

# Ancient Greek Engraved Gems: A New Proposal for Interpretation

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**Abstract:** Traditionally, the typology of engraved gems has been divided into two broad categories: property seals and amulets or talismans. With the idea of analyzing them in depth, it is possible to classify these two groups as seals for civil or practical use and seals for therapeutic or magical use. After carefully studying their iconography and thoroughly analyzing the Greco-Roman sources, we have divided the first type of seals, those for civil or practical use, into several subgroups: administrative and official seals, personal seals and seals for initiations. In this article, we will be talking specifically about the group of seals that we considered might have been intended for initiations, as a way of trying to give an answer to the questions that arose when we studied the iconography of this small but very interesting objects. The subjects covered by this kind of seals being are mainly hybrid beings, heroes (specifically Heracles) and the gods Hermes, Aphrodite and Eros. Even though we know the proposal is kind of daring, we think it could give a new approach to the study of seals and new ideas to bear in mind when explaining the iconography. To finish the paper, we also share some evidence to support this proposal, coming from both written sources and iconography.

**Keywords:** Seals, Initiations, Hybrid Beings, Heracles, Aphrodite, Hermes

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the typology of engraved gems has been divided into two broad categories: property seals and amulets or talismans. These two groups can be classified as seals for civil or practical use and seals for therapeutic or magical use; in both cases they are personal objects, engraved and usually set, but while in the first group they mainly involve a phenomenon of representation, in the second they have been chosen for their precise powers and in response to a specific need.

After carefully studying their iconography and thoroughly analyzing the Greco-Roman sources, it is proposed that first type of seals, those for civil or practical use, be divided into several subgroups: administrative and official seals, personal seals and seals for initiations. This third subgroup, seals for initiations, is the focus of this article.

Without entering into the motifs that are engraved on the seals<sup>1</sup>, it is important to establish that the subdivision for this

first group of seals of a practical nature is determined, above all, by the designs with which the intaglios were decorated. Based on the two most important studies of Greek seals and their evolution, the books of John Boardman and of Gisela Richter [2, 37], we can see that, surprisingly – and with some exceptions – it is not the great gods of the Olympic pantheon that are most often represented.

In Richter's book, the most represented images are Heracles (28), Nike (16), Aphrodite (14), sphinxes (13), Eros (11), satyrs + Silenus (9 + 4), centaurs (8), Apollo (7) Griffins (6), Athena (6), Hermes (5), Muses (5), Zeus (4), Sirens (4), Gorgons / Medusa (4). Later they appear to a lesser extent, with an image or two of some heroes, as well as everyday scenes of warriors, horsemen, athletes, women, and some portraits, etc. And, of course, animals (lions, herons, horses, some insects, etc.) also feature, surely as some type of heraldic

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as personal could have been related to the names or nicknames of their owners, with a philosophical or political ascription or even convey a symbol of friendship. (LAPATIN Kenneth, 2015. *Luxus. The sumptuous arts of Greece and Rome*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, p. 114).

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1 Kenneth Lapatin proposes that many of the motifs engraved on the seals defined

emblem.

In turn, in Boardman's book, the sphinxes (23), the griffins (23), the satyrs (22), Heracles (14), Gorgons / Medusa (11), centaurs (10), Eros (8), sirens (7), Athena (7), Apollo (4), Dionysus (3), Nike (3) stand out.<sup>2</sup>

It is on this information, the division that the division for Greek seals for civil or practical use into three groups is made:

a) *Administrative and official seals*: The earliest evidence of the use of seals in Greek culture is mainly associated with administration, linked to the idea of securing property. They are documented as early as the great palace civilizations of Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece.

b) *Personal seals*: In Antiquity, seals were the signature of their owner and acted as guarantors of the identity of the author of a letter or document. According to Verity Platt, "there is growing evidence of personal use of intaglios in the late archaic period, reflected in the growing popularity of scarab and scarab seals and rings with engraved settings or inserted gemstones, which could easily be worn." [31] In this section we would also include seals with sexual scenes.

c) *Seals for initiations*: Seals that people would receive or acquire after going through an initiation.

## 2. Seals for Initiations

By initiation seals, we understand a type of seal that people would receive or acquire after going through an initiation. In the same way that, today, when one performs a ritual, they receive a related symbol, it is not conceivable that the Greeks would also have had some signs to identify themselves as part of a specific group? Take, for example, contemporary Christian rituals: after baptism, a medal is usually given; at the first communion, a crucifix; rings are exchanged in marriage, etc. In secret realms, such as Freemasonry, there are also insignia to mark the different degrees of the apprentice in his evolution and when an honorary doctorate is awarded, along with a cap, gloves and a book, the doctoral student is also given a ring.

