

XVII.—AN INSCRIBED OPENWORK GOLD RING FROM CORSTOPITUM.

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The ring which is the subject of the present note (pl. xxv, figs. 1 and 2) was found on 4th November, 1935, in clearing away the top soil inside the north-east corner of the so-called forum at Corstopitum. It is of gold, and when found had been crushed flat. It has, however, been restored to its proper shape in the workshops of the British Museum, and is now in mint condition. It is one inch in diameter, and weighs 183 grains. The hoop is .4 inches (10.5 mm.) broad, and is formed of a substantial band of metal elaborately decorated in an openwork technique. The workmanship is first class, and the condition as crisp as the day the jewel was made. It is an object of considerable intrinsic interest, and of a high degree of rarity.

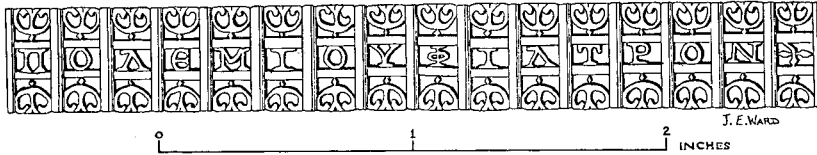
The exterior surface is divided into sixteen slightly concave facets, separated by plain perpendicular bars, each facet being subdivided into three compartments, or registers, by slighter horizontal lines, which run continuously around the hoop.¹ In the upper register appears a *pelta* motif with the central point and volute ends turned to the exterior, while the "back" of the *pelta* is attached to the horizontal line below by a minute lozenge. In the

¹ The text-figure, showing the design in projection, was kindly drawn for the present paper by Miss J. E. Ward of Armstrong College.

lower register the same design is repeated in reverse. In the central panel there is executed, again in openwork, an inscription in Greek capitals—one letter to each facet, with a quatrefoil stop to complete the number—reading as follows :

ΠΟΛΕΜΙΟΥ ΦΙΛΤΡΟΝ†
 “ The love-charm of Polemius.”

The effect of the openwork technique is one of extraordinary richness, even of magnificence. The details stand up in a form of relief from which the background has been cut away; and it is an interesting fact that this result has been achieved, not by the graver, but by the use of a set of punches—the burr, which was left projecting into the interior, having been carefully smoothed down so as to



avoid discomfort to the wearer. This feature was pointed out by the technical staff of the British Museum; on a close inspection it is, indeed, obvious. The fact argues for some degree at all events of mass production; it is, accordingly, the more remarkable that rings of this class should be so uncommon.

Careful scrutiny of the interior surface of the hoop may detect also traces, not irrecoverably smoothed away, of the junction between the two ends of the metal. These were bent over so as to overlap diagonally, and so hammered together, the resultant join being known as a “scarf” join. The position of the junction is behind the quatrefoil stop, and the technical difficulties involved have resulted in a trifling distortion of one of the leaves, or points, of the stop.² The facts that the join falls at the only break

² For this observation I am indebted to Mr. I. A. Richmond.

in the legend, and that the process damaged the pattern, however slightly, at this point, seem to prove that the design, or at all events the greater part of it, was executed before the junction took place, while the metal of the hoop was still a flat extended band. This would, of course, be much the easier position in which to work it, and is what common sense would suggest, nevertheless the demonstration of the fact comes somewhat unexpectedly.

Only one other properly authenticated example of the type is recorded from this country, and that too came from Corbridge.³ It was found in January 1840 in a field called Colchester on the estate of the Duke of Northumberland, "that is at, or even beyond, the west end of Corstopitum." It is remarkably similar to the new find, the hoop being formed of 15 facets, each fluted and ornamented with a letter from which the background has been cut away, and including three leaf stops. Above and below runs a band of openwork ornament in a design closely related to the *pelta*, though not so elaborate as in that under discussion.⁴ The letters are Roman capitals and read :

.AEMI.LIA.ZESES—Long life to Aemilia.

A gold ring with a similar inscription, but of unknown type, is recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine*⁵ from Stonham Aspal, Suffolk, with the legend :

OATMPEI ZHCAIC—Long life to Olympeus.

Although the type of this ring is not recorded, the language and wording of the inscription are so like those of the series under notice that it may be here included with due reserve.

