

# A ROMAN CAMEO FROM WAKEFORDS COPSE, LEIGH PARK, HAVANT, HANTS

By MARTIN HENIG

THE cameo described below was discovered in 1967 (Wilson 1969), during the excavation of a small one-roomed Roman building situated near the top of a small hill near Wakefords Copse (SU 727091). It was found lying in ploughsoil at a depth of only 10 cm below the surface, close to the flint footings of the building. A full report of the extensive Roman features in this area will be published elsewhere in the *Proceedings*. The excavation was carried out by Portsmouth City Museum staff with the full support and assistance of Havant Education Committee. The field has

now been levelled for the playing fields of Wakefords School, but the cameo can be seen at Portsmouth City Museum.

Cameos are less often found than intaglios, and the example from Havant is thus an important addition to the corpus of glyptic material from Britain (Henig 1974, 94–95, No. 725, pl. xlv). It is cut on banded chalcedonic silica (onyx) and measures 38 mm by 33 mm by 15 mm. Given the absence of wear, even at points of high relief, no great lapse of time can have occurred between manufacture and loss.



Plates 1, 2. Roman cameo from Wakefords Copse. (Scale 2 : 1). (Photos: Portsmouth City Engineers Dept.).

The head of *Medusa*, which is the subject of the cameo (Plates 1, 2), approximates to the 'beautiful-pathetic' features of the *Medusa Rondanini* which evolved during the Hellenistic age and became the standard for *gorgoneia* of the Roman Empire (Buschor 1958). It has a somewhat rounded face which is separated from the encircling border of stylised serpents by a shallow groove that outlines the flesh areas from below the right cheek to the end curl of the hanging lock. Short grooves of about 0.5 mm in length, scored beneath the nose and at the corners of the mouth, accentuate the sad expression on the face. The eyes themselves are wedge-shaped and have heavy brows.

Two wings are shown, springing from the crown of the head which also bears a mass of luxuriant, wavy hair. A tight knot above the forehead and a lock hanging down on the right side of the face are especially prominent. The wreath of serpents which surrounds the face (and to which reference has been made above) is highly schematised except at a point below the chin where the heads of two of the snakes can be seen.

Amongst parallels from Britain, the cameo found at Hawthorn Hill, Hertfordshire (Henig 1974, 95, No. 726, pl. xlv) may be singled out both for its size and also for its workmanship. This *Medusa* has the same combination of outlined face, top-knot and hanging lock as the Leigh Park cameo. Although it is discoloured and slightly worn, it appears to have been cut in the same material. Two small *Medusa*-cameos were found in Wroxeter (Henig 1974, 95, Nos. 727, 728), one of them 'in connection with other articles dating not later than about the middle of the second century' (Bushe-Fox 1914, 16, No. 26). These may have been set in rings as are three cameos found respectively at Vindolanda, Colchester, and Sully Moor near Cardiff (Henig 1974, 95, Nos. 730, 729 and 731), where the settings indicate a date at the end of the third century. The Sully Moor gem, indeed, comprised part of a hoard of jewellery and coins dating down

to A.D. 306. An important group of jet cameos depicting *gorgoneia*, which were certainly used as pendants should also be mentioned here. Examples are recorded from York, the probable centre of the jet-carving industry, as well as from London, Chelmsford and Strood (Henig 1974, 98, Nos. 750-755; 114, No. App. 53, pls. xlix and lix). Once again a tetrarchic date is probable for their manufacture.

*Medusa* cameos are recorded from a number of continental sites and are represented in all the major gem-collections, as the references cited in my *Corpus* (1974, 94-95) make clear. *Gorgoneia* of the 'Beautiful' type occur on gems at least as early as the magnificent *Tazza Farnese* in Naples (Richter 1968, 151, No. 596), probably of the second century B.C. Previously the gorgon had appeared as a frightening monster (Boardman 1968, 37-39), but classical art eschewed the ugly and the strange.

The head of *Medusa* is an essential component of Minerva's *aegis* and Domitian's especial devotion to that goddess may provide a suitable context for the popularisation of the device (Facenna 1956, 184-189). Bearing in mind all the various parallels, it seems probable that the Havant cameo was cut at some time between the middle of the second century and the end of the third.

Like the Hawthorn Hill gem cited above and the famous 'Bear-cameo' from South Shields (Toynbee 1962, 185, No. 139, pl. clviii) it is too large for setting in a finger-ring and will have been worn in a brooch. The ancients believed that the gorgon could deflect the power of the Evil Eye and a tenth-century Byzantine source (pseudo-Lucian, *Philopatris* cap. viii) preserves this tradition, when one character asks another why it is worn by the goddess Athena (Minerva) and receives the reply that it is apotropaic *but only if it is worn*, and is without the power to protect from afar. The Gorgon was clearly associated with good luck in Imperial times and on British material is found in sculpture, mosaic, metal-work, lead-coffins, pottery and glass

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(Toynbee 1964, 134–137; 262, 269; 321; 350; 390; 380). It is enough to mention one other *Medusa*, from Ostia. This is a mosaic in the House of the Gorgon (Becatti 1961, 25, No. 42, pl. lxxii) and shows the familiar head accompanied by the legend, 'Gorgoni Bita

(i.e. *Vita*)' thus demonstrating the life-giving qualities of the *Gorgoneion*.

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