The idea is always the same: to distinguish oneself and be recognized among equals (or by members of the same group – among those who know a secret). It is not a family emblem but rather the symbol of a group, membership in which has involved a process: something that has changed in the individual in question. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet indicates, "in philosophical terms, initiation amounts to an ontological mutation of the existential regime. At the end of his experiences, the neophyte enjoys a completely different existence from the one before initiation: he has become another." [41]

Initiations are rites of passage, in which the aspirant, after performing a series of ceremonies, customs or protocols, changes state, crossing a threshold and leaving behind who they were to start a new life. As Jean La Fontaine explains,

"initiation is usually identified by the participants as something that confers on the initiate knowledge or rights that underline and justify an elevation in their status, recognized either publicly by a community or only in the closed circle of the group." In addition to this element of status and recognition, a series of rights and duties are acquired, among which obedience to the elders stands out. [18]

In the case of Greek society, one of the main characteristics was *paideia*, the process of educating children, understood as the transmission of the values and knowledge necessary to form part of society. According to Jean –Pierre Vernant: "Its goal is to turn the young person into an adult, which implies a certain transformation, a true change of status, access to a new condition of existence". [40]

There is abundant literature on the subject [8, 5, 10, 15, 40] of Greek initiation rituals and it is interesting to note that all the authors differentiate between the important initiation of boys – whose main characteristic is that they go from ephebus to hoplites – and therefore, become full citizens, and the initiation of girls, which consists of a series of rituals that begin before adolescence and culminate in marriage.

These rites, which are also repeated generation after generation, are truly important for Greek society because "it is through repetitions, the updating of traditional rites, that the entire community regenerates itself", as Carlos Espejo Muriel explains in his book on Greek rites and festivals. [11]

In addition to this type of initiation that we could describe as "citizen" or "social", since it favors the integration of girls into society and boys into citizenship, there is also another type of initiation among the Greeks that Hofmann considers "esoteric". It used to take place during the second part of life: the mystery initiation, involving an "indirect rebirth" experience. [13]

Finally, as Kloppenborg and Ascough explain, between the family and the polis there were a large number of more or less private associations, guilds or clubs, organized around an extended family, the cult of a deity or a hero, an ethnic group in diaspora, a neighborhood or a common trade or profession. "Most of these associations had cultic aspects and most served broader social goals. Some were extensions or expansions of the family, like the Attic 'brotherhoods' (*phratryiai*) of many Greek cities, which consisted of groups of related families with devotion to a common ancestor or hero and were usually in the same district." [17]

And a last type that could be described as associations for professionals. George Miller Calhoun, in his study of Athenian political associations, points out their importance and that it was a prerequisite for success in politics. "That *hetaireiai* had a very powerful influence on the state and that membership was very common shows that they served their purpose with great efficiency." [8] He also affirms that many of these associations were surely secret and had some form of initiation in which initiates took an oath both to join and in order to strengthen the bonds between members. [8]

2 Although both authors include some of the same gems in their work the two books combined make a sufficiently exhaustive analysis to be able to draw conclusions.

### 3. Subjects Covered by the Seals for Initiations

#### 3.1. Hybrid Beings

Thus, it is well established that rites of passage or initiation were fundamental in Greek society. It is also well-understood that these rites had a tripartite structure, in which the passage from one stage to another was taken.

As pointed out earlier, when analyzing the carvings collected in the main books on Greek seals, the most surprising thing was that most of the images consisted of representations of sphinxes, griffins, sirens, satyrs, etc. That is, of hybrid beings that belong to two different worlds and that have traditionally been related to funeral rituals.

As Paloma Cabrera points out:

They are mythical, liminal and ambiguous beings, of double or triple nature, charged with an essence of metamorphosis, of change, who simultaneously belong and do not belong to any of the worlds that their multiple nature wants to define. They populate and delimit a symbolic space, the space of *eschatia*, of the border, the realm of the antisocial, of the unexpected, of the disruptive forces of life, of death. They are beings or monsters whose hybrid nature transcends the limits of normality, taking us from this world and its daily reality and transporting us to the bordering regions of existence, where the rules are reversed, barriers are broken and mortals enter in communion with the gods, where they can live the experience of death and rebirth to another life. The gods are accompanied by these liminal beings, who in turn become a manifestation of divinity. The divine space, the space of extreme otherness, is defined by the presence of these hybrid beings who act as protective guardians, messengers, companions, and serve as connection between the divine and human spheres. [42]

These beings move agilely between the different worlds, acting as guides through the elements. They are beings that can fly, swim and/or walk across borders and break limits, who “know the way” and who can both seduce and kill. Their dual nature, human and animal, is capable, on the one hand, of perverting a human being and on the other of help him or her to cross borders, overcome limits, surpassing themselves to become someone new: someone initiated.

In this way, Alain Moreau affirms that “some initiation masters are characters whose strange characteristic is the extraordinary, mysterious, even disturbing atmosphere of the initiation ceremonies. Half man, half animal, they are apt to give an education that takes place in nature, in the distance, in the forests, the mountains, on an island, in the world of beasts, far from the cities of men.” [25] He also points out that these animal-men, masters of initiation, are very numerous in Greek mythology and that they are usually *psychopompos*: conductors of souls.

They symbolize death and resurrection, the descent into hell, the tests that will allow one to pass from one stage to another. And, without a doubt, the guides for these trials must be beings who have access to both worlds and cross between

them.

José Manuel Galán Allué asks [42] “what does a hybrid, fantastic and even monstrous animal mean in a realistic scene?” And his answer is that “for the correct interpretation of these iconographic symbols it is necessary to know how to <<read>>, that is, to know the code or language used by the issuer.”

