

ON SOME FINGER-RINGS, OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN PERIOD.

By C. DRURY E. FORTNUM, F.S.A.

IN bringing before the notice of the Society a small collection of rings in my possession, which, judging from the emblems and symbols engraven upon them, were undoubtedly worn by Christians of the earlier centuries of our era, I will not venture to discourse upon finger-rings generally, or upon the history of early Christian emblems. Both of these subjects are of large extent and great interest, and have been elucidated by far more able persons than myself. I would merely preface the descriptions of the rings exhibited, which form part of my "*Dactyliotheca*," and are an extremely interesting section, from the associations connecting them with the early history of the Christian church, by a few remarks which bear generally on the subject. It is well known that the greater number of the early converts to Christianity were of the poorer classes, among whom very many were slaves. The habit of dividing the goods of the rich for the benefit of their poorer brethren also prevailed, the indulgence therefore in rich dress and valuable ornament could hardly exist consistently with such observances. Indeed we are told that it was directly reprobated and forbidden by the early fathers; and although so often quoted, I cannot but refer to the letter of Clement of Alexandria who, alluding to the then fashionable use of ornament in excess, particularly to the great number of rings worn,—it being no uncommon thing to cover each joint, (indeed Martial states that one "Charinus" wore always six to each finger, making sixty rings in all for his daily adornment,)—admonishes the Christians that they should wear but one ring, the which to use as a signet, reproving the habit of having immoral subjects engraven on their signet rings, but that they should adopt a device typical of their faith, such as the palm-branch, emblematic of peace; or a ship in full sail,

representing the church ; a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit and eternal life ; an anchor, of hope ; a fish, the allegorical “*ixθvs* ;” and other similar devices. Among the rings now described will be found all the emblems here referred to, and in addition some others. The quaint and curious combinations of emblems adopted on early Christian monuments are well known to students of that section of archæology. I would also wish to make some remarks, with a view to the classification of the forms exemplified in this collection, and which appear to have been in vogue at that period, and also on the material of which the rings are made.

These forms do not appear to differ from the general fashion of their day, in the world Christian and Pagan, and may be classified as follows :—

A. The circular hoop of convex metal swelling to the shoulders and flattened to an oval or angular *chaton*. Such are Nos. 2, 8, 10, 24, and 25. The “legionary” rings may be also classed as an oval variety, so shaped possibly to permit of more space on the *chaton*. Such is No. 23.

B. Rings formed of two, three, or more hoops springing from one, widening to the bezel, and generally having beaded wire or chain-work between each hoop. This form, as the last, occurs also at an earlier period. Nos. 1 and 9 are examples of this form.

C. Octagonal. A flat hoop of metal formed into an octagon ; sometimes oval and swelling to the bezel, which is set with a stone or has a raised table of metal ; a form, I think, peculiar to the third and fourth centuries. Such are Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

D. A peculiar form, greatly varying, and, I think, only occurring during the Lower Empire ; sometimes of the largest size, and great weight of metal. The bezel is more or less raised, either in the metal or by an oval truncated conical stone. The shoulders diverge in straight lines at a greater or less angle from the bezel to the sides, from whence the hoop is completed by a semicircle. These rings are sometimes of extreme widths. Nos. 11 and 12 are of this class.

E. A simple hoop, generally of convex metal more or less swelling to the shoulders, and having a circular bezel with flat table, on which the device is engraved ; Nos. 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 are of this abundant form. No. 26 is a variety with a square bezel.

F. The simple hoop has a high, trumpet-shaped bezel, formed as an inverted cone, of greater or less height, and sometimes octagonal laterally. Such are Nos. 20, 21, and 22.

This form, and also D., are peculiar to this period of decadence, and occasionally occur of grotesque proportions and development, the tower-like head rising sometimes to more than half an inch in height.

It is singular how the forms of rings repeat themselves at distant periods, but always with modifications. Thus the pointed oval *chaton* of the early Greek, recurs transposed in the last century. The tower-like head, in Gothic times, assumes a crocketed and pointed form of extraordinary development.

On the subject of material, it may be observed that, as a rule, early Christian rings of gold are rare. This might be expected, as the use of rich and numerous ornaments was not in accordance with the teaching of the early church. The rule also of wearing one ring only, as a signet, instead of one nearly on every joint, as was mostly the fashion among the Pagans, would account for the comparative rarity of rings with early Christian symbols.

