The "Whys" of the Grand Cameo: A Holistic Approach to Understanding the Piece, its Origins and its Context

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Sotheby's Institute of Art

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The “Whys” of the Grand Cameo:
A Holistic Approach to Understanding the Piece, its Origins and its Context

by

Constantine P. Sidamon-Eristoff

A thesis submitted in conformity
With the requirements for the
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The “Whys” of the Grand Cameo:
A Holistic Approach to Understanding the Piece, its Origins and its Context

By: Constantine P. Sidamon-Eristoff

The Grand Cameo for France is the largest cameo surviving from antiquity. Scholars have debated who is portrayed on the stone and what its scene means for centuries, often, although not always, limiting their interpretations to this narrow area and typically only discussing other causes in passing. This pattern can and should be broken, allowing the stone to be what all objects truly are: windows to the lives that that objects have lived, just as all physical things are; evidence of an experience part of the world went through, whose meanings have and continue to be part of a wider network of object-meanings. The underlying purpose of this thesis is to use the Grand Cameo to prove this point. It does so by asking why the Grand Cameo came into being using Aristotle’s four-part fragmented “Why” to widen this meaning broadly enough to expand the scope of what cause means from the vernacular use of the term to include material, formal, efficient and final causes. This allows for a sufficiently satisfactory exploration of many elements of the ancient world.

This thesis comprises an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter discusses the material sardonyx itself, its possible origin points and how it would have been seen and used in its time in both the India and the west. It discusses the development of trade routes through the Indian ocean and Hellenistic and Egyptian ties to the east which were later taken over by Rome, as well as the Ptolemies, who they replaced. The second chapter discusses the relationship between Rome and Egypt, how their imagery and materials were usurped, and how this connects to the cameo, a medium that became Roman. Chapter three discusses Rome’s absorption and reuse of Hellenistic kingdoms, their people and their culture to see how these influenced images of Roman Rulers in the transition from the Republic to the Julio Claudians. The fourth chapter details the nature of Julio-Claudian power in Rome, the roles the family took over, and how they made themselves essential to the state, especially in how this relates to imagery from the Grand Cameo. Finally, the fifth chapter allows for the exploration of final cause by using a process of elimination based on living number of family members to establish a coherent narrative for the stone’s scene, allowing an interpretation of message and intent. It seems most likely to be justifying the handing over of power to Emperor Claudius as intended by the heavens regardless of the plans of his relatives.

A roughly chronological understanding of this stone’s role from being plucked from the ground to the imperial court is presented by assessing available material. The expansive nature of the question “Why?” allows for an explanation of the stone both broader and more satisfactory than the intentions of one emperor alone, however interesting. The Grand Cameo intersects with the highly international and interactive dynamics of the ancient world as well as specific elements therein which earlier interpretations do not allow for room to explore.
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Introduction

Consensus about the Grand Cameo of France (Fig. 1) is rare. Scholars widely disagree about its patronage and dates, and the interpretations of the scene. Doubts of varying credibility levels exist as to the geographical origin of the rock itself and what this origin reflects about its era. Factual questions about the stone, such as why someone would commission such a cameo and what it reveals about the Roman world are either made secondary to issues listed prior or circumvented. Objects acquire form in contexts within which those forms, and creations in those forms, are imbued with meaning. Someone had this stone commissioned, fully aware of the zeitgeist and the network of meanings which any object made within would be engaging, but why would someone have this made?

The question of “Why” has occasionally been broken into four separable but interrelated parts that interlace into a coherent, multifaceted understanding. These traditional “Four Causes,” originating with Aristotle, are the Material Cause, how the change or movement of an object is determined by the material comprising it, the Formal Cause, or why it looks the way it does, the Efficient Cause, or what interacted with an object to make it this way, e.g. carvers, and the Final Cause, the intended purpose of the piece.¹ The Material Cause can be addressed by asking where the stone came from, since physical presence in the Mediterranean was a prerequisite for its carving, and touching on what this signified at the time. The Formal Cause relates to the composition of the stone, and results from the material culture of several earlier traditions whose homelands the Romans absorbed, especially the Ptolemy’s of Egypt, as well as Greek and Roman art,

and the captured treasury of the kingdom of Pontus, supposedly the moment cameos entered Roman art. Propaganda of later Julio-Claudians is based on the Augustan transformation of Roman political art. The Grand Cameo of France appears largely to draw its composition from the Gemma Augustea (Fig. 2), a large-scale Augustan cameo. The Efficient Causes include the Indo-Egyptian sea trade that the Romans took over and the conquests of Hellenistic kingdoms, which brought hardstone carving technology and Greeks, like Dioskorides, who worked as a gem carver for the Roman court.

The Final Cause is the hardest to establish. No record exists of the commission of the Grand Cameo, the name of its carver, patron, or owner. Any specific event or general desire that would have led to its creation is also debatable because the records are lost, if they ever existed, and so its past must be extrapolated. It is assumed that before its appearance in 13th century France it was taken from the Roman treasury in Constantinople after the fourth crusade, when western Christians usurped power in the Roman Empire, plundering Constantinople, as it appears in France during the Latin Empire. It appears to have been part of the imperial collection for over a millennium, although thought of as a depiction of Joseph at the court of Egypt for much of its history, since relabeling figures meant that relabeled pagan art survived stripped of its original meaning. Several limitations can be applied, narrowing likely scenarios for its Final Cause, suggesting an original iconographic meaning. If it is a statement of dynastic intention, how so, beyond including Julio-Claudians? If it is about displaying power, then for whom, in what possible context, and to what intended effect? Final Cause will be the most elusive of the Four Causes, but likely scenarios can be established by narrowing the scene’s timeframe.
Chapter I – Sardonyx and Eastern Trade

The attempt to answer why someone would have had this piece made will start with the material itself and move through the process of its creation and its causes in a semi-chronological order. The story of the journey of the stone should begin in the ground from which it was pulled. This is most likely India, making sense chronologically, because the dynasty that produced the stone also conquered Egypt, as well as in light of ancient accounts. Although other explanations must also be analyzed. Several ancient sources discuss sources of Sardonyx, related beliefs and contemporary uses. After the stone was pulled from the earth, it would have likely been traded via Indian Ocean routes up the Red Sea, (collectively called the Erythraean Sea\(^2\)) through Egypt into the Mediterranean.

Pliny begins his discussions of the origin of sardonyx in his *Natural History* \(^3\) “Formerly… Sardonyx meant a stone with a layer of carnelian (Fig. 3) resting on a layer of white, that is, like flesh superimposed on a human fingernail, both parts of the stone being translucent. Such is the Character of Indian sardonyx…” He describes the qualities of other types of sardonyx known to him late in the Julio-Claudian era, first Arabian, “Those stones that have now usurped the name… come from Arabia; … the base being black or else having the color of azurite, while the ‘nail’ above is colored vermilion and is banded with a thick white line, not without the suggestion of purple where the white shades into vermilion… The Arabian stones are remarkable for their whiteness, the band being brilliant and quite thick; it does not glimmer in the depths of


the stone or on its sloping side, but shines on the convex surface of the gem and is, moreover, set off by a lower layer of the deepest black.” This description sounds less like the Grand Cameo than its older cousin, the Gemma Augustea (Fig. 2). The subsequent description of Indian sardonyx matches more closely. “In the Indian stones we find that this layer has the color of azure or horn. Moreover, their white band can have a kind of iridescent shimmer, while the surface is red like the shell of a crawfish.”

Looking at these ibex, rhino and ram’s horn carvings (Figs. 4, 5, 6), they have a similar brown, glowing with an equivalent light penetration, and shining with a similar texture when polished. Consulting photos of the stone, one will find differences in the way that the white areas, despite millennia of patination, never reflect back the exact same shimmer. If the surface highlights are ignored, tiny changes in angle seemingly cause the stone to display a different refraction (Figs. 7, 8). This appears to resemble Pliny’s “iridescent” white shimmer. There are multiple Mediterranean crawfish species, colored earthy purples and greens, rusty browns and reds, of varying translucence (Figs. 9, 10), all boiling to lobster red. The Grand Cameo lacks any outside layer at all, like all presently identified Julio-Claudian cameos, rendering his reference unhelpful.

After listing a series of imperfections that would make a piece of sardonyx unacceptable, he quickly mentions an Armenian variety. “There is also an Armenian sardonyx, which is acceptable in every respect apart from the faintness of its white band,” which appears a poor match for the Grand Cameo’s coloring. The closest color description in Pliny is the Indian type. Although an Armenian origin is plausible, Pliny’s description of the faint white layer lowers the chances that the Grand Cameo itself is of

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4 Ibid, XXXVII.xxiii.
5 Ibid, XXXVII.xxiii.
Armenian stock. An Armenian source is rarely discussed as a possible origin by modern authors. As altering the color of stones by boiling them in a mixture of honey and other substances shows, the alterations ancient Mediterranean people described only altered the colored bands of the stone, and thus would have done nothing to create more opaque white bands. Although the cameo form seems to have entered the Roman world after the triumph of Pompey Magnus over Armenia’s immediate neighbor Pontus, it does not seem that large, identifiable quantities of sardonyx were sourced from that region.

There have been attempts to discount the possibility of an Arabian origin, claiming Arabian sardonyx could be misattributed Indian sardonyx since most would have flowed through Eudemon Arabia in the Gulf of Aden. However 1800s sources claim there are onyx mines with banded brown sardonyx in Yemen in and around the Dhamar Governate and near Sanaa. There was likely confusion as to the origins of particular stones making their way up the Red Sea in the first century AD, but this confusion is insufficient reason to preclude an Arabian source altogether. However the presence of some redness in the Grand Cameo’s hues does not accord with Pliny’s description of Arabian sardonyx that “they lack all trace of the carnelian of the Indian stones”. Pliny is however not totally authoritative, as when he describes silk moths making webs, or rock crystal being a type of ice, leaving an Arabian origin for the

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7 Ibid
8 John Pinkerton and Samuel Vince, *Modern Geography, a Description of the Empires, States, and Colonies, with the Oceans, Seas and Islands in All Parts of the World ... The Astronomical Introduction by the Rev. S. Vince. With Numerous Maps* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1804).
10 Ibid, XXXVII.xxxiii.
11 Ibid, XI.xxxv-xxvii.
12 Ibid, XXXVII.ix.
Grand Cameo as a possibility, although based on his descriptions less likely than an Indian origin.

