



Diamonds invincible

The word diamond comes from the Greek “*adamas*” (meaning indestructible) and initially referred to the very hardest of metals, before being applied to any very hard material such as magnetite and diamond.

For the ancient Greeks, diamonds were «*adamas*» because they could neither cut nor saw them. Man has associated diamonds with extraordinary qualities and symbolic meanings from very early times.

Indestructible

At the time, diamonds were appreciated less for their sparkle than their hardness.

Invincible

If the diamond cannot be bettered, it is because it is invincible, a source of power and victory on the fields of war and justice. This invincibility protects against sickness and poison.

Pouvoir

Diamonds also symbolise protection and eternity...

Powerful

... the symbol therefore of eternal love and marriage...

The symbolism surrounding the diamond is heightened by the ancient legend of its origins: a mysterious valley of diamonds in India, whose location was hidden for centuries.

Famous diamonds have always been associated with the rich and the powerful. As objects of desire, they were destined to pass from hand to hand: from sultan to rajah, king to emperor, via merchants and adventurers,... finding their way only occasionally into the more modest hands of the museums.



The valley of diamonds. An illuminated version of The Travels of Marco Polo. © BNF
The trade in Indian diamonds to Arabia dates back to the 1st century. First writings identify the diamond mines as those in Golconda, near Hyderabad, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. The Indian mines were mentioned in Marco Polo's Travels, but it was the French pioneer Jean-Baptiste Tavernier who was amongst the first to describe them in 1679, in his six Voyages.



Diamonds on the crown created for Louis XV at his coronation ceremony. © BNF, Marthine Beck-Coppola

Invincibility: The diamond of Charles the Bold, Les trois Frères (Historisches Museum Basel)

Diamonds' resistance to change suggests invincibility and the beneficial powers a «good dia-mond» can deploy to ward off defeat, disease, poison, serpents, and sin, ... powers that even kings depended on. But every rule has its exception... Charles the Bold invested heavily in the protective power of diamonds, and he was always well provided when he set off to war. He was nevertheless defeated by the Swiss in 1476 despite his many diamonds, including a 30-carat specimen. Rumours have it that the peasant soldiers found them strewn over the battle field and exchanged them with merchants for a handful of coins.



A rough diamond in its «ganguis», together with rough diamonds with natural octahedron faces. © Collection des minéraux - UPMC - Paris

The hammer and the anvil, Virtus expugnabilis (A Collection of emblems ancient and modern) © BNF

Pliny recounts that diamonds were tested for authenticity on the anvil: «All these diamonds were tested on the anvil, by hammer blow; they are so hard they send the hammer sideways, to left or to right, and even manage to break the anvil sometimes.» (Pliny, Hist. nat, XXXVII). If the stone shatters it is not a real diamond... and they were many to fail the test.

The diamond's hardness was associated with total resistance to external forces, although there was one exception: the ancient texts report that diamonds succumb to goat's blood!...