I have not, to my recollection, seen more than two authentic early Christian rings of silver. Bronze is the more common material; iron being much more rare. This probably arises from the easier oxydation and destructibility of that metal, whilst gold and "enduring bronze" come down to us in good preservation. Among the twenty-six rings now described, *six* are of gold, one of them being Byzantine, and one possibly Pagan. Of iron there are two, one from the dry climate of Egypt, the remaining seventeen being of bronze, and one of jasper. Rings with Pagan subjects of the same period are frequently found of massive gold and silver, occasionally weighing as much as two and three ounces; a silver ring in my possession weighs one ounce.

Before entering into a description of each of the rings to which the present notice relates, I will take this opportunity of warning collectors against the many admirable counterfeits, now manufactured at Rome and elsewhere, of early Christian rings, as well as intaglios and cameos, requiring the most careful examination, and not a little experience, to detect the forgeries. All those which I now proceed to

describe have passed the scrutiny of far more able judges than myself, and are of unquestionable antiquity.

1. Gold triple ring, formed as three hoops, springing from one, and widening towards the bezel, between which a beaded wire fills the open space, and on the bezel is formed into the Christian emblem. This form of the emblem was in use before A.D. 312, and is believed to have ceased after that date.

The ring was, I am told, dug up in a vineyard in Rome, and is probably of the latter end of the third, or beginning of the fourth century.

It is possible that the triple ring tied by the cross may be emblematic of the three persons of the blessed Trinity. Rings of this form were, however, in fashion at that, and at earlier periods, two, three, and as many as five hoops springing from one, being found.



2. Portion of a ring of dark green jasper, on the oval bezel of which the following remarkable, and hitherto unknown symbol is engraved in intaglio, viz.—a boat, on which is a cock, carrying a branch [^] palm. This symbol, as read by the Padre Garrucci, would indicate the arrival of the blessed soul in the haven where we would be; thus, the bird (the cock) representing the soul, and carrying the palm-branch of peace and victory over this world, is conveyed by the boat, which typifies Christ's Church on earth. The workmanship is sharp and good, pointing to an early period of Christianity, probably the second or third century. I purchased it at Rome.¹



3. Ring of bronze, formed as a flat octagonal band, on the

¹ In the collection of the British Museum is a portion of a ring in cornelian of similar form, on the flat bezel of which is engraved a dove holding a branch; its form, size, and general similarity of workmanship would indicate a corresponding

date. The ship frequently occurs. On an intaglio in the British Museum is a ship having a Greek cross on the prow; two fish are beneath. The dove also occurs on another intaglio in the British Museum, standing on a fish.

outside of which is engraved the inscription—V.I.V. I.N. D.E.O.—*Vivas in Deo*, a form of expression frequent on the *loculi* of the catacombs.

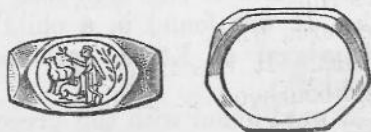
4. Copper ring, formed as a flat octagonal band, engraved thus on the outside—DONATE BIBAS IN DEO. The use of B in place of v in the word VIVAS frequently occurs. This ring and No. 3 are both from Rome, and probably of the fourth century.²

5. Solid gold ring, also formed as a flat octagonal band, but instead of the inscription being engraved outside as in the case of the more ordinary bronze rings, the letters are cut out; each letter occupying a square panel, the ground of



which is cut away, leaving the letter attached merely by points to the sides, a technical peculiarity that may be termed "*champlevé à jour*." This inscription reads—X.P.Ω.M.A.T.I.—CROMATI—a Christian family name, known to be of the fourth century, as I am informed by the Chevalier De Rossi. This ring was also found at Rome, but I am unable to state in what precise locality. It is believed to be of the third or fourth century, and is an object of considerable interest.