It is necessary to address suggestions that sources of sardonyx known today that are unmentioned until later eras are possible sources of the stone. There are sources of sardonyx in Germany, Czechia, and Bulgaria that are unmentioned in either Pliny’s *Natural History*, Theophrastus’ *On Stones*, or Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, which, although produced across a nearly four-century period, all note the sources of sardonyx to be east of the Mediterranean, not north. Scholars appear not to seriously entertain the suggestion of the German or Czech sources. However Schmidt, in his otherwise informative *Das Geheimnis Des Grossen Kameo*, devotes his final two chapters to arguing for a Bulgarian origin. He discusses how sardonyx takes on color from the process of boiling with honey, and the chemical reasons for the mixtures effect on the colored parts of the stone and lack thereof on the whites. He then states that because any sardonyx could be processed thusly, any descriptions in the ancient sources that mention characteristic qualities of sardonyx related to particular regions should be discarded, disregarding the visual as their main method of categorization. He states that different sardonyx stones pulled out of the ground a few meters away can have vastly different crystalline structures when observed microscopically and that each pocket that an agate forms in will have slightly different layering than its neighbors (Figs. 11, 12), which can be true, but when bedrock conditions change, not randomly as he implies. This means that stones from the same deposit generally look similar, and that different deposits in the same region can be quite different, as well as different regions having similar deposits. Schmidt tries to manipulate evidence to both support his claims that samples he found in Bulgaria
match the Grand Cameo well enough that only a Bulgarian source is plausible, while disqualifying other areas as possibilities because stones of several regions appear too similar to be differentiated, and thus cannot be disqualified as Bulgarian. These arguments are based on contradictory underlying premises. In fact, as geologists confirm, while regions will have general characteristics, a positive match with one stone from one area does not indicate a definite source. Schmidt’s small sample size combines with confirmation bias to create an erroneous assessment.

Claiming a trustworthy origin cannot be established, he lays out a case for a source in Bulgaria. He discusses how Bulgarian sources were discovered in the 1970s, partially buried but excavatable by hand. Schmidt claims that since the stones were there all along, people would have been using them 1900 years prior, without the stones being mentioned in any source we have left today either because the source was lost to time, or because it was a valuable secret the government wanted undiscovered. Schmidt then states that of the three samples he happened to pick up, one has banding and crystalline structure between bands that look similar to him under a microscope to the Grand Cameo despite differences in color which could have been processed away. Despite these lines of logic being rejected by him as reasons to suggest an origin outside Bulgaria, when they support his favored origin he states their reliability.

Doubting the credibility of Schmidt’s theories due to their internal contradictions, a translation was provided to Kevin Gardner, a University of Oregon Geology Department field scientist and teaching fellow, to assess. Gardner responded:

14 Ibid. 86-96.
Agates form when hot fluids carrying dissolved quartz (usually around geothermal systems) fill a cavity in the surrounding rock and begin to solidify. As a result, a commonality between all agates is that their primary component is microcrystalline quartz. This gives them some distinct visual similarities. The color of the agates, which usually determines the specific type of agate, comes from trace elements in the hot fluids that were picked up as the fluid migrated through the bedrock. Given this, I would guess he got lucky and found a similar agate. Are there any reports of Bulgarian sources that are rich in sardonyx? No, it is not mentioned until less than fifty years ago. We could also easily answer this question by running the samples through an XRD to get the exact mineralogical fingerprint and compare the possible sources to the piece itself. Similar agates can form in areas far from one another, but this can only be true if the surrounding bedrock was capable of providing the same set of trace elements that color the agate. They can differ from distances as little as a few feet, but unless there is a sudden change in bedrock or perhaps cooling rates where they formed a few feet from one another, they will not be drastically different... I would doubt that it is coming from Bulgaria, not only because of the fact that Bulgaria does not have widely documented agate or onyx deposits, but also because of Occam’s Razor. If the explanation that it is coming from Bulgaria requires numerous specific conditions (down to having the same bedrock as India or Yemen) for it to be possible, then I doubt it.16

Gardner states that the microcrystalline quartz between layers is a common feature between the same type of agate, meaning what Schmidt points out as the “connecting feature” between the Grand Cameo and his sample is actually intrinsic to sardonyx, not necessarily exclusive to Bulgarian sardonyx. Schmidt discusses boiling his samples in honey to achieve the same color as the Grand Cameo. The color of an agate is determined by its chemical composition, so stones can be brought to the same color, and thus cannot show whether there is a geographical match without XRD analysis. To say the process producing results suggests an origin or lack thereof is misleading. If XRD analysis has been performed, neither Schmidt, the institution holding the stone, nor any other

15 Garner here refers to the philosophical principle that if two explanations are proposed, the one requiring less speculation is often the better of the two, becoming more unlikely with each additional speculation required
available source has disseminated the results, although a conclusive test could be performed to settle the origin. Gardner states that the similarity between sample and original is not a definite indicator of Bulgarian origin, it being likely that the author happened to find a piece of sardonyx that looked similar to another piece of sardonyx to him after his own alterations than that he happened to accidentally locate the exact source of the stone. Schmidt also argues that any piece of sardonyx could be from any source, because deposits can change visibly in just a few feet (provided geological shifts he does not mention) or via human intervention. After using this argument to establish that the stone could be from anywhere, this notion is abandoned for claims that his personally doctored sample was such an exact match to the original Grand Cameo as to preclude any other source. Then he notes that the bedrock in India and Yemen are capable of producing chemically similar stones while maintaining Bulgaria as the source. It seems clear with Gardner’s insight that Schmidt is representing the significance of his findings based on his desired conclusion rather than sound geology, which is imprudent. To bend evidence and discard contemporary accounts to prove a personal theory based on an internet search performed after choosing to disregard the already proposed sources seems unscientific, especially when the technology to determine a chemical match is available but unused. Schmidt’s Bulgarian origin theory is thus only an interesting but improbable suggestion.

India appears the most probable of the potential origin points. The connection between India and Sardonyx was established in the ancient world. Pliny connects the stone with the subcontinent multiple times. He states that the typical description of sardonyx according to his sources is characteristic of the Indian type of stone. By saying
the Arabian stones “usurped” the name, he gives further primacy to Indian sardonyx, changing and broadening the definition of sardonyx to stones that contain less carnelian, stretching the definition away from the combination of reddish-brown sard (Fig. 13), and onyx (Figs. 14, 15), derived from the Greek word for “nail,” to include more stones in which he would consider the colored band too vermillion or too purple to properly be sard.17

If Theophrastus’ *On Stones* is consulted, which Pliny did, despite misinterpreting several descriptions, it becomes apparent that Greeks did not use the term “Sardonyx” commonly until it became necessary to distinguish amongst types of onyx.18 Theophrastus uses the terms *Sardion*, *Onychion* and *Achates* writing two centuries prior to Pliny during the Hellenistic period. These terms are the origins of the terms Sard, Onyx and Agates, but the translation is inexact. *Sardion* in Greek meant a reddish stone suitable for making a seal, and generally included all red chalcedonies (comprised of microcrystalline quartz) that could be used as seal stones, including both carnelian and the sard known today. The term *onychion* applied to chalcedony stones containing alternating layers of any color, and included most onyxes and several types of agates. This contrasts with today’s definition of onyx, limited to alternating white and dark layers. *Achates* seems to have meant any beautiful two-or-more-colored stone, although it seems to have precluded *Onychion* and included agate-looking stones that fell outside the category under later scientific delineations. As these definitions indicate, stones were

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defined primarily by their appearance in ancient times. It is unsurprising that between Theophrastus and Pliny new labels developed, like sardonyx, which was exactly what it looked like to the naked eye before the label took on a life of its own as a layered, white and dark seal-appropriate stone. Pliny seemingly finds this transmutation frustrating, but words are constantly accruing and dropping meanings. This lingual drift seems more evolutionary than “incorrect,” as it did to Pliny, although his notion of the “correct” stones coming from India evinces the evolution of this particular term.

Pliny includes several descriptions of these Indian stones, stating “Zenothemis writes that the sardonyx was not held in high regard by the Indians, though it might be actually large enough to be commonly made into sword hilts. Indeed, as is generally known, in India the stone is exposed to mountain streams.” It is implied that the reason for the Indian’s disregard for the stone has to do with its commonality. The Grand Cameo is more than a foot (31cm) high and accords with Pliny’s description of Indian stones, which “might be large enough to be commonly made into sword hilts.”\(^1\) No other source is noted for the size of its sardonyx, thus this positive correlation reinforces the suggestion of an Indian source. Embracing the opportunity to echo talk elevating his corner of the world, Pliny, after faulting the Indians for not doing more with this resource, paraphrases Zenothemis: “He states that in our part of the world, however, the sardonyx was popular from the beginning because it was almost the only gemstone which, when engraved as a signet, did not carry away the sealing wax with it. Later we persuaded the Indians to share our appreciation of it.” This echoes the Roman tendency to see themselves as the civilizers of other nations, despite claiming to believe a third of

\(^1\) Ibid, XXXVII.xxiii.
the world resided in India, depicted in ancient writings as somehow both more and less civilized than the Mediterranean world. Pliny also gives information on why exactly it was valued as a material by the Romans. As G.M. Richter’s *Engraved Gems of the Greeks Etruscans and Romans* lays out, sardonyx signet rings had similar uses to sard/carnelian rings, which were in use prior to sardonyx and competed with in the market. This matches Pliny’s assessment that sardonyx became popular in the west as an alternative material for this purpose. However, it appears that the material was valued for different uses in the different locations.

Returning to his own voice, Pliny states of the “persuaded” Indians, “There the common folk wear it pierced on a necklace; and this perforation is now a proof of Indian origin.” Contemporary pseudo-Roman coins that had been stamped in India with profile heads and pseudo-Latin lettering made into chains (Fig. 16) have been found in Indian riverbeds. Indian sardonyxes being used as accessories in a different style than their Roman counterparts have as well. The “Roman coin” headdresses have been used to suggest a point Pliny’s statement echoes: the relative material and mineral paucity of Europe and the Mediterranean compared to the Indian subcontinent led to different perceptions of particular materials, from which stemmed differing treatments and uses. In other words, the Romans valued difficult to acquire materials more highly because of their relative rarity, and treated them more prestigiously than in India. Gold was common in India as well, unlike the Mediterranean. In the west, coins were also used as jewelry

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(Fig. 17), but fake foreign coins minted for decorative purposes are absent there. Gold coins tended to be circulated in the west, as there this resource was valued for its practical over its aesthetic use. Rather than being pierced, which would compromise its weight and thus its value, prior to the Byzantine period westerners had theirs set, and thus removable for later use. This parallels the treatment of sardonyx, another common material in the east used for popular decoration there but having doubled value in the west as a tool of exchange with aesthetic and prestige bearing potential, uses that spread east over time.

The fact that Romans saw sardonyx as a common material in India, desired to know if they had genuine Indian sardonyx and discussed it as the most desirable variety, suggests that this variety would have been most likely to be prestigious enough for use in the Roman court, regardless of the absence of the identifying necklace hole on the Grand Cameo. It is unlikely that the Grand Cameo was ever a necklace due to its weight and size, so this lack is dismissible, despite the prevalence of fakes Pliny discusses.

To distinguish genuine and false gemstones is extremely difficult, particularly as men have discovered how to make genuine stones of one variety into false stones of another. For example, a sardonyx can be manufactured so convincingly by sticking three gems together that the artifice cannot be detected: a black stone is taken from one species, a white from another, and a vermilion-colored stone from a third, all being excellent in their own way. And furthermore, there are treatises by authorities, whom I at least shall not deign to mention by name, describing how by means of dyestuffs emeralds and other transparent colored gems are made from rock-crystal, or a sardonyx from a sard, and similarly all other gemstones from one stone or another. And there is no other trickery that is practiced against society with greater profit.”

