Throughout the Roman empire, many people used amulets inscribed with images of supernatural beings, esoteric signs, and magic words. These objects often make reference to images and languages from various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, including, though by no means limited to, Egypt. Scholars typically categorize these artifacts as “magical” and assume that they were used for personal ritual purposes. Additionally, because these objects frequently adapt Egyptian themes, they have often been described as “Greco-Egyptian” and separated – both conceptually and (in museum displays) physically – from other forms of “Greco-Roman” material culture.

This talk aims to reassess our conceptualization and interpretation of “Greco-Egyptian magical gems” on the basis of evidence from these objects’ archaeological contexts. Because most known gems of this type come from unprovenienced museum collections, research has traditionally focused almost exclusively on their iconography and inscriptions. However, that approach de-materializes the gems, reducing them to two-dimensional images and texts rather than artifacts from archaeological contexts. My talk will therefore collect and synthesize the available information on “magical gems” from known contexts and assess the implications for how people actually used and valued these objects.

A contextual analysis of so-called “magical gems” from known findspots reveals surprisingly varied use-contexts, ranging from ritual practice to record-keeping. These results point to the importance of framing, user choice, and materiality. While engraved gems’ inscriptions and imagery certainly contributed to consumers’ decisions about how to use them, these potentially multifunctional objects resist reduction to texts or images alone; indeed, some consumers may have valued the gems more for their materials than their decoration. As a result, I argue that the functions and valuations of these objects were flexible, emerging from ongoing interactions with users, contexts, and assemblages.