tazza Farnese. *BASP* 21, 111–53.
- KYRIELEIS, H. 1975: *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer* (Berlin).
- LA ROCCA, E. 1984: *L'età d'oro di Cleopatra; Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese* (Rome).
- LONDON CAT. 1928: The Cheapside Hoard of Elizabethan and Jacobean Jewellery. *London Museum Catalogues* 2 (London).
- MEGOW, W.R. 1987: *Kameen von Augustus bis Alexander Severus* (Berlin).
- MERKELBACH, R. 1973: Die Tazza Farnese, die Gestirne der Nilflut, und Eratosthenes. *ZÄ* 99, 116–27.
- MILNE, J.G. 1916: Ptolemaic Seal Impressions. *JHS* 36, 87–101.
- NEWEROW, O. 1981: *Antike Kameen* (Leipzig).
- PANUTI, U. 1983: *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli; Catalogo della Collezione Glittica I* (Rome).
- PLANTZOS, D. forthc.: Female portrait types from the Edfu hoard of clay seal-impressions. In Invernizzi, A and Boussac, M.F., *Archivi et Sigilli nel mondo Ellenistico* (Turin).
- PLATZ-HORSTER, G. 1992: *Nil und Euthenia* (Berlin).
- POLLINI, J. 1992: The Tazza Farnese; Augusti Imperatore 'Redeunt Saturnia Regna!'. *AJA* 96, 283–300.
- POLLITT, J.J. 1986: *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge).
- QUAEGEBEUR, J. 1975: *Le dieu égyptien Shai dans la religion et l'onomastique* (Leiden).

- REINACH, S. 1895: *Pierres gravées des collections Marlborough et d'Orleans* (Paris).
- REINHOLD, M. 1970: *History of Purple as Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Brussels).
- ROTROFF, S.I. 1982: Hellenistic Pottery; Athenian and imported moldmade bowls. *The Athenian Agora: Results of Excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens XXII* (New Jersey).
- ROSTOVITZEFF, M. 1940: Karpoi. *REA* 17, 508–14.
- SAATSOGLOU-PALIADELI, C. 1993: Aspects of Ancient Macedonian Costume. *JHS* 113, 122–47.
- SMITH, R.R.R. 1988: *Hellenistic Royal Portraits* (Oxford).
- SOTHEBY'S 1989: *Sotheby's Auction Catalogue; Monday 10th July and Tuesday 11th July 1989* (London).
- SPIER, J. 1989: A Group of Ptolemaic Garnets. *JWalt.* 47, 21–38.
- SPIER, J. 1991: Two Hellenistic Gems Rediscovered. *AntK* 34, 91–6.
- THOMPSON, D.B. 1978: The Tazza Farnese reconsidered. In Maehler, H. and Stročka, V.M. (eds), *Das ptolemäische Ägypten* (Mainz), 113–22.
- TONDO, L. and VANNI, F.M. 1991: *Le gemme dei Medici e dei Lorena nel Museo Archeologico di Firenze* (Florence).
- VANDERLIP, V.F. 1972: *The Four Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the Cult of Isis* (Toronto).
- VASSILIKA, E. 1989: *Ptolemaic Philae* (Leuven).
- VOLLENWEIDER, M.L. 1966: *Die Steinschneidekunst und ihre Künstler in spätrepublikanischer und augusteischer Zeit* (Baden-Baden).
- VOLLENWEIDER, M.L. 1979: Catalogue raisonné des sceaux, cylindres et intailles. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève II (Mainz am Rhein).
- VOLLENWEIDER, M.L. 1984: Portraits d'enfants en miniature de la dynastie des Ptolémées. In Bonacasa, N. and Di Vita, A. (eds), *Alessandria e il Mondo Ellenistico-Romano: Studi in onore di Achille Adriani II* (Rome), 363–77.
- WALTERS, H.B. 1926: *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems and Cameos, Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the British Museum* (London).
- ŽABKAR, L.V. 1988: *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hannover and London).
- ZANKER, P. 1988: *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor).