

## A Roman silver signet ring from Bullock Down, East Sussex

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In 1991 a walker on Bullock Down near Eastbourne in Sussex, Mr G. Challice, discovered a Roman silver signet ring (Fig. 1), and thoughtfully passed it to the Downland ranger. The exact findspot is no longer known, but it is believed to have been somewhere in the vicinity of the Romano-British farmstead (Rudling 1982). Field BD 0002 of this settlement had already produced a 3rd-century silver ring with a plain glass setting (Rudling 1982, 138), which may originally have held an engraved gem used for sealing. During a survey of signet rings from southern Roman Britain for my MA dissertation, it was noted that these artefacts were quite uncommon in East Sussex. The four known examples are a bronze Byzantine ring from Alfriston, two loose engraved gemstones from the *Classis Britannica* bath house at Beauport Park, and one bronze signet ring and an unset carnelian intaglio from the small town of Hassocks (see catalogue in Henig 2007).

The ring is silver, weighs 9.07g, has projecting shoulders and a relatively flat bezel of Henig type X form, and thus probably dates to the 3rd century AD (Henig 2007, 9, fig. 1a). It is complete and well preserved, has an internal diameter of 18.5mm, and has several dents and scratches. On the underside of the bezel an area appears to have been scratched away to reach the underside of the gem (Fig. 1c), possibly to test the metal content, or to prise out the intaglio and replace the signet's device. Although it is unlikely that traditional Roman sumptuary laws were still adhered to in 3rd-century Britain, silver rings would not have been obtainable on most budgets, and finds of two such rings from this vicinity probably indicate individuals of some wealth visiting if not residing on the headland.

The gemstone (Fig. 1b) is a dark-red opaque red jasper cut as an oval 10mm × 7mm. I follow the convention of describing the signet's motif in reverse, as it appears this way

when used as a seal, and the image would have reached its widest audience in this form. Engraved on the gem is Mercury, standing in profile to the left, and nude apart from his hat and a chalmys slung over his left shoulder. He presents a moneybag in his outstretched right hand, and supports his caduceus in the crook of his left arm. This composition is that most commonly used to represent Mercury on signet rings in Roman Britain, and Henig suggests that it originally derived from a lost Greek statue by the master Polykleitos (2007, 29). The gem cutting is cursory, particularly in the execution of the simplified caduceus, and falls within the Incoherent Grooves Style of Maaskant-Kleibrink (1975, 207; Henig 1988, 149–51) which was predominant in the 3rd century AD and so tallies with the likely date of the ring. At first we might attribute such simplification to lack of understanding of Roman iconography, or even to artistic decline, but it is worth considering that during the 3rd century use of signet rings reached a wider section of the Romano-British population than ever before. This was probably only enabled by intensified production, with a resulting reduction in the quality of many of the gems produced.

Parallels can be found elsewhere in Britain with this signet's depiction of Mercury, on two carnelian intaglios from the military north, one from the mansio at Chesterholm (*Vindolanda*), Northumberland, and the other from Castlesteads, Cumberland (Henig 2007, cat. nos 43 and 47). Elsewhere in the empire a similarly 'incoherent' but slightly more detailed rendering of the god can be found on a plasma from Split, Croatia, also dating to the 3rd century (Middleton 1991, cat. no. 59). In Italy itself, an intaglio from the major gem-engraving centre of Aquileia is similar to our Sussex Mercury, and is again engraved on the popular gemstone carnelian (Sena Chiesa 1966, cat. no. 176).

Mercury was a popular device used on signets in southern Roman Britain, particularly among the military and rural communities, and this artefact seems to suggest his popularity among the well-to-do rural individuals of this locale. He appears to have been perceived as an approachable deity, with a kind ear to the problems of humanity, and seems to have been the most popular of the Roman gods among the peoples of the western provinces (Henig 1984, 57). We can only wonder at the specific circumstances that led our ring's



Fig. 1. (a) A Roman silver signet ring found on Bullock Down (Marshman). (b) Carnelian intaglio depicting Mercury set in the Bullock Down ring. (Marshman by permission of Eastbourne Borough Council) (c) Underside of ring, damage possibly caused by testing the metal or changing the gemstone. (Marshman by permission of Eastbourne Borough Council.)

owner to choose Mercury for their personal signet, but we may assume that they felt a strong connection to the deity.

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## Gilt-glass tesserae from Southwick Roman villa, West Sussex: a reappraisal

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### INTRODUCTION

Southwick Roman villa, dating from c. AD 75/80, is the sole case within the group of early Roman villas in Sussex, and indeed Britain, where tesserae of coloured glass with gold leaf have been recorded (Neal and Cosh 2009, 557; Cunliffe 1973, 78; Russell 2006, 138). These extremely rare tesserae have been interpreted as originating from a wall mosaic rather than a floor mosaic (Winbolt 1931, 482; 1932, 24). Here we reappraise the evidence for the gilt-glass tesserae discovered

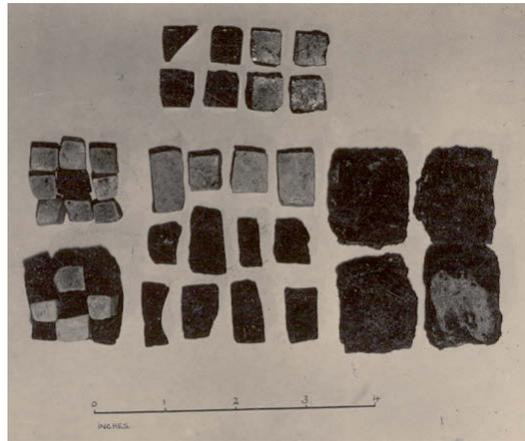


Fig. 1. An original photograph (c. 1931) including the Southwick glass tesserae (top two rows) found by S. E. Winbolt; scale in inches (courtesy John Ward).

during the main excavation of the villa in 1931 under S. E. Winbolt and his assistant C. R. Ward, and the subsequent additional findings during later re-examination of part of the structure in 1965 under R. A. Canham, in relation to the glass and gilt-glass tesserae in the Sussex Archaeological Society collections at Marlipins Museum hitherto considered to be from that site.

### WINBOLT AND CANHAM TESSERAЕ

In 1931, S. E. Winbolt first published (1931, 482) information on the gilt-glass tesserae found that year at Southwick villa, recording '9 greenish glass tesserae, measuring on the surface about 3/5 inch [15mm] square'. Winbolt subsequently reiterated (1935, 28) this first account, similarly recording nine tesserae with their approximate dimensions. The most precise description of these tesserae was published in the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter SAC) (1932, 24–5), the principal article on the Southwick villa excavation.

Eight exceptional glass tesserae (7 square, 1 triangular), probably used for a wall mosaic in room 14. They are of yellow-green glass, the face 7/16 in. [11mm] square, tapering on the inner side to 5/16 [8mm] to 6/16 in. [9.5mm]; thickness, 3/16 in. [5mm]. Gold leaf was laid on the upper surface, and flashed with a very thin coat of glass. They were imported, perhaps from Aquileia, the glass centre of Italy, or Damascus.

This account presents eight, rather than nine, gilt-glass tesserae, and eight such tesserae are also depicted in the same article in a contemporary photograph (Winbolt 1932, fig. 6), whereas no such image was published with Winbolt's other two accounts. The measurements and details of the tesserae are also more exact in this report, giving specific dimensions for the surfaces and thicknesses.

A second, original, photograph, similar to that published in the 1932 SAC article, most likely taken by Tim Ward in 1931 (see Winbolt 1932, 32), has been deposited by John Ward (son of C. R. Ward and nephew of Tim Ward) with the