³ It has been several times published, most recently by Haverfield in the *Northumberland County History*, vol. x, Corbridge (1914), p. 515, with full bibliography.

⁴ *Catalogue of Antiquities exhibited at Edinburgh*, 1856, pp. 59-60, with fig.

⁵ Vol. LXXXI, pt. II, p. 516.

The above three items complete the list for this country, and though no doubt others exist, I have been able to trace only three more from abroad. An example found in Cologne is preserved there in the Niessen collection.⁶ It also is of gold, and has twelve concave facets carrying the inscription :

AAACWNI ZHCAIC—Long life to Alasonius.

with the ν of $\text{'}\Lambda\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\iota$ crowded into one compartment, and no stops. The edges are, however, plain.

Another, but poorer, representative of the type is in the Fortnum Collection in the Ashmolean (Fortnum Coll., no. 296).⁷ This has a narrower hoop without decoration, but with a similar openwork inscription to the foregoing : XPWMAI.⁸ This ring has eight flutings, and is stated to have been found in Rome.

The most magnificent of the whole series is that in the British Museum from the Franks Bequest.⁹ It carries, in addition to twelve flutings of the usual type, a form of bezel with an openwork inscription to which is attached a projecting square element as in the common class of key rings. The projection consists entirely of a delicate openwork frame in which are arranged a form of the cross nine times repeated, and is finished in a scroll termination. The inscription in Roman capitals, reads : on the bezel—ACCIPERE DVLCIS; and round the hoop—MVLTI ANNIS, with a leaf stop. To us its chief interest, however, lies in the decoration of the edges of the hoop, above and below the inscription. This consists of a series of *pelta* ornaments

⁶ Henkel, *Die Römische Fingerringe der Rheinlande*, no. 9, pl. I, 9 and a-d. I am indebted to the authorities of the Departments of Greek and Roman, and British and Mediaeval Antiquities in the British Museum for this and one or two subsequent references.

⁷ *Arch. Journ.* xxvi (1869) 141, fig.

⁸ Both here, and in the Alasonius inscription, the large W, and not Ω is used.

⁹ Illustrated in the *B.M. Guide to the Early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities*, fig. 30; see also Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities in Brit. Mus.*, p. 9, no. 49.

indistinguishable from those on our new ring except that in the latter the ground behind the *pelta*, that is between the body of each *pelta* and the inscription, has been punched out. We may here remark that our new ring is the only one of the series in which this has been attempted, a refinement which gives it an even greater air of splendour than is displayed by the rest. The Franks ring was acquired from the Demetrio collection, for which reason it is assumed to have come from Egypt.

Less important representatives of the same general class are known, as, for example, another ring, of unknown provenance, in the Franks Bequest,¹⁰ formed of a similar fluted gold hoop, but much slighter in construction, of no great depth, and with an inscription rather crudely engraved, as in all the cheaper classes of ring, and not executed in openwork. Such may be regarded as the "poor cousins" of the magnificent class now under discussion. On no others, so far as we are aware, does the openwork technique reappear.^{10a}

In date and significance the group generally offers no difficulties. They are agreed to be late Roman, probably of the fourth century; and the formula of their inscriptions shows them to have a Christian connotation. Three out of the six rings described above carry inscriptions couched in the form of a personal acclamation accompanied by the word ΖΗΧΑΙC (for *ζήσεις*), the Greek equivalent for the Latin *vivas*. It is perhaps worth noting that on the first Corbridge ring this word has suffered a curious fate; the Latin *vivas*, translated into the Greek *ζήσεις*, has been retransliterated into Roman capitals, suffering in the process a partial Latinization to the form *zēsēs*! The force of the word, however, arises from the fact that it is an abbrevia-

¹⁰ Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan and Roman, in the B.M.*, no. 642.

^{10a} The openwork gold ring mentioned by Dalton (*loc. cit.*) as found at Tirlémont (Belgium) in 1894 may perhaps be identified with a fine example I have seen in the Cinquantenaire Museum at Brussels; unfortunately I did not take a note of the details and cannot say whether it carries an inscription.

tion for the ubiquitous formula *vivas in deo*, and is so found constantly in all classes of inscriptions of the early Christian period.

