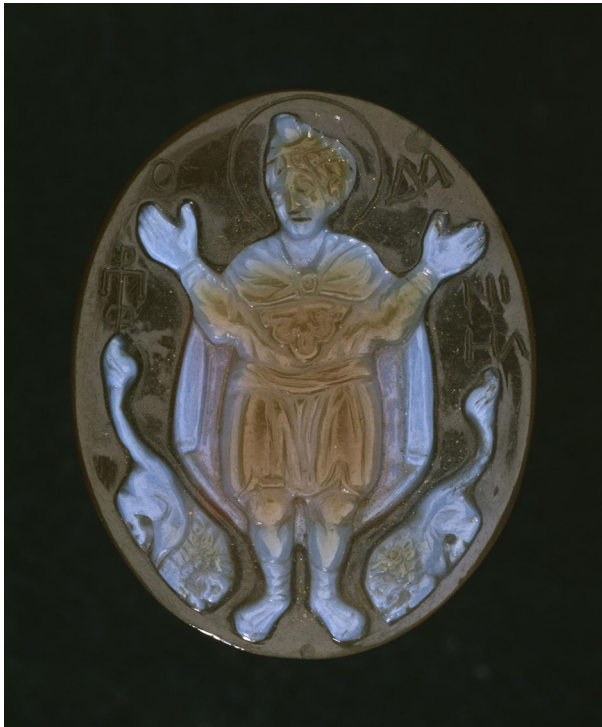

About the Cover



[Detail from image of a cameo. Brown and white sardonyx upright oval carved in low relief with a male orant figure, nimbed and wearing a Phrygian cap, a tunic, boots and cloak fastened in the centre with brooch, with a crouching lion on either side of the feet (Daniel between the lions).
© The Trustees of the British Museum.]

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The association between solitude and the idea of personal space, on the one hand, and interiority and the sense of self, on the other, has long been central to thinking about human subjectivity. A *locus classicus* is Montaigne who, in one of his essays, famously notes: ‘We must reserve a backshop (une arrière boutique), wholly our own and entirely free, wherein to settle our true liberty, our principal solitude and retreat’ (2, 270). Writing some twelve centuries earlier, the great Byzantine theologian Basil of Caesarea offers a comparable admonition: ‘Solitude (...) quiets our passions and gives leisure to our reason to uproot them completely from the soul. (...) One should, therefore, choose a place (...) removed from association with humans, so that nothing from the outside may interrupt one’s ascetic routine’ (1, 7; my translation from the Greek).

Basil here voices a commonplace view of solitude as a condition for self-mastery. Withdrawal from the world enables one to resist what Basil calls ‘passions’ (πάθη), namely, irrational urges and impulses arising in the soul. It is a necessary step in the process of acquiring attentiveness to and control over one’s inner life, and hence of becoming a self-conscious moral subject, the agent of one’s actions.

Objects such as this sardonyx cameo, now in the British Museum in London, were designed to assist their human users in the pursuit of solitude. The carving visualizes a well-known episode from sacred history: having refused to compromise his religion, the prophet Daniel was punished by being thrown into a den with lions, but thanks to divine intervention, the beasts left him unharmed. The engraved image does more than carry the promise of salvation and deliverance from evil; it also offers a model to emulate. Indeed, when interpreted allegorically, the cameo may be said to encapsulate an entire spiritual program: the prophet’s figure with outstretched arms signifies prayer; the den a secluded personal space, the space of solitude; while the lions stand for the violent passions threatening to overpower the Christian soul. The viewer is presented with a visual invitation to follow Daniel’s example and embark on the path of self-mastery in prayerful retreat from the world.

One can truly be alone, shielded from the unrelenting flux of everyday existence, in the company of this precious little thing. The cameo was made for private, solitary scrutiny. With a mere 2.55 cm in height, it demands to be examined at close range. The miniature carving arrests our attention, draws us in, and in the process, temporarily blocks out the world around us.

It affords us a moment of respite, a moment of solitude.



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