

TWO UNIDENTIFIED GEMSTONES

1) *Aethiopicus*. The only notice of this stone is that given by Isidore of Seville, (*Etymologiae* 16. 15. 13). His sources were varied, and one can trace many of them¹⁾, but it appears that he must have taken his description of the *Aethiopicus* from some anonymous author whose work has not otherwise survived. Nor does he tell us much about it. The stone was the colour of iron and when rubbed (or ground, *tritum*), it emitted a black liquid.

Now, this is not the only example of a stone which was supposed to exude juice of some kind. When one form of *Indica* was rubbed between the fingers, a crimson (*purpureus*) liquid emerged. From the *Media* issued saffron-yellow moisture, and when the haematite was scratched with a flint it discharged a liquid the colour of blood²⁾. This last practice sounds like the process called *streaking* used by mineralogists to determine the colour of a particular sample. Rutley defined it thus.

‘The streak of a mineral is the colour of its powder and may be quite different from that of the mineral in mass. For instance, black haematite gives a red powder. Streak is observed by producing a small quantity of the powdered mineral by scratching with a knife or file or by rubbing the mineral on a piece of unglazed porcelain or roughened glass called a *streak-plate*³⁾’.

The colour thus produced will be clearer if it is made wet, of course, and Pliny records the use of Cretan whetstones which were lubricated with oil. Naxian, Armenian and Arsinoean were used with water, and Cilician with a mixture of oil and water. The moisture from these would mingle with the powder and turn the ‘smear’ into a ‘juice’⁴⁾.

It is impossible to identify the *Aethiopicus* with any certainty. There are many minerals which are more or less grey in colour and give a more or less black streak, but perhaps the most likely candidate is graphite. This is iron-grey to dark steel-grey in colour and gives a streak which is black and shining. So, after a mineralogist’s test it is the latter characteristic which could have given rise to the notion that the mineral exuded a black liquid⁵⁾.

2) *Aitherite*. There appears to be only one reference to this stone, that made by pseudo-Callisthenes in his description of Nectanebo’s jewelled casquet⁶⁾. On this, gems represented the seven planets, and that of Jupiter was

1) See E. Dressel: ‘De Isidori originum fontibus’, *Rivista di Filologia* 3 (1875), 207–68.

2) Pliny: *NH* 37.61 (170). *Ibid.* 63 (173). Ps.-Dioscorides: *De Lapidibus* 4.

3) *Rutley’s Elements of Mineralogy*, 26th ed. by H. H. Read, (London 1970), 49. This is exactly the method of testing the haematite recommended by Sotacus, apud Plinius: *NH* 36.38 (146).

4) *NH* 36.47 (149–50). These stones are therefore not the same as the *enhydros*.

5) See *Rutley’s Elements*, 340–1.

6) *Vita Alexandri Meagni* 1.6. The name does not appear in the Armenian version of the *Vita*.

the *aitherite*. According to LSJM: Lexicon, *aitherites* is a falsa lectio for aerites, which may be true, although I suspect that pseudo-Callisthenes was coining an exact descriptive phrase for an unusual stone in an attempt to convey that opaque pale blue which is characteristic of a cloudless sky. Sapphire, which might spring first to mind, is a blue corundum but is transparent and in any case not particularly uncommon. It is more likely, therefore, that the *aitherite* was meant to be a turquoise.

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