Following Moreau’s assertion helps in trying to answer this question of why there are so many representations of hybrid beings on Greek seals? We know these characters were related to passage rituals or initiations, and not only with funeral rituals, as has been traditionally pointed out<sup>3</sup>, but with all kinds of initiation. Numerous representations of sphinxes, sirens, griffins, etc. have been found in tombs, but after studying the subject in depth we can see that they also appear in marriage scenes or in hoplite initiations, two main rites of passage in Greek society and not at all associated with mortal death.

Sirens and sphinxes are probably the two hybrid beings that have been most studied and their role in mythology gives a clue as to their connection with initiation in Greek society. For sirens it is their song that always stands out; a melody that attracts sailors and makes them jump into the sea where they will drown and be eaten by them. Only the hero Odysseus manages to best them, and return to his abode undefeated. He has been prepared, he arrives with the necessary knowledge, with the indispensable resources and with the fundamental training to pass the test, as a hero must. Through his training he manages to emerge victorious, but he will never be the same. In the words of Édouard Brasey, “the temptation that sirens exert on men does not have to do with lust but with knowledge. They bring memory and knowledge, supreme intelligence, glory and celebrity. In a word, they offer them immortality and propose that they become gods.” [4] Plato even compared the singing of the sirens to Socrates’ way of speaking. [30]

Odysseus is the only one who is prepared to make this transit. He is accompanied on the trip by a series of sailors - whose names we do not know because they have not been initiated - who are not ready yet and have to cover their ears so as not to hear the initiatory words. The lesson is clear: one must never enter a place or environment for which he is not prepared, must never listen to what his ears are not ready to hear or what he is not destined to know. To do so runs great risk, in the case of Odysseus, to die skinned by sirens.

Thus, to be able to abandon the old and embrace the new, prior preparation is required. Initiation, as James Redfield points out, “entails a loss as well as a gain, (...) initiation also implies the loss of innocence.” [35] The Greeks know it well. As noted above, to achieve hoplite status it is necessary to previously pass a series of tests and demonstrate that one is worthy of achieving said status, of belonging to the group, of achieving citizenship.

Something similar happens with the sphinx. Located at the

3 Traditionally, sirens, sphinxes and other hybrid beings were the ones who led human souls to Hades, as well as guardians of tombs.

entrance to Thebes, only those who manage to decipher its enigma will be saved from death at the hands of the monster. Once again, it will be the hero who gets through the gates of the city, who passes the initiation: Oedipus.<sup>4</sup> As Jean-Marc Moret explains, "The sphinx is a daimon, an entity whose domain lies below the divine and beyond the human - a hybrid being whose nature is numinous and monstrous at the same time." [26] And its territory is an obligatory place of passage, located on the border, at the intersection of two universes.

Herbert Hoffmann talks about the sphinx as a paradigm of initiation, pointing out that in many of the Athenian vessels that represent the theme of the sphinx, Oedipus is accompanied or replaced by one or more "anonymous" young people standing or sitting on rocks or stools. "Normally their robes cover their heads in a ritual gesture of mourning, expressing that they are prepared to die." The young Thebans who await their death in the clutches of the sphinx are, in reality, Athenian ephebes, the future hoplite warriors of the city, awaiting their initiation: "dying" (or experiencing the terror of death) to be reborn." [13]

In his study of the iconography of Oedipus [26], Jean-Marc Moret affirms that the image is ambiguous by nature and that, to be able to read it, it is necessary to know the iconographic language. From a comprehensive analysis of the images in which this character appears, [27] Moret refutes the theories that the sphinx is an incubus, a monster that imposes its sexual embrace on its victims, affirming that interpretations of the Attic imagery as a scene of sexual union as perverse. In his opinion, such theories confuse the different levels of significance present in the image. For Moret, the Theban immobilized between the legs of the Sphinx, does not have a sexual connotation but an initiatory one. This explanation is more satisfactory than that of the violation and has a better chance of being true, because why would a person engrave a sphinx on his seal if he were really a wild, rapist monster?

Moret provides numerous examples of the sphinx as a paradigm for hoplite initiation in Athenian vase paintings, most notably a red-figure lekythos found in Athens and on a head-shaped vase in the Metropolitan Museum. In both cases, the sphinx has kidnapped a young man and is leading him to the altar. The young man, whose eyes are wide open, is shown unhesitatingly abandoning himself to his fate, like a novice during his initiation. By placing the initiation "death" in the same semantic category as the blood sacrifice, the image imbues the initiation with a measure of a consecration. All initiation, as has already been pointed out, entails a death, a leaving behind what one was to "be reborn" as a new being. Hoffmann notes that "hoplite initiation was a survival of a tribal rite, providing the novice with an experience of death that transformed him from a novice to an intrepid warrior who, having experienced the terror of death in life, would not be frightened in the extremely terrifying experience of the hoplite battle." [27]

4 According to Jean-Marc Moret, Oedipus defeats the sphinx not because of his sagacity or his own virtue but because he has previously received the initiation reserved for future leaders. (pp. 54-55).

In his analysis of this image, Jean-Marc Moret states:

The condition of the victim is also ambivalent: one of the hands hangs in the void, the other rests inert, on the chest. The gaze, fixed on that of the sphinx, proves that the Theban is still alive. Death is translated into kidnapping, to which the adolescent is abandoned without resistance. The almost vertical position of the protagonists indicates the place to which they are flying. The altar does not give the scene a new dimension but rather a new significance. Eliade showed that communication between the terrestrial and the celestial world, or the infernal world, is only possible in certain sacred places whose location is usually marked by a tree, a column or an altar - the axis mundi. [27]



National Archaeological Museum of Athens (Inventory Number: 1607)<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1.** *Lekythos* (Circa 420 B.C.).