6. Bronze ring of oval octagonal form, widening at the bezel, which is set with a red jasper engraved in intaglio with the subject of a shepherd who stands on the left leg, the right being bent; he is supported by a stick in his right



hand, while the left holds a branch of olive towards two sheep, one standing, the other lying at his feet. Behind

² An intaglio on cornelian in the British Museum has the inscription, "*Deus dedit vivas in Deo*," a circular wreath or coronet probably of olive or

palm, and the Christian emblem formed of the combined Greek letters, Chi and Rho.

him is an olive tree. The shepherd here would typify our Blessed Lord offering the emblem of peace ("My peace I give to you") to his flock. The two sheep, or lambs, may also be intended to represent the Church of the Circumcision and the Church of the Gentiles, to both of whom he offers the peace of his blessed doctrine. Although there is no distinctive Christian emblem upon this intaglio, I have no doubt, from the subject and its mode of treatment, as well as the general character of the ring, that it is Christian of the third or fourth century.³ I purchased it at Rome.

7. Small heavy gold ring, formed as an octagonal band widening towards the bezel, on which, set in an oval raised collar, is a pointed onyx of three strata, engraved in intaglio with a palm branch. I have some hesitation in thinking that this ring is Christian, although the form and general character is of the third or fourth century, and the palm branch is undoubtedly an early Christian emblem. I have not therefore had it engraved. My doubt of its Christian origin arises, firstly, from its being so weighty for its size; such, however, do occur. One, of angular form, in the British Museum, is set with an emerald, having a fish carefully cut in intaglio, and on the opposite side of the hoop, a dove, seated on a branch, between the letters F A. Another massive gold ring bears an intaglio on onyx I M of the Sacred symbol, the P (the Greek rho) being I L crossed with the third stroke, a form of much more unusual occurrence. My ring is of excellent workmanship—I purchased it at Athens.

8. A child's ring of gold, a simple hoop, flattened out on the bezel, which is engraved also with the palm branch. It was found in a child's tomb in the neighbourhood of Rome, accompanied by that next to be described.⁴



9. Small ring of gold found with the preceding. It consists of two hoops of gold, springing from one, and widening to the bezel; on each of which a small round paste

³ Genuine intagli of early Christian subjects are rare. The British Museum has some interesting examples—the Good Shepherd carrying the lamb on his shoulders being represented in three intagli. On one he is placed between a

fish and a palm branch.

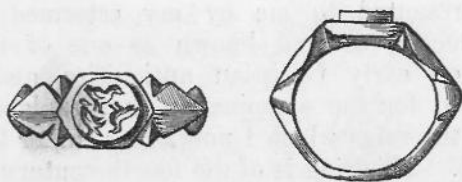
⁴ Rings of this simple form and engraved with the palm are of frequent occurrence. Several are in the Museum at Naples; and one of silver, a rare material, is in the British Museum.

has been set, but these are now wanting. A plait of gold wire fills the opening between the hoops, and is attached at their junction. The Christian Symbol of the palm-branch engraved on one of these rings, and the workmanship and form, being of the third or fourth century, would, perhaps, warrant the conclusion, that they had belonged to a child received into the faith of Christ.

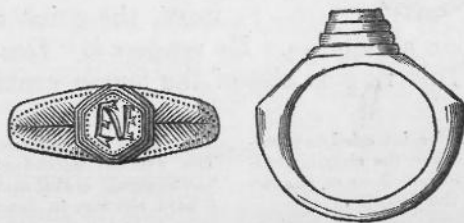


10. Bronze ring—circular hoop of convex metal, swelling to the *scudo* which is of lozenge shape, and on which is engraved the well-known combined X and P. The shoulders are ornamented with lozenge-shaped panelling. From Rome, and of the fourth or fifth century.

11. Bronze ring of coarse workmanship and angular form: the shoulders splayed from the *chaton* to the centre of either side, thence continuing the hoop in a circular form. On a raised circular table of the *chaton* is engraved the device, two doves and a fish.⁵



12. Bronze ring of nearly similar form; the shoulders engraved as palm branches, the bezel raised by four steps or tables, and engraved with a monogram. Also from Rome, and of the same period.



⁵ The fish typifying the Christ or the Christian, the doves the church militant and triumphant.

13. Bronze ring formed as a circle of half round metal, swelling to the shoulders, and having a circular raised *chaton*, on which is engraven a double fluked anchor, crossed by one of a single fluke, and surrounded by a pearled border. This emblem was in use previous to A.D. 312. From the catacombs at Rome.



