

The Magical Powers of Gem Stones

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In the times before the Roman Empire, which began in 27 B.C., the value and significance of gem stones was dependent upon their specific color and general appearance, and no attempt had been made to classify them according to their mineral species. All stones of one color were probably considered to be of the same kind and therefore judged equally valuable. Today, particularly in Western society, gems are usually valued according to their beauty, durability, and rarity; but, to the men of ancient societies, it was not only the decorative aspects of jewels that made them important. Superstitions and ritual meaning attached to the colorful stones gave them much of their intrinsic value. The power of magic was ascribed to gem stones. They were not only reputed to cure diseases of all kinds, but, as amulets, they were carried about to ward off and protect the wearer against evil spirits, at the same time bringing good luck.

The belief in the medicinal powers of gem stones lasted well into the eighteenth century; up to this time they formed an important part of the doctor's medicinal chest. For example, an actual price list of a German druggist, printed in the second half of the eighteenth century, has been discovered. It gives details of the cost of different recipes containing gem stones to be used for medicinal purposes.

Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), the famous Roman writer and natural historian, refers, among other stones, to the agate, a form of quartz, as a remedy for diseases of the eye. He even distinguishes between Indian and Egyptian agates, the former allegedly holding curative powers for diseases of the eye, while the latter were said to be effective against the bites of spiders and scorpions. The bloodstone, another of the numerous varieties of quartz, was used by ancient alchemists in treating disorders of the blood. It was supposed to be effective in the treatment of blood poisoning, and its application was believed to check the flow of blood from a wound. Emeralds were hung around the necks of children to protect them from epileptic fits, while powdered beryl was said to have special powers of healing when applied to injuries of the eye. Garnets, too, had a host of curative powers ascribed to them. Besides protecting the wearer against the effects of poisons of all kinds, they were also said to cure depressions and give protection against bad dreams. The red varieties were said to relieve fever, while yellow gems were prescribed for the treatment of jaundice.

Numerous other examples that describe the medicinal powers of gem stones can be found in ancient writings, and records prove that their influence over the lives of people must have been considerable. Any beneficial effects obtained from the use of gems must have been psychological, for none of these minerals could have had the slightest remedial effects on the ailments for which they were prescribed.

Belief in the magic, rather than curative, power of gem stones probably reached its height during the rule of the Roman emperors. In early Roman literature, there are many references to the power of gems to protect the owner against attacks from wild animals and safeguard him from the violence of robbers. Romantic associations were also ascribed to gem stones, and success in love, together with the power to read the thoughts of others, was said to belong to the possessor of precious stones.

In the fourteenth century, the Black Death (bubonic plague) swept over Europe, taking millions of lives. Those who were rich enough to afford it positively covered themselves with jewels of every description. It not only saved them self-confidence and made them forget their troubles and fears, but the belief was still strong that the purity of jewels would ward off pestilence.

The wearing of birth stones, another superstition, dates back to the early Middle Ages, but the belief originated far earlier. Indeed, it seems to have its source in the Bible story of the jeweled breast plate worn by the high priest. This breast plate, we are told, was set with twelve gems, each dedicated to a tribe of Israel. The actual identity of the stones, although they are named in the Bible, cannot be determined with any degree of certainty, because their names have changed over the centuries, and a number of differing lists describing them are extant. Later, when these gems became associated with the twelve signs of the zodiac, it was believed that if the proper jewel were worn at the right time, good luck would follow, or at least misfortune would be avoided. Ladies of noble birth wore the gem of the month, which necessitated their having twelve sets of jewelry. Those of lesser means had to make do with one set, and so it became customary to wear only the gem associated with the month of one's birth.

At first, the birth stone was worn in accordance with what was believed to be cabalistic instructions, but, in 1912, the American Association of Jewelers and Gem Merchants adopted the following list, selecting some of the more readily available stones.

January Garnet
 February Amethyst
 March Bloodstone; alternative, aquamarine
 April Diamond
 May Emerald

June Pearl; alternative, moonstone
July Ruby
August Sardonyx; alternative, peridot
September Sapphire
October Opal; alternative, tourmaline
November Topaz
December Turquoise; alternative, lapis lazuli

Though these superstitions have now nearly all vanished, some traces of them still remain. Even today it is said that the famous blue Hope diamond will bring misfortune to whoever owns it. There is, of course, no real basis for this belief, but it is understandable that the possession of a stone worth nearly \$900,000 is bound to be somewhat awe-inspiring, and the responsibility of safeguarding it is rather frightening.

Legend says opals bring bad luck, and so strong is this belief that many people in our Western society will not tolerate opal jewelry in their homes, let alone wear it. Few realize that this superstition was born in comparatively recent times. It originated in a novel by the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott, in *Anne of Geierstein*, published in 1829; he writes imaginatively about a beautiful lady and an evil opal. Later, Queen Victoria did much to overcome this superstition by presenting a fine collection of these stones to each of her daughters on the occasion of the girl's marriage. Yet the opal legend may well be based in part on the very nature of these stones; for example, they are easily liable to damage under certain circumstances. The scientific aspects of this fact are discussed in Chapter IV. How such superstitions may change over the centuries is well illustrated by the ways this beautiful stone was viewed in early documents, where it was described as a symbol of hope and purity that was able to protect its wearer against disease.