As Ana Iriarte points out, the song of the sphinx is related to the enigmatic apothegm that was at the entrance to the sanctuary of Delphi: "Know yourself". Isn't knowing oneself one of the characteristics of the initiated? "Playing with the name Oedipus, and with the verb form that means << I know >> (*oída*), Sophocles turns Oedipus into << the one who knows >>." [14] Knowledge, an essential requirement to be able to travel that space between worlds. Initiation always requires knowledge.

Thus, it seems clear that both sirens and sphinxes are related to rites of passage or initiations. Other hybrid beings that do not appear as often are the griffins. Pausanias [28] briefly mentions them in *Description of Greece* (I, 24, 5-6), when he says that they are lion-like animals with eagles' wings and beak and that they guard the gold that is born from the earth. This certainly does not give many clues but we can point to the tomb of the Griffin Warrior, recently discovered in the Pylos area (Peloponnese) and which contained different images of these beings, a highlight being an ivory plate discovered between the legs of the deceased warrior.

Ingo Pini in his article on the Cretomicene glyptic, analyzes the Mycenaean seals and their subjects, pointing out that "some scenes are difficult to understand, such as, for example, the one showing a 'priest' accompanied by a griffin (CMS I,

5 © George E. Koronaos (<https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

223). The interpretation of many of the scenes of religious significance remains problematic." [29] Perhaps, in light of this theory of hybrid beings bridging worlds we might interpret it as an initiation scene?

This gem in this curious seal is a jasper and was found in a tomb in Vaphio (Laconia, Peloponnese). It is currently in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. [9]

To Hugh Bowden, alongside the ritual activities of groups such as the Bacchic *thiasoi* or the Eleusinian initiates:

We find individual religious specialists offering the performance of mystical rituals, orgies and *teletai*, to anyone who is willing to hire them. These "private initiators" are usually portrayed negatively in sources, leading modern researchers to view them as fringe figures or con artists who abused the candor and superstition of the masses. (...) The rituals that they carried out, usually called *teletai* implied purification and some kind of revelation, which can be considered a form of initiation. [3]

Finally, it is important to talk about the famous Harpy Tomb of Xanthus (Lycia, Turkey), currently in the British Museum.<sup>6</sup> This burial chamber, dating from 480-470 BC, was made of marble and on each of its four sides a scene is represented that, could precisely describe initiation. Especially interesting is one of the sides which describe, according to the Museum: "(...) a young armed man standing on the left offering a helmet to a bearded man seated on the right." "On the angle-slabs, facing outwards, are the figures formerly known as Harpies, but which are now identified as Sirens."<sup>7</sup> These sirens are carrying a human figure.

What if the scene is depicts an initiation? A grown man hands over his hoplite helmet to an ephebus who has passed all the tests and has managed to initiate himself and become a full citizen. The harpies have been the guides that have accompanied the young man in this process and have trained him for his initiation. The image of the harpy with the young man in her arms is very reminiscent of the image we have previously seen of the Theban being initiated by the sphinx.

Although he has been described as a dead man, we can see that the young man is clearly alive as his left arm does not fall back, as it would if he were not alive, but rather clings firmly to the chest of the harpy. Which seems to indicate that this character is making a conscious transfer to another state, that is: an initiation.

Other scenes that are described in the funerary pilaster are different offerings, one of them to a goddess who, by the pomegranate in her hand, appears to be Persephone. Could this also be related to an initiation ritual? It is interesting to note that, under the old man's stool, a bear appears that, perhaps, could be related to the rituals of Artemis. In fact, in the sanctuary dedicated to Artemis Orta (Laconia, Peloponnese), lead figurines were found including sphinxes and other hybrid beings, as well as terracotta masks representing, among other things, satyrs and gorgons.

For Walter Burkert, the mask is the oldest way of surrendering one's identity and assuming a new, extraordinary one, making a transposition towards a new and unknown world. [7] Therefore, the mask is also related to that process of abandoning the old in order to give way to the new.

We have seen that satyrs also appear in this sanctuary. Curiously, of this hybrid being between man and horse (or donkey or goat) there are multiple representations on the seals of ancient Greece. The explanation for this iconographic choice may also be related to the initiatory process. For François Lissarrague the satyr oscillates between the animal and the human, barbarian and civilized. These strange beings that accompany Dionysus and are related to his cult, usually represented in a group. In addition to defining them as thieves, gluttons and characters with a great sexual appetite, Lissarrague wonders what are the skills that are ascribed to satyrs and affirms that "there are two different aspects of their knowledge: wisdom and invention. There is the wisdom of the educator, first and foremost. "And then they are also associated "with important inventions in the history of civilization." [21]

Another important characteristic of satyrs is that they are always represented with a large phallus. According to Jean La Fontaine, the phallus has been used to represent ideas of mystical power. "Male potency and the power of the gods are analogous, and they are mysterious forces, conceptualizations of a causality that underlies all events, including birth and death." [18] For him, in most rituals there is a common symbolism that refers to sexuality and birth. [18]

We see, then, that it is not at all unreasonable to associate satyrs with some kind of rite of passage or initiation.