14. Bronze ring, a plain wire hoop attached to a circular *chaton*, on which is coarsely engraved a ship (the Church) between the letters X and P (*Chi* and *Rho*). Obtained at Rome.



15. Bronze ring, a plain rounded hoop slightly swelling to the shoulders, and surrounded by a plain circular *chaton*, engraved with a draped female, standing between two birds, probably intended for doves, and typifying⁶ the church feeding her proselytes. On either side is the monogram, composed of the letters Chi and Rho. This highly interest-



ing ring is of superior workmanship, and in an excellent state of preservation; it was found in the catacombs, I believe, of S. Calixtus, and was presented to me by my esteemed friend the Padre Garrucchi, so well known as one of the greatest authorities on early Christian antiquities, and to whom I am indebted for the examination and explanation of the majority of the rings which I now bring under the notice of the Institute. This ring is of the fourth century of our era.

16. Bronze ring, with flat circular bezel, the hoop is circular, and decorated with engraved ornament to represent branches of palm in angular panels. On the bezel a mono-



gram is deeply cut, and for the reading of which I am indebted to the Chevalier de Rossi, the great authority on early Christian antiquities. He renders it "*Deus dona vivas in Deo.*"⁷ This ring is also of the fourth century, of good

⁶ This may also be intended to represent our fond mother, the church, feeding or gathering to her those of the circumcision and of the Gentiles.

⁷ The "*Deus-dona*" must be taken as a single word, or rather a Christian name of base Latinity, but known to have been used in the fourth century. It would equally read *Deo-dona*, a name also I be-

lieve found in inscriptions of the period. The French descendant of this name, "*Dieudonne*," is still met with in France. I have already, in describing No. 4, alluded to an intaglio in the British Museum on which occurs—"Deus dedit vivas in Deo." The engraving of this monogram, as well as that of Nos. 19 and 20, is reversed, being intended for signets.

workmanship, and in excellent preservation, having a rich green patina. I purchased it in Rome.

17. Bronze ring of coarse workmanship, a circular hoop surmounted by a flat circular bezel, on which is engraved an ear of corn between two fishes, emblem of the bread of life, and of those who live in faith of it. This ring is also from the Roman catacombs, and of the fourth century.

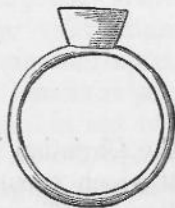


18. Bronze ring of similar form and coarse work, having the sacred emblem, the standard of Constantine, engraved on the *chaton*. It is much oxidised, and was found in a Roman vineyard.

19. Bronze ring of similar form but smaller, and also engraved with the same monogram, but with the P (rho) reversed. This ring is said to have been found in the neighbourhood of the house of *Pudens*, which underlies the church of Santa Pudentiana at Rome, and was supposed to have been brought out with the rubbish excavated therefrom.



20. Bronze ring formed as a circular hoop, from which springs a trumpet or inverted conical bezel, on the flat circular face of which is engraved the sacred monogram, round which is the inscription COSME . VIVAS. This ring is in excellent preservation, and was found in one of the catacombs on the Via Appia.

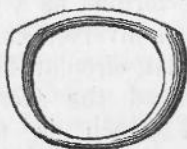


21. Bronze ring of the same class as No. 20, but of still more exaggerated form, the trumpet-shaped bezel rising more than one-third of an inch beyond the outer surface of the hoop ; this conical piece is encircled by three projecting mouldings, and the *scudo*, or face, is engraved with the double anchor crossed by a single one, as on No. 13, and surrounded by a dotted line. Where this ring was found I am unable to say ; I purchased it in London. It is probably of the fourth century.

22. Iron ring, of somewhat similar fashion to the last : the bezel is higher, and of octagonal form ; on its flat surface is engraved a subject of two figures, over which is the sacred monogram. On each face of the octagon is

engraved a figure, but the oxidation of the metal renders it impossible to distinguish more than the indistinct form. It is a remarkable ring of its class, both from the material and the great amount of subject engraved upon it. I purchased it in London. From their easy destructibility by oxidation, iron rings are seldom found entire. In the British Museum there is one with a cornelian set in the bezel, and which has been burnt. The intaglio is very rude, an animal, but the cross or sacred emblem is apparent.