This quote shows that faking gemstones was common and profitable, even listing two fully developed methods of creating a fake sardonyx. If his contemporaries agreed with

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his valuation of sardonyx as second only to opal (the context of his assessment implies some expected disagreement), then this level of indignation is understandable. The Grand Cameo is not a fake, as the microcrystalline structure linking the layers show it was formed as the stone cooled underground.\textsuperscript{24} It is likely that the stone was boiled, as Schmidt suggests,\textsuperscript{25} as this was a common practice with all types of stone and not considered fraudulent. However, similar to the aforementioned XRD, if tests of its chemical content have occurred, results have not been disseminated. According to Pliny “In general, all gems are rendered more colorful by being boiled thoroughly in honey, particularly if it is Corsican honey, which is unsuitable for any other purpose owing to its acidity.” Knowing which honey was best for the practice shows that artisans had time to experiment, indicating a fairly well-developed gem dyeing industry.

Determining what sorts of powers and attributes sardonyx would have been thought to have in the ancient Mediterranean is complicated by modern misinterpretations of sources. on Theophrastus and Pliny’s categorizations were based on visual impression, not chemical composition, but modern interpreters sometimes interpret sources in light of modern, anachronistic definitions. Theophrastus does not mention sardonyx, only onyxes and agates. Banded agates, like sardonyx and eye agates, were categorized together with onyxes, while spotted agates and most true agates were called by their present name. Theophrastus states that agates come from the river Achates in Sicily, which may be the Carabi or Cannitello.\textsuperscript{26} Ptolemy’s later Geographia contains

\textsuperscript{26} Theophrastus, John F. Richards, and Earle Radcliffe Caley, \textit{Theophrastus on Stones: Introduction, Greek Text, English Translation, and Commentary} (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1956), 129.
coordinates in his tenth map of Asia, focused on the Indian subcontinent, for mountains
of sardonyx in the “Larica” region of western India, up the Narmada River, the only
location in his book he lists as a source.\textsuperscript{27} The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea states that
\textit{Onychion} are brought from the highlands upriver to Barugaza, the main port on that
river.\textsuperscript{28} Agates were thus understood to come from Sicily, and Sardonyx was understood
to come from southwestern India, based on contemporary sources popular enough for
copies to survive to the present. It seems that these two materials were not considered the
same, but different stones from different sources. Pliny describes agates from India and
sardonyx from other regions, making it clear that in the two hundred years between
Theophrastus and himself, Mediterranean people came to understand that one did not
come from the east and the other the west, but when over two dozen chapters after his
description of sardonyx he describes varieties of agates, this is deliberately separate from
sardonyx, which not only does not match any of his descriptions of agate, and is treated
in chapters directly proximate to those of its supposed components, sard and onyx.\textsuperscript{29}
Therefore, when authors like Belozerskaya, in well researched books like \textit{Medusa’s
Gaze}, discussing the Sardonyx bowl the Tazza Farnese (Figs. 18, 19), use descriptions
from Pliny’s section on agates to describe the powers and perceptions of sardonyx, they
are applying the modern understanding that sardonyx is scientifically categorized as an
agate.

\textsuperscript{27} Ptolemy et al., \textit{Geography of Claudius Ptolemy} (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2011), Book 7.
\textsuperscript{28} Huntingford, George Wynn Brereton., \textit{trans. The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea} (Glasgow, UK: Hakluyt
Society, 1980), 47.
\textsuperscript{29} Pliny and W. H. S. Jones, \textit{Natural History} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), Books
XXIII, XXIV, LIV
Belozerskaya applies this description of agates from Pliny to sardonyx,30 “The agates found in India are also effective in this way and have other very remarkable qualities besides. For they exhibit the likenesses of rivers, woods and draught-animals; and from them also are made dishes, statuettes, horse-trappings and small mortars for the use of pharmacists, for merely to look at them is good for the eyes. Moreover, if placed in the mouth, they allay thirst.” This is from chapter LIV, which begins by breaking from previous chapters in book 37; “I have now discussed the principal gemstones, classifying them according to their color, and shall proceed to describe the rest in alphabetical order.”31 Chapter XXIII, containing the majority of his discussion of sardonyx, is set up by as the beginning of a discussion of “the stones about which men too pass judgement.”32 The source writing closest to the stone’s carving does not consider sardonyx and agate in the same category of judgment. Therefore sardonyx, despite being the source for many ancient cups and dishes (Fig. 20), has no confirmable connection to relieving thirst in the surviving literature. If there was one in people’s minds at the time, it cannot be verified. Readers must be wary of anachronistic conflations.

Pliny does list several associations and properties specific to sardonyx, alongside context for how gems and jewelry may have been understood in Roman times. He begins his treatment of gemstones stating that, despite mostly being used for signets, “very many people find that a single gemstone alone is enough to provide them with a supreme and perfect aesthetic experience of the wonders of Nature,” so much so that they are

32 Ibid, XXII.
unwilling to carve some stones. He claims that the practice of wearing rings started in the Caucasus Mountains in reference to the chains of Prometheus, although this is certainly legendary. The first piece of sardonyx mentioned was considered so valuable that a king thought throwing it to the fish would offset the karmic debt for his power and wealth, and that the sardonyx, returned by the gods as a bad omen, was later publicly displayed in the Temple of Concord in Rome, looked at as the most prestigious gemstone of all by those who did not doubt its authenticity. According to Pliny, sardonyx became esteemed in the Roman world by association with Scipio Africanus and was later favored by Claudius, although Pliny ascribes this to caprice rather than the fact that it was already associated with the family and the gem carvers they had patronized from Augustus’ day. Pliny says that he personally awards sardonyx second place in prestige after opal, that it was valued largely because of its ability to make impressions without taking wax away with it, and that the harmony of the bands in both sardonyx and onyx were prized aesthetically. Pliny says sard and sardonyx were considered relatively easy to engrave, and claims that the faking of sardonyx, amongst other stones, was a major offense. From this it seems that this stone was valued for its associations with regality and wealth, its aesthetic merits, and its practical use for correspondence and business. Rumors that it has powers, such as clarity of mind and relieving thirst, appear to come either from misinterpretation of the sources or invention over time.

Many Romans would have known the type of stone and thought that this relative rarity came from the east. Whether brought to Rome by trade or as a gift, the piece of sardonyx which became the Grand Cameo would have been brought to the empire via the Red Sea. Augustus, the first dynasty’s founder, took the territories of Ptolemaic Egypt
and held them as imperial provinces, regulating travel, and thus maintaining and improving the eastern trade routes by bringing them under his control, an act seen to be benefitting Rome, a role his descendants would have continued in and a perception from which they would have continued to benefit. Pliny mentions that westerners came to believe that sardonyx was valuable earlier than Indians did, thus Indians would have had the chance to realize that they could sell these stones to westerners for more profit than to locals.

The future Grand Cameo would have been sailed along Red Sea routes developed over more than a millennium. The mortuary temples to Pharaoh-Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari in Egypt record that Hatshepsut had a base constructed on the Red Sea coast between 1473 and 1458 BC. From there she sent ships down the coast to the northern edge of Somalia to a land called Punt, which returned with frankincense, establishing a trade that continued into the takeover of Egypt by the Persians in the 520s. When the Padishah later conquered the Indus River valley and saw crocodiles, he assumed that Egypt and India must be linked by water. Crewing a ship with Greeks, Phoenicians, and Persian troops, he sent them to confirm the theory. They did not understand the yearly monsoon, lengthening their journey by months, but, hugging the coast, they found a way around Arabia and up the Red Sea.

After the breakup of Alexander’s empire, his successors, especially the Ptolemies, employed war elephants in a Hellenistic arms race. Since Carthage refused to trade their Atlas Mountain elephants to Egypt, and the Seleucids blocked those from India, they looked elsewhere. In 280 BC Ptolemy II Philadelphus had harbors and shipyards constructed on the Red Sea coast to assist the search. Northernmost was Arsine, founded
where moderns Suez sits, then linked to the Canal of the Pharaohs, a project to connect
the Red Sea and the Nile Delta. The sources disagree on when the canal project was first
started or if and when it was completed, seemingly having failed several times. It has
been suggested that Senusret III (1878-1839 BC) attempted the project, but stopped when
he realized that higher-elevation salt water would flood the Nile Delta and make it fallow.
The Necho II, who in 600 BC sent Phoenicians on a three-year trip down the Red Sea
coast, around Africa, and back into the Mediterranean, may have had a version
completed, but after Darius I took over the country, he too was also credited with both
completing the canal and failing to do so because of the salt water.33 Ptolemy II
Philadelphus tried the project again and either stopped because of the same issue or
overcame that issue in 274/273 BC due to his engineers inventing water locks.34

Despite this possible direct water link to India, Ptolemy II’s elephant hunters
mostly appear to have stopped at the most southerly of his three ports, Bernice. The
Egyptians, alongside Greek mercenaries, established hunting outposts further down the
coast, some a full month south of Bernice, explaining why the first opportunity to drop
off their live and dangerous cargo was the one most often taken, despite the two-week
journey across the desert required of the elephants’ recipients. Some of these overland
elephant handlers were “Indos,” or Indian, according to their graffiti.35 The middle port,
Myos Hormos, meaning Mussel Harbor, was not noted for any particular type of activity,
although its name has implications.

33 Hadwiga Schörner, "Künstliche Schiffahrtskanäle in Der Antike. Der Sogenannte Antike Suez-
34 Diodorus Siculus, Delphi Ancient Classics: Complete Works of Diodorus Siculus (delphi
35 Raoul McLaughlin, The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Maritime,
2014), 75.
Hunting elephants stopped being necessary when the Ptolemies’ Seleucid enemies lost control of their elephant source in India around 200 BC. Records then exist of investors from the Mediterranean sponsoring journeys from the old elephant ports to Somalia for incense, arranged by the Italian banker Gnaeus.\textsuperscript{36} After the Ptolemies opened the ports for traders, the formerly peaceful Nabateans turned to piracy, and the kingdom was forced to protect their merchants, thereafter maintaining a naval fleet in the Red Sea. One of their patrol ships found an Indian sailor stranded in the water in 118. He was taught Greek at court and offered whatever ship would take him home guidance along the route. This voyage, commanded by Eudoxus of Cyzicus, was accomplished in a few short weeks thanks to the Indian sailor explaining the monsoon. Eudoxus established trade treaties, exchanged gifts, and brought home spices and precious stones, awakening the kingdom and wider Hellenistic world to the eastern sea trade. Due to high tariffs at the Egyptian and Indian ports (a quarter of one’s goods in Egypt and a fifth in India), as well as the 10-week round trip, merchants typically met at intermediary ports, usually Eudemon Arabia\textsuperscript{37} near the horn of Africa in Aden (modern Yemen) to avoid paying both fees while assuming the entire risk of the journey.\textsuperscript{38} Only about 20 ships made the entire journey from Egypt to India and back yearly, although Greeks were present on both ends, living in India as the Greek speaking Yavana minority, associated with mercenary and trading activities.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the distance and tendency of most trading ships to meet in the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{37} George Wynn Brereton. Huntingford, trans., \textit{The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea} (Glasgow, UK: Hakluyt Society, 1980).
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 77.
\textsuperscript{39} Thomas McEvilley. \textit{The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies}. (New York: Allworth, 2002), 349-402.
middle, the Hellenistic world was directly connected by sea in the 87 years before the Ptolemies’ fall.

Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic pharaoh, and Marc Antony were defeated by the Octavian faction in 31 BC. It is widely remembered that in the wake of Actium they retreated to Alexandria, dithered, and ultimately killed themselves. It is a largely forgotten that preceding their deaths, they attempted a Red Sea escape. In Plutarch, after Antony’s African forces went over to Octavian, Antony returned to Alexandria.

And coming to Alexandria, he found Cleopatra busied in a most bold and wonderful enterprise. Over the small space of land which divides the Red Sea from the sea near Egypt, which may be considered also the boundary between Asia and Africa… Cleopatra had formed a project of dragging her fleet, and setting it afloat in the Red Sea, thus with her soldiers and her treasure to secure herself a home on the other side, where she might live in peace, far away from war and slavery. But the first galleys which were carried over being burnt by the Arabians of Petra… she desisted from her enterprise, and gave orders for the fortifying all the approaches to Egypt.40

Although her hopes were crushed by the same Nabateans who had pirated her ancestor’s ships, and the fact that her dynastic hopes died with her suicide and the capture and killing of her son Caesarion, the belief of Cleopatra that she would have been able to escape to the east and reestablish her court suggests that the residents of Egypt thought of the east as accessible from their crossroads position. This centrality is reinforced by the world map in Ptolemy’s Geography (Fig. 21), written in Roman Alexandria in the second century, which shows Egypt west of the center, and the Tabula Peutingeriana (Fig. 22), which, although based on copies of Roman maps, probably only reached its final form in

the Carolingian period, over 150 years after Europe and India’s disconnection, depicts many lands and cities east of Egypt.41 Modern eyes, used to seeing Egypt in the lower extreme right of maps of the Roman world overlook the degree of interconnection and mutual awareness between east and west in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Caesarion and the Egyptian treasury were waiting for the wind to change at Bernice, set to sail for India to possibly return one day for revenge, when he let himself be convinced to return to Alexandria, where he was captured by his Roman executioners. Egypt found itself the personal dominion of the Emperors and their prefects as an Imperial province (as opposed to Senatorial one, indicating locus of administrative control (Fig. 23)). Conspicuous building, control of the flow of people to and from this country of about 45 million, and deliberate association with its material wealth, and the prosperity which that wealth brought Rome, would characterize the Julio-Claudian emperors.

Chapter II – Takeovers

With his Ptolemaic rivals killed, Octavian seized control of the kingdom and set about bringing Egypt under direct control. He expanded Egypt’s productive and trade capacities and used wealth and materiel from the eastern trade to improve Rome and bolster his reputation as the bringer of prosperity through victory. This perception was elemental to the “Pax Augusta” he was able to claim he had ushered in after the civil wars. While Rome was involved in numerous conflicts with external powers during his reign, it was not involved in internal struggles for the first time in generations. The Mediterranean was relatively peaceful and unified.

The emperor had his prefects transform Egypt into an imperial province, complete with more secure borders and armed protection for travelers and traders, while instituting projects to increase revenues and facilitate movement through the territory. When Augustus’ imperial governors arrived in Egypt they used the Roman army to repair irrigation and transit canals which had been neglected during the wars. They stationed troops along the caravan routes, fought local bandits and built shipyards at Arsine, as the Romans planned on conquering the Arabian coast with a fleet of over 200 vessels.42 Prefect Aelius Gallus attacked the port of Eudaimon Arabia beforehand partially to weaken their future opponents’ economies. Although his invasion of Arabia, like the simultaneous Roman invasion into Ethiopia, stalled out and became a retreat, as described by both Pliny and Gallus’ friend Strabo,43 the expedition was meant to bring

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Rome further treasures, and through the destruction of the merchants’ traditional trading center, it did. Romans now had new shipyards in the Red Sea, which merchants commissioned vessels from, to involve themselves in the eastern trade. The main point of exchange between Indian, Roman and Arabian merchants moved to the Nile city of Coptos, where safe both from and because of Roman soldiers. Tariffs were lowered, and caravan routes from Bernice and Myos Hormos were further secured. Most merchants unloaded at Bernice, despite the twelve day walk to Coptos, compared to seven from Myos Hormos, which was often the shorter route due to heavy north-to-south winds. Strabo reports that five to seven years into Roman rule, 120 ships were sailing yearly for India from Myos Hormos alone. This is six times more than were leaving yearly from all ports under the Ptolemies, when 20 such ships left yearly from all three Red Sea ports. The destruction of the middlemen’s city and improvements to transport and safety helped shift the endpoint of the Red Sea routes west, to Roman supervised territory. This facilitated closer ties to India, as rather than landing amongst the Sabeans as they had for hundreds of years, they sailed directly to Roman Egypt and many spent several weeks in its deserts before reaching the Nile. Indian kingdoms became more familiar with their new neighbors, and diplomatic overtures and gifts were exchanged.

Augustus emphasized these Indian connections on the Res Gestae Divi Augusti, an autobiographical funerary inscription that the “divine” imperator had placed around the Roman world for his remembrance and glorification. “Emissaries from the Indian kings were often sent to me, which had not been seen before that time by any Roman

leader.” 46 This is amidst the international accomplishments he enhanced his status as a glorious leader with, including “I added Egypt to the rule of the Roman people,” 47 giving out kingships for places he claims he could have conquered, and founding various colonies in the same sentence. Expansion is seen in the text as evidence of surpassing accomplishment and beneficialness to his people. His descendants would step into the political vacuum that Augustus left behind and continue to use the rhetoric that he established of being the bringer of peace through victory, and underscoring the conquests and international connections maintained under their auspices. Augustus had the Indian stone sardonyx used for the Gemma Augustea, a statement of dynastic favor for particular members of the following generation, 48 and welcomed visiting Indians, associating himself with their presence in the Mediterranean. Connecting oneself to India was not new for Mediterranean leaders, being part of the story of Alexander, the man leaders modeled themselves after for his good qualities, while giving the appearance of shunning those seen as bad. Thomas McEvilley, in The Shape of Ancient Thought, examining cultural and philosophical connections and diffusions between the ancient east and west, discusses several Indians’ visits to the Augustan Mediterranean. Some Indian emissaries arrived to maintain trade treaties between ports. There are records of at least four of these emissaries. One ambassador had letters of introduction written in Greek. 49 Some joined Augustus’ entourage. Zarmanochegas, a gymnosophist (naked philosopher), who was

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possibly sent as part of a delegation, joined Augustus’ entourage briefly when it arrived in Athens, where, according to Cassius Dio, after being welcomed into Augustus’ own mystery cult, the Eleusinan mysteries, he self-immolated in 21 BC. The reason is lost to time and transmitted as either being of the custom of his people or of his religion. Exotic gifts were presented, armless boys who shot bows by foot and huge birds, snakes and turtles, accompanied by claims by kings to rule over hundreds of other kings, while still “desiring the friendship of Caesar,” serving the purposes of both leaders, for the more mystifyingly foreign and lavishly exotic the Indians looked when they came to Rome, the more their presence served to remind onlookers how Augustus had brought enrichment and connections to foreign lands within reach, while the Indian kings made themselves seem wealthy in resources and culture. Thus, the leaders reinforced each other’s prestige by mutual interaction. No Indian kings had sent people all that way until Augustus brought Egypt to heel and opened up the Red Sea and its bounty to Rome, and the fact that Indians continued to arrive with gifts for his descendants over the routes they maintained enhanced these emperors’ prestige at home.

The originators of the Grand Cameo assumed this material came from eastern trade, so to combine a dynastic narrative with a material provided via the family’s maintenance of international relations infuses the scene, already showing Julio-Claudians mixing with gods, with a reminder to viewers about the family’s connections to bringing in the luxury and prosperity of the east. Whether the stone itself was a gift to a member of the court from an Indian emissary, a spoil of war showing dominion over Egypt, or a product of trade, and whether viewed privately or as part of the state collections, it would

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50 Strabo Of Amaseia, *Delphi Complete Works of Strabo - Geography (Illustrated)* (Hastings, UK: Delphi Classics, 2016), XV.1.4,1.73. Dio Cassius LIV.9
have carried on another Roman practice exemplified by events following Pompey’s capture of the Pontic treasury at the end of the Mithridatic wars.

Victorious leaders often brought home spoils of war that created tastes for similar items. Pompey conquered the Hellenistic kingdom of Pontus in the 60s BC. He celebrated a triumph in 61 BC, during which he dedicated an entire cabinet of Mithridates VI’s gems, called *dactyliothecae*, or ring cabinets, to the temple. Although present in Rome beforehand, ancient sources and modern catalogues of Roman carved gems suggest Pliny was truthful when saying “it was this victory of Pompey over Mithridates that made fashion veer to pearls and gemstones”\(^{51}\). Julius Caesar, Marcellus (Octavian’s nephew), and possibly Octavian, donated cabinets of gems amongst the spoils to be displayed in Roman temples reinforcing their prestige in Roman fashion. This pattern of adopting new media after conquest, and the glorification of Rome they felt this brought Rome occurred repeatedly. “The victories of Lucius Scipio and of Cnaeus Manlius had done the same for chased silver, garments of cloth of gold and dining couches inlaid with bronze; and that of Mummius for Corinthian bronzes and fine paintings.”\(^{52}\)

Adoption post-conquest was a demonstration of power and appreciation echoed in other Roman practices. Romans had a religious ceremony called the *evocatio*, meaning “summoning away,” for formally transplanting gods and their cult images from their homelands to Rome. It was usually performed during military expeditions, as calling the god of the opponents over to their side removed protection from their foes and excused any sacrilege from the subsequent or concurrent sacking.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{52}\) Ibid
were often designed around absorbing their neighbors and integrating their cultural practices, viscerally demonstrating dominion and a new forced unity while saving effort. If the subjugated loved their gods, they then had to tolerate Roman rule. When Octavian added Cleopatra’s statues of herself as an incarnation of Isis, who the Romans identified with Venus, to Venus’ temple, it had the dual message of showing Roman power over Egypt and its resources and demonstrating that Rome was favored by Egypt’s gods, who were unlikely to have let themselves be carried off against their own wishes. Similarly, demonstrating control over resources and art forms formerly centered in Egypt, like sardonyx and gem carving, by bringing them to Rome, also demonstrated power and, circularly, divine sanction. To them, the gods would hardly allow someone who they did not favor to receive and hold onto such glorious treasures. The maintenance of access to such resources for multiple generations until the creation of the Grand Cameo would have been seen as a sign of the Julio-Claudian family’s continued divine favor and temporal power.

The Ptolemies’ former property belonged to Augustus and his descendants, from trade connections to the artistic tradition of Alexandria’s capital, to the grain surplus that thenceforth fed Rome. Cameos and sardonyx ended up being identified with both the Ptolemaic and Julio-Claudian dynasties. Sardonyx cameos added significant compositional adjustments in Rome, although the technical aspects seem to have been transferred wholesale, possibly due to artisans transferring from Alexandria to Rome. Workshops such as Dioskorides’ appeared in Rome around the time of the takeover. Dioskorides was patronized by Augustus, who, imitating Alexander, had particular artists he favored permitted to make his image in particular media. It is possible that he came to
Rome thanks to the conquest, or that the end of the wars meant it was a good moment for artisans to begin new ventures, especially as Augustus added the trappings of a post-Alexander Hellenistic monarch to his image. These roles he emphasized to viewers in the eastern territories, while presenting himself in a republican idiom at home in Rome as the city slowly acclimated to the addition of a monarch in all but name.

The Ptolemies’ efforts at legitimizing themselves as rulers of Egypt and successors to Alexander had similar but different contours. Their wealth, largely from the grain surplus and being at the crossroads of the sea trade, was seen as a show of divine favor, while allowing a level of opulence that the dynasty used to present themselves as valuable allies and potential threats to neighbors. They spread useful rumors, like their founder Ptolemy I being Alexander the Great’s secret half-brother, as well as Alexander being the son of Nectanebo II, last native pharaoh of Egypt, who slept with his mother disguised as Zeus-Amon, a rumor playing on Alexander’s own belief and rumors that he was the son of this god. On paper, this formed a blood-based continuity that would be religiously acceptable to the locals while also emphasizing their connection to the king, whose body Ptolemy had stolen and stored in Alexandria, near where dynasty members were buried. Formal echoes appear between Alexander’s intaglios (Figs. 24, 25) and Ptolemaic cameos 54. The falling locks and shaven faces of the Pharaohs echo Alexander’s images, as do the slightly upward-tilted gazes, closed mouths, calm but forceful stares, and frequently included tainiae (festival headbands). The Gonzaga Cameo (Fig. 26), shows Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his wife Arsinoe in profile with these same characteristics, in addition to a helmet, wreathes, and an aegis. They are

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traditionally interpreted as gods or under their auspices, the aegis being Zeus’ attribute, later borrowed for his daughter Athena.\(^{55}\) The king’s helmet has a Macedonian sun above the temple carved in a lighter band. This sun was a symbol of the Macedonian royal house generally and Alexander specifically, symbolically linking Ptolemy II to the older king. This type of coin-like profile portrait, like the cameo form itself, were not put to stone until the Hellenistic period, and according to some accounts, may have been developed in dialogue with Indian innovations, although this is unsubstantiated.\(^{56}\) More cameos of higher quality were produced for the Ptolemies than the record substantiates for any other Hellenistic dynasty. Their patronage of the arts helped to cement their preeminence, as did their divine association with gods such as Isis and Osiris, married sibling gods associated with fertility, the Nile and renewal, associations reinforced by marrying kin to kin. This pair became more common in Ptolemaic imagery than the old Zeus and Hera pairing, once more prominent when the dynasty ruled extensively outside of Egypt and enjoyed closer ties to Macedonia. Adjusting to local customs helped Hellenistic rulers keep their thrones.\(^{57}\)

Their divine associations are on full display on the Tazza Farnese (Figs. 18, 19). Almost certainly Alexandrian, authors have occasionally assigned this dish a Roman origin.\(^{58}\) Although the iconography makes this unlikely, the fact that this piece of cameo carving could be supposed to be from Julio-Claudian Rome indicates the quality of the


efforts of the Roman dynasty to become as the medium’s premier patrons. It also supports the suggestion that carvers who served the Ptolemies may have served in or trained those who served in the Julio-Claudians’ Roman workshops. On the exterior of the dish, Medusa’s stone head sits in a roiling vortex of hair and snakes, undulating with shifting colors. On the inside, the largest figure, an old man with a cornucopia, a symbol of plenty associated with good harvests, is seated on a stump while a young man approaches with a plow and bag of seeds. In front of the young man and throne-stump, a woman props herself on a sphynx. Along the right edge, two partially dressed young women are seated with a bowl and a second cornucopia, while two nude young men fly through the air, one gripping a sash, the other blowing on a shell. These figures are typically interpreted as divines associated with the prosperity of Egypt and its leaders, but have been read as an assembly of constellations present during the Nile’s restorative yearly floods. The old man is usually seen as allegorical of the Nile, while sometimes being interpreted as Osiris, despite the cornucopia not being a traditional attribute. The claim has notional appeal when the central woman is interpreted as Isis, Osiris’ partner, of whom women of the dynasty often claimed to be incarnations. The reading of the central group as a family is made more tempting as the young man, behind and gazing the same direction as the other two figures, is often interpreted as Horus, associated with Triptolomus, the Greek bringers of grain and agriculture. The pairing of Isis and Osiris may also be read from the piece using the sphynx. The sphynx was associated with the Dionysian mystery cult, and Dionysius, who also died and came back to life, was associated with Osiris. An association with the Dionysus cult is possible as the cult was introduced to Egypt by the Ptolemies themselves in the 3rd century BC. The cult lasted
there at least until the Arabs came in the 7th century, attesting to its popularity and the use that the cult was put to in linking rulers with ruled through ritual. The two figures in the sky are interpreted as those winds that blow when the Nile floods. The two women along the side may be two of the branches of the Nile, the Nymphs that were believed to control its flooding, or the seasons. These figures appear Hellenistic rather than traditionally Egyptian. Hellenistic and Egyptian influences are synthesized here to associate the sources of prosperity, the Nile’s natural floods, the gods of the royal household, and the arts they patronized in all their quality and expense, linking the Ptolemies, Egypt, and its wealth and culture.59

Cameos were an element of Roman visual culture from absorption on, creating cameo glass (Fig. 27), an artform in imitation of the adopted aesthetic of cameos and hardstone vessels. Decorated and undecorated hardstone vessels (Fig. 28) were made in Alexandria for the Ptolemies. One the Cup of the Ptolemies (Figs. 29, 30), features imagery associated with the court-favored Dionysus cult. On one side, an anclabris (sacrifice table) covered in vessels is surrounded by six masks hanging from trees. Above the table a cloth is suspended from the trees, and below the table is supported by sphynxes, a cult symbol. A small Hermes, pipes, a basket with snakes, and a goat are also present, all cult-appropriate motifs. On the other side, Pan’s mask hangs from another tree; two other masks above. A second table with vessels, another goat (this one eating grapes), and a young woman with a torch, probably a participant in the festivities or an associated goddess, are present.60 Like the Tazza Farnese, some revisionists claim this

60 Frédéric De Clarac, Musée De Sculpture Antique Et Moderne (Paris, France: Imprimerie Royale Et Impériale, 1841) 418-421.
piece has a Julio-Claudian origin, but this claim is unsubstantiated and the iconography seems more appropriate for the Dionysian, Greco-Egyptian, incarnation-of-the-gods Ptolemies than the Eleusinian, Roman state religion, divinized-family-cult-oriented Julio-Claudians. While neither assertion is certain, the religious themes and longer period in which carved stone vessels could have been produced in Egypt based on length of rule, favor a Ptolemaic origin.

To take over as the premier patrons of the medium would require the Julio-Claudian’s artisans to match the level of opulence expected of the Alexandrian court. Julio-Claudian cameo portraits were similar to Ptolemaic counterparts (Figs. 31, 32, 26), but the Gemma Augustea and the Grand Cameo have significant compositional elements alien to Egyptian sardonyxes. The Tazza Farnese features a group scene, but if there are “tiers” to be identified, they are created by differences in size and the diagonal gap between the flying figures and their neighbors. The Roman gems are organized into frieze-like tiers, two on the Gemma Augustea and three on the Grand Cameo. Quality of carving was roughly matched during Augustus’ reign, as can be seen by comparing the Gemma Augustea to the Gonzaga cameo. Both gems feature the same glossy texture, naturalism, and presence of miniscule details without detraction from the fluidity or clarity of line, and both modulate the thickness of the white layer for contrast and effect.

It would appear that Augustus’ successors, by the time of the Grand Cameo, were still concerned with the grandeur of their cameos’ impression, as evidenced by the size of the stone, produced by a new generation of artisans. Juxtaposing the details of the Gemma Augustea with those of the Grand Cameo, qualitative differences in the approach to faces, clothing and gesture are apparent. The Grand Cameo’s figures are more overtly
and stiffly separated from their background, not employing the technique of thinning the white layer for effect like in clothing and skin textures on the Gemma Augustea. The impression of the Grand Cameo is less clean and orderly than its predecessor, largely because of the shallowness of the incisions into the white layer, which allows for little change in translucence and little shadow play on the surface, limiting the effect of the low relief. An additional brown top layer of the stone, sometimes used to offset clothing from flesh, as well as one of a Pegasus’ legs and wings is employed inconsistently, with somewhat smudgy transitions necessitated by the layer’s undulations. The stone also features more figures with less rhythmic distribution. The overall less cleanly impression in comparison with the work of Augustus’ gem carver belies the fact that integrating a third band into a cameo composition, blind as to the contours of the layers beforehand, is far more difficult than using two, and the inclusion of so many figures naturally creates a crowded composition. As memories of the Ptolemies faded, striking impression and continued production was more important than competing with dead, conquered foreigners. The Gemma Augustea had to usurp a tradition, while the Grand Cameo had to keep possession of it, paralleling the change in the emperors’ relationships to their principate between Augustus and his heirs.61

Much of the Ptolemies’ wealth was taken to Rome to be dedicated to the Gods. The triumph after the conquest of Egypt took three days to march around the city depositing wealth. Many of these treasures were taken to the temple of Concord, where Pliny attests that the Romans displayed gemstones they had captured. Would the Gemma Augustea or the Grand Cameo have been displayed in such a setting, or entered one of

these state treasuries? Possibly, as both gems appear to have left the imperial treasury for the west following the Fourth Crusade, when western Christians conquered and plundered the Roman capital, Constantinople. Most of the wealth of Rome, and the treasuries of the palace were shipped back west as spoils and gifts for churches and friends by the traitors. Shortly thereafter the stone first appears in France.62

The stone may have been a commission by an emperor, in which case it is likely to have had either a processional or ceremonial role, was meant as an extravagant decoration, or was meant to be shown to and admired by guests. Many Roman histories place wealthy, powerful citizens at each other’s houses for dinner commenting on the quality or expense of various possessions.63  It may have been a gift of a courtier or visitor. It has been suggested that the Grand Cameo was made to commemorate a victory, or because its imagery was associated with the divinization of the family, that it may have been a gift from one family member to another, or an announcement of dynastic intentions, as was suggested of the Gemma Augustea. It may have been for a particular event, or to be shown at private functions, as much of the movable wealth of the Ptolemies was. The Grand Cameo was part of a long Roman tradition of absorbing and appropriating what they felt was best from their conquered territories for their own purposes. Whether for private eyes or public, it stayed in the possession of the Emperors for over 1100 years. The object was still serving to glorify those possessing it after the names of the figures were stripped away and given Christian labels. Owning it was a

display of conspicuous wealth as much as its commission had been a demonstration of power and possession.
Chapter III – Hellenistic Absorption

Captured technology and captured knowledgeable people contributed to Rome’s advance alongside more conspicuously absorbed elements mentioned prior. Rome borrowed aspects of its zeitgeist and visual culture from other Mediterranean powers as it absorbed their lands and peoples. These less conspicuous forms of borrowing helped make the Grand Cameo possible and their examination can shed light on the piece’s less declarative messages.

Rome’s widespread adoption of carved gems began after the conquest of Pontus, and they adopted cameos and sardonyx more widely than ever after the conquest of Egypt. As the popularity of material trends are related to Rome’s coming into possession of new territories and peoples, then other aspects that went into the creation of the gem entered Rome under similar circumstances. The uses, technology, techniques, and personnel to create cameos were imported, not invented. Popular uses of the stones, as amulets, signets for correspondence, seal stones, and adornments for shoes, clothes, armor, furniture, walls and goblets were imported from the east according to Richter.64 Subject matters and compositions were often lifted from Hellenistic representations, like enthroned Zeus (Fig. 33), similar to the seated emperors on the Gemma Augustea and the Grand Cameo. Compositions were often recycled by multiple carvers (Figs. 34, 35), and what Hellenistic traditions brought to Rome influenced their output. Romans appreciated Greek art and culture, and how its possession elevated Roman culture, despite the tendency at the time to copy without much regard for giving credit.65

65 Ibid
The techniques for hardstone carving were non-native. The Myceneans are presumed to have learned them from western Asia. A bow or wheel would have been used to turn an iron drill. A Gem cutter’s gravestone features what appears to be such a bow (Fig. 36). Nowadays, a combination of diamond dust and oil are placed between drill and stone to create friction as it rotated. Emery is the most likely abrasive to be used for lapidary work in the Mediterranean at the time, as it had been used widely in the region since the early 2nd millennium BC, only replaced with diamond centuries later. Theophrastus discusses different tools being necessary for stones of different hardness, mentioning drills, saws, gravures, and iron tools, and mentioning that some stones required other stones to engrave them.66 Pliny reports that some stones cannot be carved by iron alone, but that fragments of diamond can cut any other stone, and that the heat from friction makes the task easier. He mentions carvers taking miniscule fragments of shattered diamond and setting them in iron bits to make drills.67 Whether the stone was rotated around the drill or vis versa is unsettled, as is possibility of carvers using magnification to check their work. Preliminary outlines were probably scratched onto the surface before rounded chunks of stone were drilled out to make the intaglio or cameo. Finally, Naxian stone was used for cleaning and polishing, likely in powder form. Cheaper glass gems were often made in imitation of better materials for fashionable Romans. Augustus’ court carver, Dioskourides, has a Hellenic name, and so probably moved there from the conquered eastern territories to serve his new patron, underscoring the imported nature of the artform.

66 Theophrastus, John F. Richards, and Earle Radcliffe Caley, Theophrastus on Stones: Introduction, Greek Text, English Translation, and Commentary (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1956), I.5, VII.41
Augustus and his descendants also borrowed and adjusted the iconography of prestige and rule from the post-Alexander east. Augustus tried through his imagery to associate himself with the deified Alexander, as well as Apollo and Jupiter and his adoptive father’s legendary descent from Venus. This ruler-god association was common in the east, as was seen with the Ptolemies’ associations, with Alexander/Zeus-Amun and later, Osiris and Isis. Augustus patronized works like the Aeneid, a legendary history which sets up his “future” reign as predicted and favored by the gods, and included “family members” Cupids and Venus, in various media including statuary and coins (Figs. 37, 38). He cultivated an image of himself as Apollo in opposition to his rival Antony’s Dionysus, appearing for at least one private party as Apollo and impressing people with his calm, centered demeanor, described in his time as Apollonian. His baring gave rise to accounts where a barbarian is supposed to have said that this god-like demeanor is what stopped him from following through with an intended assassination attempt on the emperor.70 Near his victory at Actium, Octavian minted coins with Neptune with a foot on a globe (Fig. 39). Since Alexander, rulers had associated themselves with Jupiter in their imagery, as did Augustus in many images that would have been seen in the east, such as coins (Fig. 40) or statues in which he adopts a seated Jupiter/Zeus-like pose (Fig. 41). We see this pose in the figures of the emperors on the Gemma Augustea and the Grand Cameo. Their heads are level with the figures standing

around them, but they are seated, and thus tallest overall, establishing hierarchy of scale for these emperors who were, at least at first, envisioned as *Primus inter Pares*. An element of Alexander imitation that the makers of the Grand Cameo discarded from the earlier cameo is the “star” and Capricorn medallion (Fig. 42). On the Gemma Augustea, there is a disk floating above the scene featuring Augustus’ astrological sign, reminding viewers of then-common beliefs, like the timing of one’s birth being linked to the course their life would take, and the common belief in predestination more generally. The “star” is another Alexander related symbol, a Macedonian Sun. This sun was the sign of Alexander and his dynasty, featured on their coins (Fig. 43) and in their tombs (Fig. 44). By combining the symbols, Augustus is having the sun of Alexander, his exemplar, and his own personal sun sign shining down from heaven together, blessing and watching over him and his fate. In the heavenly tier of the Grand Cameo, the scene is supervised by a crowned and hooded Augustus, by then deified, in the company of a Cupid, a shield bearer, an orb bearer, and a Pegasus with a rider who may be another deified family member. It is not the stars or the old exemplars who watch over and sanction the future and deeds of the Grand Cameo’s emperor, but his own ancestor, now a god, whose titles, inheritance and roles had been passed down, including eventual deification to be anticipated.

Augustus presented his legacy as greater than that of Alexander. He conquered about as much by a younger age. His moral restraints, many of which he codified into law, were seen as higher than those of Alexander. There was a notion of the “Good Alexander” and the “Bad Alexander,” the negative version being the man of lusts, vices, and appetites that caused his own death and led to his failure to administer his empire and
designate a successor, damning the region to years of chaos. Therefore, Augustus, on his *Res Gestae*, listed deeds Alexander had not done as some of his greatest accomplishments, namely bringing peace, plenty, and continuity that would last into the next generations. Suetonius gives us an account of Augustus’ visit to Alexander’s tomb that illustrates his relationships with and feelings towards the man he had surpassed as well as the Ptolemies he conquered:

> “At this time he had a desire to see the sarcophagus and body of Alexander the Great, which, for that purpose, were taken out of the cell in which they rested; and after viewing them for some time, he paid honors to the memory of that prince, by offering a golden crown, and scattering flowers upon the body. Being asked if he wished to see the tombs of the Ptolemies also; he replied, "I wish to see a king, not dead men."”

Augustus showed reverence for Alexander with the prayers, flowers, and crown, although the crown may have been a double-edged gesture showing Augustus in the patron, dispenser-of-wealth-and-honors position, making it into a dual gesture of power and reverence. The Ptolemies, to him, were simply dead, his defeated enemies whose possessions he was already making improvements to and integrating into the imperium. Shortly after this encounter he began using an image of Alexander as his personal seal, a bold statement as seals were literal personal symbols, and to take a king’s image as a symbol of oneself an act of association and dominance, and begging the comparison. The now dead Ptolemies no longer deserved the association or comparison with great kings like Alexander in Augustus’ eyes. Whatever cultural fragments Romans thought that

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they, as a great and glorious nation, deserved, they took and adapted for themselves.

Ruler imagery was passed down, and Augustus’ descendants depicted themselves in the roles their ancestor had collected and handed to them. His descendants later played at being like Augustus, reinforcing their rule via imitation of Rome’s own greatest-ruler-ever and his propaganda, regardless of their practical experience in bringing about the peace, prosperity, or victory his reputation was built upon.
Chapter IV – Roles and the Grand Cameo

Explanations of the republican government of Rome are plentiful. Men from respected families tiered up to higher levels of authority, rising toward the top job as one of the two consuls for a year, who had *imperium*, or the authority to make decisions that carried the weight of the state and to defend the realm militarily. There was the Senate, with authority to make its will known, and assemblies for the passage of laws. There were several important priesthoods with various ceremonial powers. Citizens were divided into tribes as voting blocks, with those with more property given more power because of being the most invested, the highest ranking, and the most possessed of the time and resources to pursue power with. Once Romans were unlikely to accept kings, having expelled them, but by Augustus’ time, several generations of civil wars and purges had made many Romans ready for order (and many nobles open to persuasion). They invested Octavian/Augustus with more powers and positions of authority as his reign continued, which he shared in his lifetime with his heir Tiberius, and the role became evermore permanent. Over the course of Augustus’ 44-year reign Rome gained a monarch by the fusing together important roles and powers into a package to be wielded by an individual. The Grand Cameo shows Julio-Claudians preforming several of these roles.

On the *Res Gestae*, Augustus says of his authority, once it reached a form acceptable to him, “After this time I surpassed everyone in *auctoritas* (soft, unofficial power, a type of tacit authority), but I possessed no more *potestas* (official powers specific to specific positions) than the others who were my colleagues in each

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magistracy.” While he implies that he was the equal of others, in a technical sense, this wording belies the fact that while another man may have simultaneously held the same powers in the same role, his auctoritas partially stemmed from no one else holding as many roles at once. Augustus was the wealthiest man Rome had ever seen, had an incredible amount of influence over those in his patron-client network, and held many forms of authority, hard and soft. Gregory Rowe points out that his epitaph is worded to spin this in the favorable light of power sharing, while conveniently leaving out how many times these “equal” colleagues were under his influence, and making what may have been acceptance of de facto circumstances seem in retrospect like a respectful embracing of his necessity and power.76 After one wave of purges, many are unwilling to cross the man who just killed masses for wealth and vengeance. After several generations of purges, people adapt to the realities of surviving under powerful men.

Over the course of his reign, Augustus accepted honors and positions that reinforced his auctoritas. He was enrolled in the Senate,77 he was granted imperium, consular powers while not a consul, and the position of triumvir for ten years.78 He accepted five triumphs, two with ovations and three curule. The Senate honored him by decreeing sacrifices on 945 separate occasions for military victories, Augustus mentioning that 55 of these were “to the immortal gods”. Augustus was named imperator twenty-one times,79 consul thirteen times (although he never took the position for life),80

78 Ibid
79 Ibid, 4.
80 Ibid, 34.
was tribune for 37 years, was Primus Senatus for forty years, became Curator of the Grain Supply, much swelled by Egypt, and was offered the position of Curator of Laws and Customs thrice, but was able to do everything that position would have allowed as tribune and declined. He had family members he was grooming for leadership placed in various roles, such as consul, multiple times, continuously increasing his authority.81

He became “high priest (Pontifex Maximus), augur, one of the Fifteen for the performance of rites, one of the Seven of the sacred feasts brother of Arvis, fellows of Titus, and Fetial,”82 meaning he was either head or member of the four major religious colleges, as well as three of the six most prestigious religious fraternities, taking authority over the top two tiers of the state religion, at a time when religion and state were not separate and touched on almost all aspects of life. Every five years the consuls and priests had to vow to his health, often organizing accompanying games. One of the priesthoods he was not a part of was ordered by law to include his names in the lyrics of their hymns, and he was declared sacrosanct.83 A holiday was named for him, alters were built to honor the peace he brought, and the doors of the temple of Janus were often closed. He filled the treasury himself multiple times, and retired soldiers with land and satisfaction, increasing his influence and prestige. All the while he funded the rebuilding of the city and temples and the expansion of its infrastructure, as well as completing projects, building new temples, and funding games. Finally, he lists being named Augustus, or venerable one, and Father of the Country. All of those titles and honors that could be transferred to his heir Tiberius before his death were. Shortly after Tiberius’ ascension,

81 Ibid, 6, 8.
82 Ibid, 7.
83 Ibid, 9.
the titles he could only receive after his predecessor’s death were his as well, and
Tiberius initiated the tradition of divinizing the previous emperor, making Augustus a
god, like Julius Caesar. The remainder of his dynasty would carry on his various civic
duties, titles, and munera as their birthright, confirmed in all by the Senate each time,
sans the title of Father of the Country, which Tiberius had refused.

The iconography of the Grand Cameo indicates some of these roles. Like its
predecessor, the central figure is seated in the pose of enthroned Jupiter, complete with
exposed torso, aegis on lap, and a staff connected to the heavenly sphere, physically
touching Cupid a direct nod to the family’s descent from Venus. In his right hand is a
lituus (Fig. 45), a curved staff that symbolized membership in the College of Augurs, one
of the four major priestly colleges of which the emperors made themselves part. Augurs
were in charge of determining the will of the gods, generally through signs related to
birds (the name probably relates to Aug- indicating increase or prosperity, but a popular
folk etymology was Avis Gero, or “bird directing,”).\textsuperscript{84} Litui would be used to mark out
the bounds in the air of an open-air sacrosanct zone, called a templum. If birds flew
through, they would interpret this as a good or bad sign. Lituus is a Latinized word for an
Etruscan soothsaying instrument related to sacrifices and omen-gathering based in form
on a shepherd’s cane. A type of crooked flute (Fig. 46) of the same name was used in
processions and funerals in Etrusco-Roman times. The presence of the lituus reinforces
this emperor’s connection to the gods, especially his ancestral ones. It highlights his
multiplicity of offices and roles as a religious and temporal figure, and seems, from the
way it is being pressed to this standing armored man’s shield, to be indicating that he, and

\textsuperscript{84} Karl Galinsky. \textit{Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction}. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University
the gods whose will he reads, are blessing the younger man’s activity, whether returning from war, receiving honors, or being blessed before departure.

The emperor’s wreath is a Corona Triumphalis, indicating he was awarded a triumph, stressing his status as a military commander, likely speaking to a subordinate. The role of bringers of peace through victory was a constant refrain for Roman emperors, especially during the Pax Romana. The use of laurel wreaths to mark victory was borrowed by Rome from Greek or Etruscan neighbors. Seated next to him on his double chair is a woman, most likely Livia, the first matron of the family to be named Augusta, or a later emperor’s wife. She holds an ear of corn and a poppy bulb, attributes of Ceres, goddess of agriculture, crops, fertility and motherhood, as the Augusta was mother to emperors and symbolic mother to the Roman state. The identity of the younger wreathed woman next to the throne is debatable, although it is possible that she has a filial relationship with the two aforementioned figures, as the group of three all have wreaths, face the same way, and their connection to the divine and the throne are stressed. It would make sense if this grouping related to one of the triads in which Roman Gods were often worshipped. Two groupings come to mind, the Aventine Triad, usually identified with the plebeians, containing Ceres (identified with Demeter), Liber (the free father, married to Libera) and Libera (identified with Proserpina/Persephone, Demeter’s daughter), and the Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. Both triads contain a father god, a mother god, and a daughter god.\(^85\) The Ptolemies emulated popular pairs of gods in their imagery for the sake of association, and it appears that the Julio-Claudians were adopting this Hellenistic ruler-god group identification propaganda.

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Flying through the heavens, watching his descendants is probably Divus Augustus, or possibly Divus Julius, the first two family members deified, complete with the Radiant Crown (Fig. 47) reserved for the divine and a scepter showing authority. The divinized man is hooded as Pontifex Maximus, a role held by the emperors, and an appropriately pious demonstration of the family’s roles connecting them to the gods they joined. The attributes of other figures will be useful later in identifying the scene’s figures, but these attributes of four of the most central figures demonstrate the offices, powers and roles this family held and embodied. The fact that Augustus was in the same role on the Gemma Augustea as his enthroned descendant on the Grand Cameo, and watches over his heirs on the later gem, shows continuity of rule, stressing the Augustan nature and role of the descendant, on a piece based on one of his pieces, shows that this association was a basis for legitimacy. They each tried to be “the August one” in turn, caring less about continuity with Alexander than with their own ancestor, who had done a better job preparing his realm for the future by providing a successor. Better aligned with their family and people’s own bringer of peace and prosperity than a foreign king full of personal flaws who left his kingdom unprepared for his loss with no clear heir, however widely admired and imitated.
Chapter V – Who?

Many identities have been suggested for the figures on the Grand Cameo. It is the great flytrap of the subject, debates swallowing space and preventing writers the latitude to discuss the wider world through the object. Yet the subject does allow for discussion of relationships within the Julio-Claudian family and relates to the core topic of this paper: why this stone was made. Final Cause has been explored from the angle of why anyone in the family would have found a piece like this a desirable thing to create generally. Yet the cameo shows a specific scene with specific living and dead members of the family, and thus did originally have a specific message which has been lost to time. Identifications must be made to reconstruct Final Cause possibilities.

Theories abound about who these figures are. At least 30 were published in the 90 years from 1886-1976, with 230 years prior where it was identified as Roman, and the c. 1200 beforehand when it was read as a biblical scene. In the last four decades, the lack of consensus holds. There are 13 figures to identify as well as a Cupid and a lower tier of captives of debatable origin. To survey each author’s theories would take too many words. It will thus be useful to pare down the possibilities before attempting identifications according to when the correct number of Julio-Claudians of matching genders were living. Then their relationships can be examined, which will further narrow the possibilities for figure-by-figure identifications. At that point, a reading can be proposed and all four Whys will have complete answers.

This process of identification will use a graphic frequently used in texts on the subject for reference which numbers the identifiable figures 1-14 (Fig. 48). Using an

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animated Julio-Claudian family tree, it is possible to find moments after Augustus’ death when there were at least four adult females, three adult males, and one male child simultaneously. The years where such an arrangement is possible are 14-19 AD (Fig. 49), and 20-23 AD (Fig. 50), The first window is between the deaths of Augustus and Germanicus, who Augustus forced his successor Tiberius to adopt as his heir, and with whom Tiberius had a later falling out, leading to suspicions he had his heir poisoned. The second window is between the deaths of Germanicus and Drusus. Within Window 1, figure (9), the captive, may relate to Germanicus being sent to take command in Germania in 14 AD, Drusus being sent to take over in Pannonia that same year (although the lack of a son until 19 AD would have made the presence of people 7 and 8 impossible to reconcile), Germanicus’ victorious return after the battle of the Weser River in 16 AD, or Germanicus gaining imperium in the east in 18 AD, possibly symbolized by the eagle on figure (3)’s helmet, in which case the captive’s presence could be related to how he gained imperium. In Window 2, the most likely moment for this scene to be set is when Drusus was given tribunitian power, although the military garb would make little sense if this is the case, as he was receiving civilian office. In any of these cases, having the stone made in celebration at that moment leaves many figures difficult to explain, such as the man flying the orb of the world across the sky from one figure group to another.

There are no moments beyond 23 AD when this arrangement of sexes and ages fits the family tree. But what if the scene was set in an earlier period than it was carved, by someone who wanted to use a similar form to the Gemma Augustea, a stone likely
created as a statement of succession intention\textsuperscript{87} to plant the seeds of his reign deeper in the remembered past? Claudius was considered an unlikely imperial candidate, mistreated, excluded and ignored by his family, and handed power by the assassins of his young predecessor. In an unforeseen turn, fate or the ancestors or some force had handed him the world. Roman minds conceptualized time in relation to physical space differently than modern minds. To the Roman, the future was thought of as behind a person or object, in the part of their view they could not see, in the part of the procession of all life that would follow eventually without their necessarily sensing its approach.\textsuperscript{88} Now, the “road ahead” is conceived of as one’s future which they move towards, while whatever is behind one is in one’s past, which they move away from, but in a parade, each participant passes through the same area in sequence, each replaced by some future marcher in turn, each position filled by another. The scene, interpreted with a Claudian lens, reads thus: heaven looks behind the throne to its future occupants. Augustus (10) watches Claudius (5), standing next to his seated (enthroned?) future wife (who would have been a child at the time the scene is set) Agrippina Minor, mother of Claudius’ adopted son, Nero, who she wanted to set up for the succession by marrying her uncle, Emperor Claudius, after his previous wife betrayed him. These two are the only ones to look towards the divines above, Claudius with his arm outstretched and Agrippina Minor stroking her chin, her hand resting on a possible throne. Towards them turns Augustus and the symbol of their ancestry by Venus, Cupid. The orb-carrier, who some read as


\textsuperscript{88} Dr. Rhiannon Evans and Matt Smith. “Ara Pacis” \textit{When in Rome: A Podcast about Place and Space in the Roman Empire}. La Trobe University, Australia, 2017.
Aeneas, floats over Germanicus (3), holds the orb, symbolic of temporal power, over Tiberius (1), and moves it towards Claudius, who is either opening his arms to receive it, the motion interrupted by the scepter of Tiberius, or is receiving the armor attached to the Pegasus above, possibly connected, like his to the military career he gained through his ascendancy. This Pegasus has a Julio-Claudian with a Laurel wreath on his head sitting on him (11), and seems to be taking his place amongst the deified. It is unclear whether the armor below him is going down to Claudius, or is a trophy that the ancestor is ascending with. His identity is difficult to establish and only relevant to the interpretation if he happens to be Julius Caesar, another adoptive ancestor, the trophy-armor possibly connecting to he and Claudius both having attacked Britain. The fact that the captive (9) is more in Claudius and Agrippina Minor’s space, rather than the scene to the left that seems the initial focus, could reference his role as captive taker in Britain, or may be germane to the discussion between the throne and Germanicus, the actions of Claudius prefigured in those of his predecessors.

In the space occupying the left two thirds of the middle register, the figures seem oblivious to the divines showing favor towards their ignored relative. Tiberius (1) most likely sits next to his mother, Livia (2), the Augusta and one of his closest advisors. Claudius and Germanicus’ mother, Antonia, a Tiberius loyalist despite his possible involvement in her favorite son’s death, who would be proclaimed Augusta by her younger son, posthumously earning the wreath she wears, appears to be figure (4), staring into her son Germanicus’ (3) eyes from just over his shield. She is also the daughter in law of Livia, fulfilling the “daughter” role in a symbolic divine triad. The final figures are likely Caligula (7), whose nickname meant “little boots,” a reference to the miniature
uniform that he wore on the campaigns he accompanied his father on as a child, and Agrippina Major (8), wife of Germanicus and mother of Caligula, who protected her child after his father’s death and had a hand in bringing him to the throne prior to Claudius. Caligula imitates his father in pose as well as dress, foreshadowing how he would replace his father in the line of succession, and through leaning left, possibly alluded to his “future” reputation as an immoral man. This scene of divine favor and redirection of the succession is riddled with hints of what would come true by Claudius’ reign. While it would be incredible if the Grand Cameo contained genuine foreshadowing of events and political moves that took place in the 20-year gap between Germanicus’ life and Claudius’ ascent, this is exceedingly unlikely. By narrowing the timeframe of the year the scene was set, the possibility opens that this “prophetic” gem is retconning the succession narrative to claim that Claudius was meant to be emperor based on the will of heaven, while Claudius’ predecessors made their own choices, ignoring him. Although the possibility that another member of the court had the piece commissioned as a gift can never fully be discounted, the Grand Cameo was probably of Claudian origin in terms of timing if not in terms of commission, likely after his marriage to Agrippina Minor. Thus the Final Cause of the stone was to place Claudius, symbolically and rhetorically, as the true heir to the roles, possessions, and throne of the family, whatever his relatives intended while he was kept away from politics.
Conclusion – Why?