As mentioned, satyrs are related to the cult of Dionysus and surely must also be related to his initiations. Walter Burkert states there are two specific stimulants related to Dionysus and that must have played a role in the secret celebrations: alcohol and sexual arousal; wine and the symbolism of the phallus. "The release of previous anguishes due to the pressure of daily life, an encounter with the divine through the experience of force and the meaning of life are present in the Dionysian initiation. But hope for the future, for death and the afterlife were also part of the secret advantages promised to those who knew." [7] Were, perhaps, the satyrs the ones who educated in that knowledge needed for initiation?

One can find many examples of hybrid beings related to initiations in art and even though conducting an exhaustive analysis of all Greek painting and sculpture is far from the objective of this article, it is important to emphasize that there are examples of hybrid beings related to rites of passage that might support the thesis that these fantastic beings were linked in one way or another with the initiations. A thesis that, on the other hand, without written texts from the classical period would be very difficult to corroborate. Some examples would be: the dinos of Sófilos, the oinochoe Chigi, the vase of Euthimides, the amphora of Nikosthenes, the kylix of Pistoxenos, the amphora of the sacrifice of Polyxena, the rhyton of the sphinx and the marble stele of the sphinx.

<sup>6</sup> British Museum Inventory number: 1848, 1020.1.

<sup>7</sup> For the matter at hand, it makes no difference whether they are one or the other, since it is one of those hybrid beings that are between two worlds.

### 3.2. Heroes

As for the heroes, all the myths that mention their exploits, travels and adventures are really telling us about their initiations. All of them must pass a series of tests to reach their goal. Perhaps the most obvious case is that of Odysseus, who even has to go through Hades - he has to die in life - in order to know the secrets that will finally lead him to his destination, back to his home, Ithaca. Although, in reality, the one who returns is never the same as the one who left...

And yet the only hero who appears regularly depicted on the seals is Heracles.<sup>8</sup> As Nicole Loraux highlights, no Greek hero was more popular than Heracles. "From the archaic epic to the Hellenistic period, the figure of Heracles underwent constant reevaluations. But as no city was able to definitively appropriate his image for itself, the reassessment process did not take place in the political realm, with its multiple identifications and inevitable distortions, but rather in the logic that presides over the Greek concept of the powerful hero." [22]

Analyzing the part of Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* (II, 4, 9-10) in which the author talks about Heracles, Jan Bremmer points out that it is talking about an initiation: "The first detail that strikes us is the absence of any information about the name of Heracles. It is often typical of male initiation that boys receive a new name in the course of time, and there are a number of examples of that practice in Greek mythology. (...) Apollodorus does not mention Heracles' earlier name here, but elsewhere he tells us that Heracles used to be called Alcides." [6] He explains, later, how the hero's stay among the shepherds can be interpreted as a liminal stage, before returning to the civilized world for final acceptance among adults, and links different moments of Heracles' story with stages of education and preparation for initiation. "The feat (bedding with Thestios' 50 daughters) happens, as Apollodorus notes, at the age of eighteen, that is, when he is on the brink of adulthood; Diodorus (4.29.3) calls him at this stage an ephebe (*ephēbos*): his sexual precocity is clearly connected with his coming of age." [6] Finally, the young man receives a sword from Hermes, a bow and arrows from Apollo, a golden breastplate from Hephaestus and a tunic from Athena, cutting himself a mace in Nemea. These gifts are, according to Bremmer, the signal that the process has concluded: the child is now an adult. [6]

Bremmer concludes by saying that the initiation of Heracles corresponds closely with what we know about the oldest customs of Greek initiation: "the single educator, the stress on bow and arrows, the stay with shepherds, the hunting of a threatening animal, the sexual experience and the gift of arms all follow a pattern that we can observe, albeit in various transformations, in several places in Greece." [6]

Jennifer Larson explains that, like Hermes and Apollo, Heracles was the patron of young men dedicated to preparing their bodies for the challenges of fighting and combat." [20]

As a protector of youth, he received libations from Athenian boys preparing to embark on military training." [20] Thus, Heracles becomes a role model. Burkert also says that Heracles was a prototype of a ruler with divine legitimacy and that's why Alexander stamped his image on his coins; but also, he is a model for the common man who can hope that after a life of hard work, and through that very life, he can come into the company of the gods. [7]

### 3.3. Gods

As has been pointed out, Hermes, Aphrodite and Eros are the most represented gods in the Greek intaglios. And we are going to see how, also on this occasion, both could be related to the rites of passage. Nano Marinatos [24] presents Hermes and Aphrodite as initiating gods, both separately and together; Hermes related to maturity rites and Aphrodite with initiation of men into sexuality. And the two gods, united, give us an archetype (or prototype of model) of illicit, extramarital sexuality.

Hermes, in addition to being the messenger of the gods, is the psychopomp, guiding souls of the dead on their journey to Hades. Therefore, as Walter Burkert [7] explains, he is a god who crosses the boundary between the living and the dead, invoked in libations in honor of the deceased, their graves placed in his care.