23. Bronze "Legionary ring" of oval form with flattened bezel, on which is engraved the so-called legionary number, but this numbering I am unable to decipher. Beneath, at the opposite extreme to the bezel, the hoop is flattened, and



the Christian letters occur. I am unable to account for the *M* which occurs on each shoulder. I procured the ring in Rome. These rings are called "Legionary rings" by the Roman antiquaries. Mr. Waterton thinks that they may have been for the use of soldiers, the number denoting the company or "*cohors*." The Legions never exceeded 28, whereas the numbers on these rings occur to 100. From Rome.⁸



24. Gold ring: a circular convex hoop, widening to the shoulders, and flattened to form an oval bezel, on which is engraved a monogram between two Greek crosses. I have not been able to read the monogram. The ring is Byzantine, probably of the fifth or sixth century, and was found at Constantinople, where I purchased it. The workmanship is excellent.

⁸ See the supplementary notice of a legionary bronze ring in Mr. Waterton's collection.

25. Small iron ring, a circular hoop swelling to the *chaton*, on which is engraved the lion of St. Mark. This ring, which is also probably of the sixth century, was found in a Coptic grave near the Temple of "Medinet Aboo," at Thebes, whence the Christians were driven by the Arabs in the seventh century.⁹ The Lion is probably allusive to the church of St. Mark of Alexandria. On an onyx in my possession the lion is represented in intaglio, accompanied by the Greek cross.



26. Bronze ring, a simple convex hoop holding a square tabular *chaton*, on which is engraved a draped male figure having a nimbus round the head, and standing before a cross which is placed on, or springs from, what would appear to represent a bunch of grapes, to which the cross forms the stem—"I am the true Vine." The form of the cross is what would be termed "potent," each arm having a T formed termination. This ring is probably Byzantine, of the sixth or seventh century, and is from Athens.



With the Christian rings which have been described I obtained also during my recent visit to the Eternal City a few objects of a different description, but likewise early Christian. These consist of a bronze lamp from the catacombs at Naples, and probably of early Christian origin. The handle is surmounted by a large open flower of six petals. It has two nozzles for light, each of which is also formed as a flower or star of eight points. The cover is wanting; there are points for attaching three chains for suspension. Also two fibulæ of bronze, formed as doves, very probably of Christian origin; and a martyr's tooth, from the Catacomb of S. Callixtus. These objects, as well as the rings, I have had the honor of exhibiting to the Society.

LEGIONARY RING, IN POSSESSION OF EDMUND WATERTON, Esq., F.S.A.

There are a considerable number of the bronze rings designated by collectors "legionary" in the Waterton *Dactyliotheca*; they were submitted to the Institute at the annual

⁹ See a notice of Eucharistic and other Christian relics found there, and now in my possession, Arch. Journal, vol. xxv. p. 244.

meeting, at Gloucester, in 1860, and are noticed in the Catalogue of the Temporary Museum, p. 24. Mr. Waterton observed that they had been supposed to have been worn by soldiers, as indicating the legion to which they belonged: the numbers engraved upon them range from 1 to 100. At no period, however, did the legions exceed 28. I am enabled to place before the reader a representation of one of the specimens in Mr. Waterton's series; the letter C. engraved upon



it may seem to corroborate his conjecture, as denoting possibly the Cohort. These curious Roman rings have not been satisfactorily interpreted; one in my possession bears the number LXIV. I am not aware whether any example has been found out of Italy, nor have I heard of another ring of this class that bears,

in addition to the usual Roman numerals, like that in my collection above figured (No. 23), any symbol or monogram that may be assigned to the Christian period.

A remarkably fine gold ring of pierced workmanship, similar to that of No. 5, above described and figured, is in the possession of the Duke of Northumberland. The ground surrounding the letters is cut away; the legend reads—AEMILIA ZESES—small foliated ornaments being introduced to divide the two words. It was found at Corchester, the supposed site of the *Corstopitum* of Antoninus, about a mile west of Corbridge, on the Tyne. This beautiful Roman relic is described and figured in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. vii. p. 192; also in the *Illustrated Catalogue of the Museum formed at Edinburgh during the meeting of the Institute in 1856*, p. 59. There is every probability that this ring is early Christian, and of about the same period as that in my collection (No. 5, *supra*).