

at seeing it brought to him, and, discovering the fraud, he succeeded in obtaining possession of it by purchase. This original is now with the rest of the collection in the British Museum. His taste as a collector appears to have run chiefly upon three classes of objects, Greek and Etruscan vases, engraved and sculptured gems, and early personal ornaments of gold. The first of these three classes, that of the vases, has been made better known to the public than the others through the works of Panofka, De Witte, and others; and some of the finest of the gems in the Blacas collection having been derived from the older and better known Strozzi collection, have been spoken of in different works on this branch of ancient art, but otherwise the contents of the museum of which we are speaking are not very generally known. It was from the Strozzi collection that the Duc obtained the noble cameo of Augustus, represented in our accompanying plate.

So much has been written on the history of precious stones and of the lapidary's art, that it is now hardly required, in treating of a subject like this, to go at any length over ground which has been so well trodden before. The ancients themselves had abundance of wonderful stories of the immense values set upon particular precious stones, and of the singular parts they had sometimes played in history. Pliny the Elder, in his chapters on this subject (*Hist. Nat.*, lib. xxxvii.), tells us that it was the common belief that the first individual who wore a ring with a stone in it was Prometheus, who had been condemned by Jupiter to carry on his finger, as a memorial of his offences, a bit of the rock of Caucasus set in a ring of iron; and this, he tells us, was, according to the tradition, "the first ring and the first jewel known." But Pliny adds that, in this case, he disbelieved the tradition, and that his opinion was that this ring of Prometheus was only that of the chain by which he was bound to the rock. The same writer tells us next of the celebrated jewel of Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, upon which so much value was set that he imagined that the voluntary loss of it would be a sufficient expiation to the inconstancy of Fortune to avert her wrath, and he went out to sea, and threw the ring containing the jewel into the waves. But the fickle goddess refused to accept it; a large sea-fish, served at the king's table, was found, when carved, to contain in its belly the fatal jewel, which was restored to the king; and the latter, in the sequel, ended his life miserably. Pliny tells us that this precious stone was a sardonyx, which was still in his time preserved at Rome, where it had been given as part of the ornamentation of a horn to the Temple of Concord by the Emperor Augustus, and he says that it was there considered as much inferior to many other jewels then collected in the Roman capital. It was reported, a few years ago, that the ring of Polycrates had been found in a vineyard near Rome, by a vine-dresser of Albano; but as it was described as a very fine intaglio, with the name of the artist, it is probable that the whole story was a fiction, or the ring a forgery.

The object of the first people who made use of precious stones, was of course to display the stones themselves, on account of their beauty and the great value set upon them. Pliny, launching out into admiration on this subject, says that a precious stone is an object "in which the majestic might of nature presents itself to us, contracted within a very limited space, though, in the opinion of many, nowhere displayed in a more admirable form." Many people, he says, looked upon it as no less than sacrilege to engrave them, even for signets, although he considers that the especial purpose for which they were created. In another part of his great work (*Hist. Nat.*, lib. xxxiii. c. 4), Pliny recurs to the ring of Prometheus, mentioned above, and to rings of iron and of gold. As might be expected, some of these primeval rings became celebrated for qualities which were more than natural. Midas, according to our writer—others say Gyges—had a ring which, upon the collet being turned inwards, caused the wearer to become invisible. The only rings known among the early Romans,

were of iron, and even they only came into use at rather a late period. At the very close of the republic, a gold ring was only made use of on public and ceremonious occasions of great importance. The *annulus pronubus*, which was sent as a present to a betrothed woman, as a sign of her engagement, was only of iron. Pliny believed that the use of rings had not existed even in Greece at the time of the Trojan war, and he tells us that the first date in Roman history at which he could trace any general use of them was in A.U.C. 449, in the time of Cneius Flavius, the son of Annius. Yet, as he adds, after this date they must have come into use very rapidly, for, in the Punic war, they were so abundant that Hannibal was able to send from Italy to Carthage three modii of them. The next advance in luxury was the practice of inserting or setting a precious stone in the gold of the ring, and it was not till a still later period that the use of signet rings was adopted, which implied the engraving of a device, of some kind or other, on the stone of the ring. Pliny tells us distinctly that the stone of the ring of Polycrates, or at least the one shown for it at Rome in his time, presented no traces of engraving.

The first engraved gem he mentions belonged to Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, the great enemy of the Romans. This was in the first half of the third century before Christ, and the history of precious stones was still involved in so much mystery, that King Pyrrhus was believed to have in his possession an agate (*achates*) on which were figured the nine muses, with Apollo holding a lyre, the work not of the engraver, but of nature herself, the veins of the stone being so arranged naturally, that each of the muses had her own peculiar attribute. At a later period, notions like this prevailed extensively, and in the more ignorant periods of the middle ages, people believed that the ancient intaglios and cameos, which were often found in digging the ground on ancient sites, were natural objects, and that engraving on them was a mere natural indication of the special power or quality each possessed. Some of the mediæval writers believed that the *fidus Achates* of Roman fable was nothing but a precious agate, on which depended the fortunes of Æneas.

We know nothing of the first beginnings of the art of engraving upon precious stones, but it appears to have come from the East.

Pliny, who is our chief authority on these matters, mentions an edict of Alexander the Great, forbidding the engraving of his portrait on a smaragdus (supposed to be the emerald) by any other professor of the art but Pyrgoteles. We seem from this justified in supposing that, in the age of Alexander, the art of engraving on gems was extensively practised in Greece. Less than a century before Christ, Mithridates, the celebrated king of Pontus, possessed a dactylitheca, or museum of signet rings. With Augustus and the earlier Roman emperors, the possession of these dactylithecae became a great subject of pride, and the Romans displayed a sort of wild extravagance in their taste for possessing cameos and intaglios, and in the immense sums they gave for them. The first who formed a dactylitheca at Rome was Scæurus, the stepson of the dictator Sylla, but all we know of it is the statement of Pliny, that it was much inferior to that of Mithridates, which latter was transferred to Rome by Pompey the Great, the conqueror of Mithridates, and presented by him to the capitol.

The contents of the dactylitheca appears to have been little appreciated by the Barbarians, and, after the fall of the empire of the West, the taste for this branch of art was carried to Byzantium, whence it returned to Western Europe in the fifteenth century. Yet the people of the middle ages, with that mysteriously superstitious regard for them already noticed, sought eagerly to be possessed of them. It is very common to find a great baron or knight, or an ecclesiastic, sealing his charter or other document with a seal in which an ancient intaglio is set instead of an ordinary mediæval seal. Perhaps he thought that, being an object of comparative rarity, the possession of it was something to be proud of; but it is probable also, that he looked upon it as possessing some superior power which gave