On the other hand, one of Hermes' representations – known as *herm* or *herma* – consists of a pillar with the head of Hermes and a phallus below. In addition to being a god who attracts prosperity, from the fifth century on, Hermes began to be recognized as "Lord of Tournaments" and, with Heracles, became a patron of the gym and arena. "From this time on, he started to be depicted as a beardless, athletic youth with great homoerotic attraction, although the *herma* stones continued to portray him with archaic bearded heads. (...) With this aspect, that of a young god associated with the physical education of boys, Hermes became the archetype of the ephebus, a young citizen on the threshold of maturity." [7]

In relation to this subject, the recent excavations of Kato Symi (Crete) document that the deities of the sanctuary were Hermes and Aphrodite. At Kato Symi, bronze plaques have been found featuring different scenes including hunters with bows and arrows, youths fighting animals, homosexual courtship, and Hermes himself, who appears to have been the dominant companion in the sanctuary, judging for the dedications that have survived. "The votive offerings suggest a predominantly male clientele participating in rituals of maturity and socialization typical of the Dorian aristocracy. In Kato Symi, Hermes appears both as a beardless young man and as a mature adult, as to illustrate his patronage of young men approaching maturity." [7] Therefore, it seems clear that this god was also related to the initiation, specifically of men.

As for the goddess Aphrodite, who often shared a temple with Hermes and Eros, perhaps the most outstanding sanctuary that can inform us about the relationship of this goddess with the rites of passage is that of Persephone in Locros (Magna Grecia). That both goddesses were related is deduced from the fact that, a large collection of terracotta

8 For Christopher A. Faraone the gems in which Heracles appears would have a magical character; especially the scene of the Nemean lion is, for him, a healing amulet. [12]

pinakes has been found at Locros containing numerous mythical and cult scenes related to Aphrodite. As Jennifer Larson explains: "Three types of pinakes show Aphrodite with her cult partner Hermes, while the Eros cult seems to have played a role here as well. (...) The general impression is that while the Persephone cult focused on pre-nuptial rites and the protection of young children, the Aphrodite cult was related to female sexual experience, including that of brides. [7]"

As James Redfield declares, for Plutarch (*Moralia* 156c): "Aphrodite is the great expert of *homophrosune* (marital unity of hearts and minds) and *philia* for men and women, because by uniting their bodies under the influence of love, it also brings together their souls." [35]

Thus, Aphrodite is a dual goddess in many aspects a goddess of sexuality, erotic love and also of marriage. In this way her sexuality can be understood as both "pure" and "impure".

In his study of the maidens of Locros, James Redfield analyzes the subjects of sacrifice and initiation, by which girls become brides. For him, the *pinax* 10/2 P4 represents Aphrodite on a journey to her new marriage and Hermes is presented in his role as psychopomp, conductor between the worlds of life and death. "If she is conceived as the mortal bride, Hermes must be preparing her for her new role conducting her from the maternal house to the parental one; in other words, he is here a symbol of marriage." [36] As for the 10/1 P1 *pinax*, it would represent the moment, just before, when Hermes summons Aphrodite for the trip. "She carries Eros on her arm as a symbol of the sexual power that she bestows. (...) And at the end of the trip is on the pin 10/12 P56, in which two female figures face each other while one presents the other a small winged Eros. In other words, these three pinakes show the active role of Aphrodite in the consecration of brides." [36]

Finally, Redfield [36] points out the parallels between marriage and funeral: love and death. Redfield relates Aphrodite to Persephone, one as an agent and the other as an example to follow, celebrating the transformation of the bride. Therefore, we find, once again, the correspondence between initiatory and funeral rituals. It seems that all the figures that have traditionally been related to the funerary world could also be related to initiatory rituals, underscoring the strong symbolism of the passage from one state to another.

#### 4. Evidence of Seals for Initiations in Ancient Sources

To end this article, it is essential to consult the Greek and Latin texts in search of evidence of the use of initiatory seals. Although it is true that these types of seals are not mentioned in written sources, it is also true that, for the most part, these types of rituals were secret. Therefore it's possible the seals and would not be talked about lightly, or even be worn daily, but rather reserved for particular moments such as meetings or encounters with other group members/ peers. Indeed, it could have been that such encounters were not advertised as group

members may have been obliged to signal recognition to each other, but not the uninitiated.

However, there are some references in the texts in which the use of this type of rings could be intuited. First of all, we find in Xenophon's *Anabasis*:

After this the Greeks dismissed the guide with gifts from the common stock—a horse, a silver cup, a Persian dress, and ten darics; but what he particularly asked the men for was their rings, and he got a considerable number of them. Then he showed them a village to encamp in and the road they were to follow to the country of the Macronians, and, as soon as evening came, took his departure. (Xenophon: *Anabasis*, IV, 7, 27) [16]

Here "the rings of the soldiers" are mentioned. It is true that nothing indicates that they were initiation rings but it is a possibility since it seems to mention a type of ring that all the soldiers had. Could they have been a hoplite initiation ring? We cannot know for sure.