Rings were from the earliest times favourite vehicles for the expression of Christian sentiments, and the display of Christian symbols. They were, moreover, frequently used as a sign of betrothal, or marriage. And Haverfield has expressly suggested that this may have been the purpose of the first Corbridge ring.¹¹ That may well be so, but it must not be forgotten that "inscriptions upon early Christian rings frequently took the form of acclamations or expressions of goodwill, praying for the piety and prosperity of the recipient,"¹² so that the formula under discussion may connote only a general Christian fellowship, and not the particular circumstances of betrothal.

The new ring, however, offers a variant upon the common form. If there is any substance in the suggestion that the first Corbridge ring is a betrothal ring, the phrasing of the inscription on the second raises a distinct presumption that it *was* such a token. The word *φίλτρον* is explicit. The sense of "love-charm," however the nuance may vary, is, according to the lexicographers, inescapable. We seem at once to be back in the domain of magic, and amuletic jewellery is anything but in accord with the temper of the early fathers. There is, however, no need to read into the word any intention quite so elemental. Its ornament shows that it must belong to the series as to whose strictly Christian background there is no question. And though the words are cast in no well-worn formula of the early church, it is quite natural to understand them in a playful sense, as indicating that the ring given in open acknowledgment of betrothal should act also as a

¹¹ What he did *not* note, however, was the specifically Christian complexion of the formula, and its bearing as evidence, slight as it may be, for Christianity in the north. This is the more surprising in view of his interest in the subject, and his well-known paper on this very topic. *Arch. Ael.*³ xv (1918), 22 *seqq.*

¹² *B.M. Guide, Early Christian Antiquities*, p. 134.

bond retaining for the giver, who is named, the love of the recipient. If this is the correct interpretation of a formula at first sight somewhat puzzling, the status of the jewel as a betrothal ring becomes self-evident.

The great size of the hoop is remarkable—the more so if we recollect that the gender of the Polemius who is indicated as the giver is masculine, and that it was therefore presumably intended for a feminine hand. It may have been designed to be carried on the thumb—a not uncommon practice in antiquity. But it is simpler to suppose that, in accordance with a still more common practice, it was intended to be worn over a glove.

As regards dating there is, as noted above, general agreement in favour of the later Empire, and more particularly the fourth century. But apart from the implications of the Christian formula, which might apply over a considerable period, we have not seen the grounds for such a view set out in detail. The *vivas* acclamation is certainly characteristic of the *early* Christian period, and its appearance on such articles of outward show as finger rings suggests a date after the official adoption of Christianity (A.D. 323), though in view of increasing toleration this does not by any means follow of necessity. We may perhaps here be allowed to form a closer estimate.

In the first place the discovery of these rings on a Roman site in our own country puts a limiting date to the period of their production. They cannot be later than c. A.D. 400, and are not likely to be later than about A.D. 380. On the other hand, the use of the *pelta* as a decorative element is characteristic of *late* Roman art, more particularly of the fourth century, and in this connection the close resemblance between the ornament along the edges of the best rings of this class, and that which is frequently found fringing the foot of the fully developed cross-bow brooch, is of considerable importance.¹³ It is

¹³ See e.g. *B.M. Guide, Early Christian Antiquities*, fig. 53; and unpublished examples in the British Museum from Colchester (2), and London.

admitted that the ornament on the examples quoted does not consist of *peltae*, but then neither does that on the rings, with the exception of the new Corbridge one, which alone has the *pelta* in its full development. As noted above, this is the only ring in which the background behind the *pelta* has been punched out; in other words the new discovery helps to explain the ornament on those previously known. But about the connection between the kidney-shaped projections with inward curling ends on the fourth-century brooches, and the openwork decoration on, for example, the *multis annis* ring, there can be no question.

Further, in point of technique it is forwards and not backwards that our rings look. It is only in the later Empire that the fashion for this openwork, sometimes though incorrectly known as filigree, began to show itself. An interesting example from the north, also with an openwork inscription and equally dated to the fourth century, is the magnificent gold brooch from Erickstanebrae, near Dumfries.¹⁴ The openwork gold foot of the Gourdon paten is composed entirely of kidney-shaped elements arranged symmetrically; and here the evidence of associated coins gives some assurance to the late fifth-century dating which is generally accepted.¹⁵ But it is in the near east that in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries the technique finds its full development—a development which culminates in such jewellery as composed the great Antinoë hoard of the sixth century, part of which is now in the British Museum.¹⁶

Thus the history of the technique tends to force down as low as possible the dating of these its first beginnings. With all of these factors in mind we may therefore rest fairly assured if we date the rings of this group to the

¹⁴ *P.S.A.S.* LXVI (1931-32), 370-71, fig. 54.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Mr. T. D. Kendrick for drawing my attention to this fine object in the present context.