Why would Claudius, the family member deliberately excluded from power and thought incapable by his relatives who became emperor nonetheless, have had this piece made? The Material Cause, how the development of the object resulted from its material, is that this gigantic ancient sardonyx cameo exists in large part because of being a gigantic piece of sardonyx that some viewer thought might make an emperor-worthy piece. The material was likely located in India and came to the west, where it had meaning and prestige as an exotic material associated with the wealth, power, and reach of the Ptolemies and Julio-Claudians. For its Formal Cause, it exists because of artistic precedents, such as coins, friezes and ruler portraits inherited from Hellenistic times, and because of the carvers and carving processes in use at the time, taken by Rome from the Hellenistic kingdoms. Efficient Causes are many. Someone had to gather the stone, which was moved across the Indian Ocean to port cities on the Red Sea repurposed for trade, via routes rerouted violently by the Romans, who streamlined trade and lowered tariffs, encouraging its growth. It came, either as a gift or through trade, from Egypt to the Roman court, where artisans leaned on those skillsets absorbed by Rome through conquest, likely from Alexandria. Claudius’ Final Cause had to be reconstructed as his exact intent is lost. The scene seems to show divine favor and power moving from Claudius’ relatives to Claudius, ignored by the living but not the gods and ancestors. He was operating in an overtly Augustan idiom, basing his piece on one commissioned by Augustus, and associated with both the conquest of Egypt and the possession of power, creating a useful conversation piece to help the emperor encourage a certain narrative of his rise. Identifications are secondary to the causes of their existence.
“In the case of men, it is an individual's caprice that sets a value upon an individual stone, and, above all, the rivalry that ensues. A case in point is that of the Emperor Claudius, when he took to wearing a 'smaragdus' or a sardonyx.”

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Fig. 1: Unknown Gem Carver, *The Grand Cameo of France*. c. 49-54 A.D., Sardonyx, 11.8 x 10.4 in. 31 x 26.5 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Fig. 2: Possibly Dioskorides, *The Gemma Augustea*. c. 12-14 A.D., Sardonyx, 7.4 x 9.1 in. 19 x 23 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
Fig. 3: Bowl of Tumbled Carnelian; Courtesy of Fall Hill Bead and Gem
Fig. 4: Martin Gizl, *Ewer and Stand (Présentoir)*, 1758, Alpine Ibex Horn, Gold and Gilded Copper, 12.8 x 17.3 x 14.94 in. 32.5 x 44 x 38 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Fig. 5: Unknown Chinese Artist, *Cup Depicting Three Laughers of Tiger Ravine*, 18th Century, Rhinoceros Horn, 4 x 7.3 in. 10.2 x 18.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Fig. 6: Unknown Jewish Artist, *Shofar*, 18th Century, Ram’s Horn, Height and Diameter 22.94 x 2.3 in. 58.2 x 6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Fig. 7: Unknown Gem Carver, *Detail of The Grand Cameo of France*. c. 49-54 A.D., Sardonyx, 11.8 x 10.4 in. 31 x 26.5 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Fig. 8: Unknown Gem Carver, *Detail of The Grand Cameo of France*. c. 49-54 A.D., Sardonyx, 11.8 x 10.4 in. 31 x 26.5 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Fig. 9: Spiny Lobster/ Crawfish (Palinurus elephas); Musée Océanographique de Monaco
Fig. 10: Spiny Lobster/Crawfish (Palinurus elephas); Courtesy of John Sullivan
Fig. 11: Banded “Scotch pebbles” Agate; Courtesy of www.gemstonebuzz.com
Fig. 12: Eye Agate from the American River, Near Sacramento; Courtesy of /u/Spaw_Three_Bears via www.reddit.com/r/rockhounds
Fig. 13: Sard; Courtesy of Irene Design
Fig. 14: Slab of White Onyx; Courtesy of European Granite and Marble Group
Fig. 15: Slab of Black Onyx; Courtesy of www.onyx.com
Fig. 16: Unknown Indian Artisan, *Pierced Imitation Tiberius Denarius from Stratified Layers*, Diameter .7 in. 1.8 cm. Peddabankur, Andhra, India
Fig. 17: Unknown Jeweler/Goldsmith, *Collar with Medallions Containing Coins of Emperors*, c. 225 A.D., Gold, Length 35.8 in. 91 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Fig. 18: Unknown Alexandrian Workshop, *Tazza Farnese*, 2nd Century B.C., Sardonyx, Diameter 7.8 in. 20 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples, Italy
Fig. 19: Unknown Alexandrian Workshop, *Tazza Farnese (Reverse)*, 2nd Century B.C., Sardonyx, Diameter 7.8 in. 20 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples, Italy
Fig. 20: Unknown Hellenistic Workshop, *Sardonyx Ewer*, 323-321 B.C., Sardonyx, 6.9 x 3.9 x 3.7 in. 17.5 x 10 x 9.5 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain
Fig. 21: Leinhart Holle, Lord Nicolas the German, *World Map (2nd Projection)*, *Ptolemy’s Geography*, 2nd Century A.D., 1482 A.D., Baden-Württemberg, Germany
Fig. 22: Konrad Miller, *Tabula Peutingeriana* 1-4th century A.D., Facsimile edition 1887/8 A.D., 268 x 13.3 in. 682 x 34 cm., Austrian National Library, Vienna, Austria
Fig. 23: Andrei Nacu, *Imperial and Senatorial Provinces*, 2007, Public Domain
Fig. 24: Unknown Gem Carver, *Profile Head of Alexander the Great Intaglio Ring Stone with Taenia and Horns of Ammon*, late 4th Century B.C., Tourmaline, .9 x .9 in. 2.4 x 2.4 cm., Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK
Fig. 25: Unknown Gem Carver, *Profile Head of Alexander the Great as Herakles Intaglio Ring Stone*, late 4th/Early 3rd Century B.C., Carnelian, .6 x .8 in. 1.5 x 2.1 cm., Museo Archeologico, Florence, Italy
Fig. 26: Unknown Gem Carver, *The Gonzaga Cameo*, 3rd Century B.C., 6.2 x 4.6 in. 15.7 x 11.8 cm., Sardonyx (Silver and Copper Mount of Later Date), The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia
Fig. 27: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *The Portland Vase*, 1-25 A.D., Glass, Height and Diameter 9.6 x 7 in. 24.5 x 17.7 cm., The British Museum, London, UK
Fig. 28: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *Ptolemaic Lidded Vessel*, 332-30 B.C., Calcite Alabaster, Height 4 in. 10 cm., Private Collection
Fig. 29: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *The Cup of the Ptolemies*, 4th Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D., Sardonyx, 3.3 x 4.9 in. 8.4 x 12.5 cm., Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Fig. 30: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *The Cup of the Ptolemies (Reverse)*, 4th Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D., Sardonyx, 3.3 x 4.9 in. 8.4 x 12.5 cm., Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Fig. 31: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *Julio-Claudian Cameo (Possibly Minerva)*, 1st Century A.D., Sardonyx, Length 1.8 in. 4.6 cm. Private Collection, US
Fig. 32: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *Ptolemaic Cameo*, 278-269 B.C., Sardonyx, 4.4 x 4.5 in. 11.3 x 11.5 cm., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Germany
Fig. 33: Unknown Artisan, Silver Tetradrachm, Obverse: Head of Antiochus IV, Reverse: Zeus Enthroned, 175-164 B.C., Silver, 1.2 in. 3 x 3 cm., Seleucid Empire
Fig. 34: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *Oval Gem with Kassandra Kneeling at the Palladion*, late 1st Century B.C., Aquamarine, Length .9 in. 2.3 cm., Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA
Fig. 35: Unknown Artisan/Workshop, *Oval Gem with Kassandra Kneeling at the Palladion*, Late First Century B.C., Sard, Length .8 in. 2.1 cm., Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA
Fig. 36: G.M. Richter, Drawing of a Fragment of the Gravestone of Doros, 18-Year-Old Engraver of Ring-Gems (Daktyloukoiologlyphos) of Asia Minor, Featuring a Probable Bow-Powered Lathe/Drill, Second Century A.D., Stone, Turkey
Fig. 37: Unknown Artist/Workshop, *Detail: Augustus of Prima Porta*, Early First Century A.D., Marble, 80 in. 203 cm., Vatican Museums, Vatican City
Fig. 38: Unknown Artisan/Mint, Denarius, Obverse: Profile Head of Octavian, Reverse: Standing Venus, Late First Century B.C., Early First Century A.D., Silver, Rome
Fig. 39: Unknown Artisan/Mint, *Denarius*, Obverse: Profile Head of Victoria, Reverse: *Augustus as Neptune*, Late First Century B.C., Early First Century A.D., Silver
Fig. 40: Colonia Patricia Mint (Cordoba, Spain), *Aureus*, Obverse: Profile Head of Caesar Augustus, Reverse: Jupiter Tonans, 19 B.C., Gold, The British Museum, London, UK
Fig. 41: Unknown Artist/Workshop, *Statue of the Emperor Augustus as Jupiter*, Early First Century A.D., Marble, 73.6 in. 187 cm., The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia
Fig. 42: Possibly Dioskorides, Detail: “Star” from The Gemma Augustea. C. 12-14 A.D., Sardonyx, 7.4 x 9.1 in. 19 x 23 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
Fig. 43: Abydos Mint, Drachma, Obverse: Profile Head of Phillip III Arrhidaeus (Alexander’s Half-Brother) as Herakles, Reverse: Philip’s Name, Zeus Seated with Staff and Eagle, Vergina (Macedonian) Sun and MO Monogram Below, Horse’s Leg Nearby. C. 323-317 B.C., Silver, Abydos, Egypt
Fig. 44: Unknown Artisan/Workshop *Laranx (Ash Coffin) of Philip II*, Mid Fourth Century B.C., Gold, Vergina Museum, Vergina, Macedonia
Fig. 45: Unknown Artisan/Workshop *Roman Lituus*, Late First Century B.C., Early First Century A.D, Metal, Museum und Park Kalkriese, Kalkriese, Germany
Fig. 46: Probably Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Lituus (After Ancient Roman Type)*, Late Nineteenth Century, Copper, Length 64.2 in. 163 cm., Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA
Fig. 47: William Smith, *Crowns from A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities by John Murray*, Original 1875, Contemporary Digital Version August 2017, Digital, University of Chicago Website
Fig. 48: Hans Jucker, *Chart of Grand Cameo Figures from Article Der Grosse Pariser Kameo*, 1976, Ink and Paper, 3.7 x 6.2 in. 9.5 x 10.8 cm., Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Berlin, Germany
Fig. 49: David Rudmin, *Julio Claudian Family Tree*, Uploaded September 12, 2016, Screenshot August 27, 2018, Digital Video, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhGcUleVwsM&frags=pl%2Cwn](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhGcUleVwsM&frags=pl%2Cwn)
Fig. 50: David Rudmin, *Julio Claudian Family Tree*, Uploaded September 12, 2016, Screenshot August 27, 2018, Digital Video, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhGcUleVwsM&frags=pl%2Cwn](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhGcUleVwsM&frags=pl%2Cwn)
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