Another reference, rather more solid, is found from a much later author, who has helped illuminate our understanding the Greek world: Plutarch. In his work *Moralia*. In Book VIII, he explains:

And as soon as he (Lysanoridas) returns, he must endeavor to find the sepulchre of Dirce, which not one of the Thebans themselves, besides the captains of the horse, knows; for he that goes out of his office leads his successor to the place alone, and in the dark; there they offer some sacrifices, but without fire, and leaving no mark behind them, they separate from one another, and come home again in the dark. So that I believe, Phidolaus, it will be no easy matter for him to discover it. For most of those that have been duly elected to that office are now in exile; nay, all besides Gorgidas and Plato; and they will never ask those, for they are afraid of them. And our present officers are invested in the castle with the spear only and the seal, but know nothing of the tomb, and cannot direct him. (Plutarch: *De Genio Socratis*, 5, 578 B-C) [33]

If we analyze this fragment in depth, we see that it provides a lot of information on the subject at hand. In the first place, it confirms that to access a military position, specifically that of captains of the horse, it was necessary to perform certain rituals that only the predecessors in office knew. and that it took place in a specific place and at a specific time of night. Therefore, they were secret rites, something characteristic of an initiation and that entailed a change of status in the person who was initiated.

After performing the ritual, Plutarch explains that the signs were made to disappear and the participants left separately in the dark. Once again, we find the secret characteristics of an initiation. And finally, the most interesting part of this quote for our purposes, since it refers to the seals, is the final sentence in which the author complains that the "legal" captains of the horse have been exiled and that the current ones have received the spear and the seal without having completed the ritual. Plutarch seems to imply that, at that time, the customs have been relaxed and that anyone can access the position without knowing the secret knowledge or ritual. In



this protest by Plutarch, we discovered that, after performing the ceremony to become captains of the horse, the participants were given a spear and a seal that distinguished them as such. It is, therefore, a very clear evidence of initiatory seals. Perhaps it can be extrapolated that rituals similar to those to access the position of captain of the horse, also happened in other initiations or rites of passage.

It is once again Plutarch who offers, further possible evidence that the military had initiatory rings. In this case, in *Parallel Lives*, specifically in Timoleon, the generals are arguing because no one wants to be the first to cross the river and, at that moment:

Then among Timoleon's cavalry officers an astonishing strife and contention arose which delayed the battle. For not one of them was willing to cross the river against the enemy after another, but each demanded to begin the onset himself, and their crossing was likely to be without order if they crowded and tried to run past one another. Timoleon, therefore, wishing to decide their order by lot, took a seal-ring from each of the leaders, and after casting all the rings into his own cloak and mixing them up, he showed the first that came out, and it had by chance as the device of its seal a trophy of victory. (Plutarch: *Timoleon*, 31, 3-4) [34]

Once again, we cannot assure that these were not personal rings rather than initiation ones, but the idea that all the leaders had one supports the theory that it was a ritual seal associated with their membership of a powerful group or status.

On the other hand, Pliny the Elder mentions that "the divine Augustus used a seal that had a sphinx engraved on it", although, in this case, it is an inherited ring, since he found it among those his mother had. It is significant, however, that the emperor chose this motif as his personal hallmark. Later, Pliny also informs us, Augustus will use another seal with the effigy of Alexander. (*Natural History*: XXXVII, 8-10). [32]

We have spoken about the solidarity that is created between fellows of a *fratria* or civic association. There is also evidence of this in Plutarch's *Moralia*, specifically in the chapter on *How to tell a flatterer from a friend*:

For when Cephisocrates was impeached for high treason, and Lacydes, an intimate acquaintance of Arcesilaus, with several others of his friends, stood by him at his trial, the counsel for the state desired that the prisoner's ring, wherein lay the principal evidence against him, might be produced in court; which Cephisocrates heard dropping it softly off his finger, and Lacydes observed him, setting his foot upon it and burying it in the ground. Whereupon being acquitted, and going afterwards to pay his respects and thank his judges, one of them (who, it seems, had noticed their actions) told him that his thanks were owing to Lacydes, and so related the whole story, yet Lacydes had never mentioned it. (Plutarch: *How to tell a flatterer from a friend*, 22, 63E) [33]

It is also interesting to note that in the life of *Alexander* (2, 2), Plutarch [34] explains that Alexander the Great's father, Philip, was initiated in the mysteries of Samothrace at the same time as his wife, Olympia. In this case, no ring or seal appears but it seems relevant to us to point out that both begin

together, so it's possible there were initiation rituals common to men and women. It is evident that we are not referring to "social" rituals, related to citizenship, but to those mysteries that Hofmann defined as "esoteric".

Another important source of knowledge about the Greek world, although much later than the classical era, are the so-called "fathers of the Church", because their texts (doctrinal and loaded with morality) often refer to Greek society and allow us to discover some characteristics that Greek writers themselves do not mention. Among them is Tertullian who, in the 2nd century AD, wrote in his *Apologeticus*:

I also see that between matrons and prostitutes no longer can a difference be established by their external appearance. Among women, even that custom of our ancestors that protected modesty and sobriety has disappeared; when none knew gold except in one of her fingers, the one that her husband had tied with the bridal ring... (Tertullian: *Apologeticus*, 6, 4) [39]

Here is confirmation that during this rite of passage so important for Greek girls, the man "tied" her with a ring, so that, although it does not say exactly what era it is, the thesis is confirmed that in a Greek society's initiation/marriage ritual, an external symbol was given to its participants so that they could be recognized. Tertullian affirms it, albeit with disgust since that custom has disappeared and nothing remains to distinguish matrons from prostitutes.