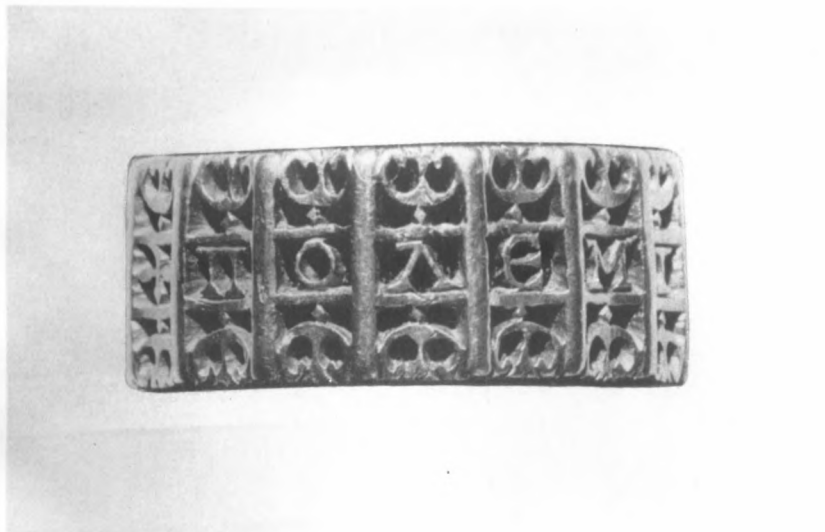
¹⁶ *Guide to Early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities*, fig. 78; see also *Univ. Michigan Studies, Humanistic series*, vol. XII (1918).

fourth century, and probably not to a very early date within it.

Of the centre of origin of this most distinctive class of work it is impossible to speak with any confidence. Did not the economic conditions and artistic degradation of the western empire preclude the idea of a western origin, the Greek of the inscriptions puts any such notion out of court. It is to the near east that we must look for the place of their manufacture. Its material circumstances and central position suggest Alexandria as a possible candidate, and this is to some slight extent borne out by the distribution of the later phases of the same technique; but any suggestion of the kind can be no better than guess-work.

How two such rings, of great elaboration of ornament, considerable intrinsic value, and unquestionably exotic origin, came to be lost in or about the remote outpost of Corstopitum towards the decline of the Roman Empire we shall never know.¹⁷ That they had a common origin far away in the east there can be no question, and they must have arrived here in company by the same means of transport. They may have passed from hand to hand as jewellers' stock-in-trade, though their destination seems an unlikely one, and can hardly have been intended in the first instance. More plausible is the notion that both came in possession of a single individual, or perhaps a family, transferred in the course of government from one end of the empire to another. Most interesting of all is the possibility that they were borne by members of the same

¹⁷ Mr. Richmond has drawn my attention to the several curious points of resemblance between these two rings and the sporadic finds of silver plate made in the neighbourhood of Corbridge in the eighteenth century, and generally agreed to form part of a single hoard dating from the last days of the Roman occupation (see Haverfield, *North-umberland County History*, x, pp. 516-520). They, too, were of the Lower Empire, of oriental inspiration, and possibly of Alexandrine workmanship; while the Chi-Rho monogram on the foot of one of the vessels introduces again the Christian emphasis. The appearance at such a date of these two classes of objects made of precious metals, and that not in isolation but in groups, is equally unexpected and equally difficult to account for. They present alike problems of the same order, and wear about them generally an air almost of mystery.



ROMAN GOLD RING FROM CORSTOPITUM (x3).

military unit, brought perhaps from a comparatively safe billet on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean to take part in a last ejection of the barbarians from the far north. It is in any case an almost incredible coincidence that both being lost they should both independently have been found, and we must not lose sight of the contingency, remote though it now is, that they formed part of a larger hoard, of which the remaining pieces await still to be recovered.