

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXIV

for 1985

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Officers and Council of the Society, 1984-5

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A GOLD 'HAIR-RING' FROM WIMBLINGTON PARISH, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

COLIN F. PENDLETON

In March, 1985 a finely decorated gold ornament with unique characteristics was found by the use of a metal-detector, in ploughsoil, in the parish of Wimblington in North Cambridgeshire. The object apparently represents a single stray find with no evidence of other contemporary metal work associations from its findspot although other finds, probably from the remains of a scattered hoard of late Bronze Age metalwork, have been reported from nearby, the closest piece occurring about 30 metres away.

The gold 'hair-ring' (fig 1) belongs to a distinct class of gold and copper alloy ornaments, occasionally found in pairs, dating from between 850-500BC (Taylor 1980, 69) and variously described as ear-rings, lock-rings and hair-rings, but whose usage, although clearly partly ornamental, is unknown (cf Taylor 1980, 68). They have been relatively well discussed by Eogan (1969), and this account relates to this important addition to Eogan's list of known finds.

The gold ring falls into the general definition of 'hair-rings' in being penannular and having a hollow triangular cross-section. The piece was, on discovery, rather distorted (fig 2), but has since been restored to something closer to its original form. Its condition is unworn. It shares some common features with Eogan's 'Southern English group' in lacking side plates and being made from a central tube and two separate decorated face-plates of sheet gold. However it is unique among both the British and French examples in having ornamentation on its inner tube that is clearly decorative in function, as opposed to the suggested usage as a gripping device proposed for five examples (all Irish) with repoussé bosses (Raftery 1967, 65). Another feature not found on the other eight examples from Eogan's Southern English group is the presence of a 'C' sectioned binding strip holding the two face plates together. Previously this feature was confined to the Irish and North British groups (Eogan 1969, 96 and 106).

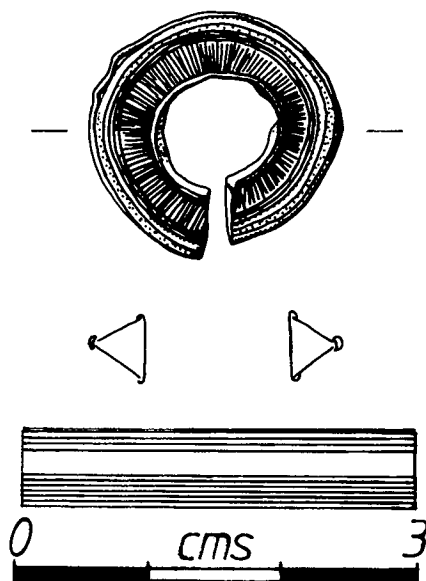


Figure 1.

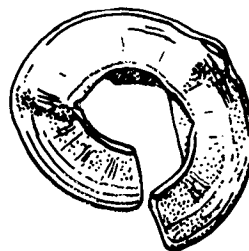


Figure 2.

The hair-ring is one of the smallest known (listed dimensions vary from 18mm to nearly 100mm) being only 19mm in diameter. Despite this it is highly decorated, like several others from Southern England. On the inner tube face this decoration consists of four parallel bands of incised grooves on the upper side (as illustrated) and six on the

lower side. The face plates have a single incised groove concentric and abutting the tube overlap and three incised grooves on the outer edges concentric with the binding strip. The regular execution of these incisions contrasts with the punched radiating lines which link the inner and outer grooves and which occasionally overlap and cut the inner of the three external incisions and the raised pinnacle separating the third and second incisions. However with a frequency of 33 punched lines per centimetre this crudeness is relative and perhaps not unexpected, and to the naked eye also appears finely executed.

The pattern of decoration would appear to be unparalleled although the closest in appearance are the matching pair from near Haverhill in Suffolk (Edwardson 1968, plate VI) where single hatched opposed triangles fill the concentric grooved bands. The Highdown Hill, Sussex (Curwen 1954) hair-ring is the only other example having grouped bands of incisions concentric to the central opening, although this lacks any form of infilled decoration.

This find adds to the known distribution of late bronze age ornaments from East Anglia. Its find-spot conforms with the main concentration of Bronze Age metalwork recorded elsewhere (eg, Pendleton in preparation a) in being from a fen edge situation, in this instance a fen 'island'.

Despite the lack of a positive association for this find the discovery of hoard material close-by may be relevant, as hair-rings are represented on at least three occasions as a component of founders or metalworkers hoards (eg, Balmashanner, Angus, Scotland; Burwell Fen, Cambridgeshire and Portfield, Lancashire), although most instances of association have been in hoards of a personal nature. However without direct observation of all of the Wimblington 'hoard' material, dating, on the basis of the identification of palstaves in the hoard, would favour a relatively early, possibly Wilburton date, which on the chronology of hair-rings suggested by Taylor, would appear too early.

However, a second possibility is that the Wimblington hair-ring comes not from a hoard but from a late Bronze Age occupation site. Finds of hair-rings from occupation sites are relatively common, with at least four instances being recorded (ie, Heathery Burn Cave, Co. Durham; Traprain Law, East Lothian; Highdown Hill and Harting Beacon, Sussex). It may not be merely fortuitous, especially considering the rich nature of these objects, that the last three of these locations, together with the Portfield hoard, were situated on the sites of hill-forts. Significantly the 'hillfort' of Stonea Camp

(and incidentally an extremely wealthy concentration of late Iron Age coinage) is located in the close vicinity of the find-spot of the hair-ring, and evidence of substantial late Bronze Age settlement of c seventh-fifth centuries BC has been revealed by excavations at Stonea Grange (Potter and Jackson 1985, 9). However until further fieldwork is carried out the nature of the Wimblington hair-ring's deposition must remain unresolved.

This find, although rich, typifies the 'new trend' in finds of Bronze Age metalwork, that is the now relatively frequent occurrence of small items, including objects that were formerly extremely rare in East Anglia, eg, the possibly functionally related gold and copper alloy penannular 'ring-money' of the late Bronze Age (Pendleton, in preparation b).

Due to the finding of these small items it may now become possible to correct a bias that has occurred in favour of large and complete objects (eg, swords and large spearheads from river dredgings).

NOTES

1. About 5 fragments of broken up palstaves and possibly a sword fragment (as seen and reported by the finder of the hair-ring) have been found by various individuals and fragments of other broken hoard material have been reported. Other known material including parts of three socketed axes, cake and part of a possible single edged knife are at present being drawn and listed by the author.

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THE PROCEEDINGS

- (1) The Editor welcomes the submission of articles on the history and archaeology of the County for publication in the *Proceedings*, but in order to avoid disappointment potential contributors are advised to write to the Editor, to enquire whether the subject is likely to be of interest to the Society, before submitting a final text. The Editor, if necessary with the advice of the editorial committee, reserves the right to refuse to publish any papers even when an earlier approval of the subject has been given.
- (2) Authors are reminded that the cost of printing is high and that, all other things being equal, a short and succinct paper is more likely to be published than a long one. It would also assist the Editor if contributors who know of possible sources for subventions towards the cost of printing their paper would inform the Editor of this when submitting their manuscript.
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