Much later, in the fourth century, Themistius, a Greek exegete of Plato and Aristotle, as well as a high official of the Eastern Roman Empire, wrote one of his political speeches to emperor Constantius. In it, he compares the publication of his writings with the access of the ephebos to citizenship after the public examination of their merits, as explained by Aristotle in the *Athenian Constitution* (42.1 ff). Themistius says:

Why would the prince be irritated if I give my works to you before anyone else and did not remove them from the city walls before the gathered assembly grants them citizenship, like ephebos, stamping them with the State seal? (Themistius: *To Constantius*, 62a) [38]

Obviously, one has to be careful with this quote. In Aristotle's text, when the passage from Ephebus to Hoplite is explained, no seal is mentioned. It's possible that Themistius' phrase may simply be symbolic: a way of expressing that the ephebes, after passing a series of tests, became part of the civic body. In any case, it is remarkable that the word seal is used. In this example, the quote does not confirm that the ephebos received a seal, but it seems a sound interpretation.

And also from the 4th century (in this case a Roman writer) Macrobius explains at *Saturnalia* that:

When Laberio, at the end of a show, was honored by César with the golden ring, he took it as a sign of rehabilitation and instantly went to sit in the fourteen seats reserved in the theater for the equestrian order that he himself had earlier disgraced, and been repudiated from. As a Roman knight, Cicero, on one occasion when Laberius passed in front of him looking for a seat, said to him: "I would make room for you, if I weren't sitting so tight." (Macrobius: *Saturnalia*, 2,



3, 10) [23]

It is this Roscio who was very loved even by the dictator Lucio Sila, who gave him the gold ring of the knights. (Macrobius: *Saturnalia*, II, 14, 13) [23]

These last examples from the late Roman period can be linked to Plutarch's previous texts. While Macrobius speaks of knights of the equestrian order, as it was in the Roman era, it is known that the Romans inherited most of their customs from the Greeks they so admired. And in Rome at least it is clearly demonstrated that when a soldier is knighted, he is given a ring, in this case, of gold.

On the other hand, to finish the defense of our daring proposal regarding initiatory seals, we can also cite some evidence in favor of it from the context of iconography. We can find very clear examples which show hybrid beings related to initiations, more specifically in: the dinos of Soófilos, the Chigi olpe, the vase of Euthymides, the amphora of Nikosthenes, the vase of Pistoxenos, the amphora of sacrifice of Polyxena, the rhyton of the sphinx and the marble stele of the sphinx.

In conclusion there are various credible reasons to be found in the Art as well as in Ancient sources to infer that a large number of seals were related to initiations. At least that there is a sound possibility with profound implications for how we understand Greeks distinguish and carried themselves as they moved through their lives and rites of passage.

## 5. Conclusion

The main proposal of this article is to state the idea that, in the Ancient Greek world, in which seals were used as personal objects with a practical use, there might have been some seals that could have been used to commemorate an initiation or to highlight membership in a specific group. In this case, the seal would be a symbol that its owner had performed a specific rite of passage, being transformed and leaving behind what he was to become someone new. We are aware that this proposal is daring, but we have found evidence both in written sources and in pictorial or sculptural representations that suggest that it may not be far-fetched.

What we suggest is that these initiatory seals would be those showing images of hybrid beings, heroes – mainly Heracles – or the divinities Hermes and Aphrodite.

When studying the iconographic motifs engraved on Greek gems, we were struck by the fact that hybrid beings – mermaids, sphinxes, griffins, satyrs, etc. – were the ones that most frequently appeared in them. We thought this fact was really interesting and raised many questions that led us to want to find answers to this question. Thus, analyzing the most important studies on these beings, among which the great work of Jean-Marc Moret on *Oedipus and the Sphinx* stands out, we came to the conclusion that hybrid beings were related to the rituals of passage, since they are creatures that belong to two different worlds. In fact, they have traditionally been related to funerary rituals but, in our case, we dare to propose that they were also related to other types of rituals; rituals that also implied a change from one stage to another, that is,

initiation rituals, not just funerary ones. They are beings that move easily between different worlds, relating them and acting as guides between them. Beings that, due to their physical characteristics, can fly, swim or walk. Beings that cross borders and break limits. Beings that can be favorable or terrible, that can seduce or kill, that, by their nature, are capable of perverting human beings but also of helping them to cross borders, overcome limits or complete an initiation. Thus, we find these creatures related to marriage scenes and hoplite initiations, two of the most important rites of passage in the Greek world, differentiated according to gender.

On the other hand, it is evident that all the myths that relate the life and exploits of the heroes are talking about their initiations. In this case, the hero who appears most frequently on seals is Heracles. Although some researchers such as Christopher A. Faraone relate this topic to magical gems, we believe that it cannot be ruled out that they were also initiatory seals. Heracles is the hero par excellence of the Greek world and we see that he also receives a series of gifts when his initiation concludes, when he goes from being a child to being a fully adult. Heracles was one of the protectors of young Greek men and they looked to him when they prepared for combat. Heracles was the example to follow, the model to imitate.

Finally, within the initiatory seals we have included Hermes and Aphrodite who, both together and separately, have been related to rites of passage, above all, linked to sexuality. One of the greatest evidences that support this fact is the collection of terracotta pinakes found in the sanctuary of Persephone in Locros (Magna Graecia). In them, both gods appear – sometimes also alongside Eros – in clearly initiatory cult scenes.

To finish the defense of our daring proposal on initiatory seals, we have also shared some evidence in favor of it, coming from both written sources and iconography.

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