

Some notes on Gems and Finger Rings in the Grosvenor Museum

By Martin Henig M.A.; D.Phil.; F.S.A.

Chester has produced very few engraved gems and finger rings; far less than might be expected of a site of its importance.¹ Even of those which I have listed, information has been less than adequate either because the gem is lost or because there is no record of the object's provenance. It is thus with great pleasure that I acknowledge the considerable help of Miss G. Lloyd-Morgan in locating the following items in the stores of the Grosvenor Museum.

1. Impression of an intaglio paste showing Cupid standing on one leg upon a racing chariot drawn by two horses. The biga is depicted in profile to the right but the front horse has turned its head to face its companion.² The gem was originally set in a bronze ring.

From Hunter Street, Chester, 1936. Found with Flavian pottery.

Dimensions c 13 × 11 mm (The dimensions given in Henig of 8 × 5 mm refer to the moulded surface and not to the total area of the piece, whose sides bevel outwards.)

The intaglio was placed on display with other loan material in the upper foyer area of the Cinema. Some pieces, including the ring, were stolen at a later date. Fortunately a wax impression of the intaglio is still extant, and was recently made available for study by courtesy of the Manager Mr. Rosser and staff at the Cinema.

For references *cf* *Trans. Chester and North Wales Archaeol. Soc.* XXXIII, 1939, 59 and fig. 12, 6 where the device was correctly described as 'Eros [Cupid] driving biga' although the very poor drawing did not enable the reader to confirm this identification. Henig No. 517 is cautious and compares the device with that on a cut stone from Bath depicting a mortal charioteer. This note provides an opportunity to correct the description.

2. Impression of an intaglio gem showing Venus with a hand mirror.³ The stone was evidently slightly convex and was described by Watkin as a 'pale carnelian'. It has not been located. Museum Ac. No. 312. R. 1975.

Dimensions 13 × 9 mm.

For references *cf* Henig No. 277.

3. Heavy bronze ring with trace of gilding, containing an intaglio of glass paste imitative of nicolo. This depicts a Victory, holding a palm-branch and wreath, standing on a globe. Museum Ac. No. 251. R. 1925.

Dimensions Ring: external diameter 28 mm; internal diameter 22 mm; width across bezel 20 mm.

Intaglio: 13 × 10 mm.

For references *cf* Henig No. 311. The intaglio is closely paralleled by *ibid* Nos. 306-310. Both ring and setting are closely matched at Beaune in France (H. Guiraud, 'La Victoire sur quelques pierres gravées d'époque romaine à propos d'une bague du Musée de Genève', *Genava* XXIII, 1975, 127-134 especially 129f, photo No. 7. The ring should be dated to the late second century rather than to the beginning as stated by Guiraud.)

4. Gold ring with incised representation of clasped hands on the bezel.

Museum inv. no. 252. R. 1975, previously registered as Z55.

Dimensions external diameter 19 mm; internal diameter 13 mm; width across bezel 6 mm.

The device is in fact correctly identified in my *Corpus* (Henig No. 773) on the basis of a drawing. A similar ring is illustrated by Oman in his *Catalogue of rings in the Victoria and Albert Museum*.⁴ Although this is assigned to the Middle Empire, it is probably—like ours—a first century piece.

Apart from the above which have been noted before, the following items are presented for the first time.

5. Hexagonal bezel containing an intaglio of blue-green glass moulded with a schematic device.

Museum Ac. No. 307. R. 1975.

Dimensions Width of bezel 12 mm; height of bezel 4 mm. The intaglio is oval, 8 mm by 6 mm.

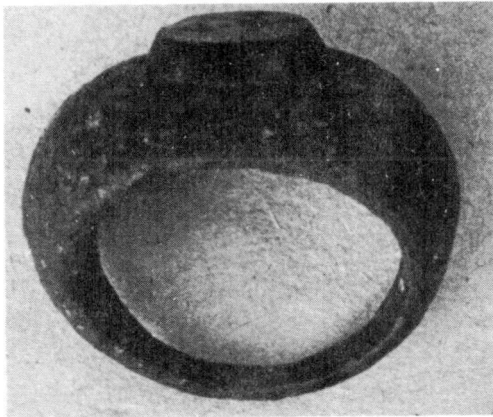
Intaglios of this type were made in the third century and appear to be confined to sites in Britain.⁵



No 2



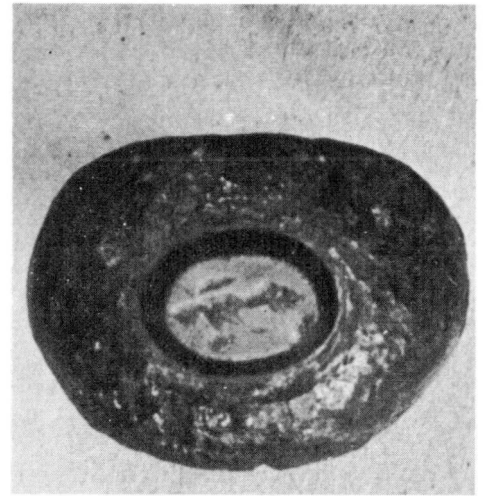
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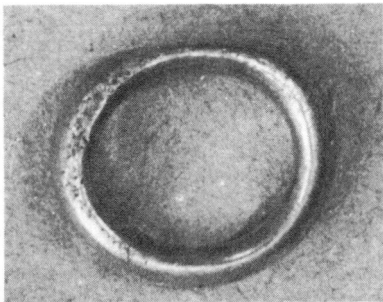
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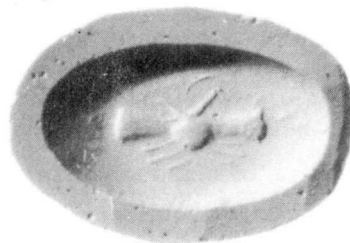
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No 3



No 4



No 4



No 4

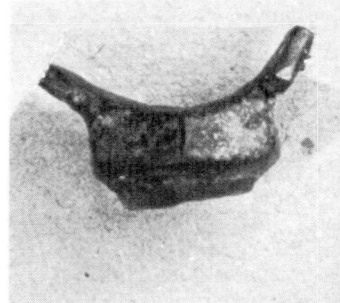
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|-------|--|-------|-----------|
| No. 1 | Impression of Cupid and biga intaglio | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| No. 2 | Impression of Venus intaglio | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| No. 3 | Winged victory intaglio set in bronze ring | | Henig |
| | side view | | Henig |
| | impression of intaglio | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| No. 4 | Gold ring with Dextrarum Iunctio | | Henig |
| | side view | | Henig |
| | impression of engraved bezel | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| | Plate 1 | | |



No 5



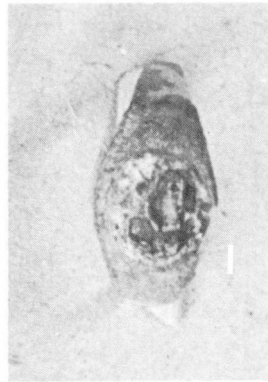
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No 5



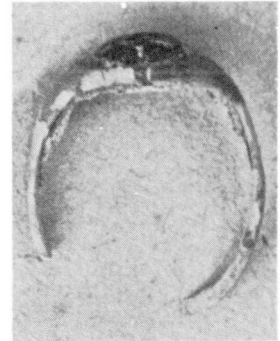
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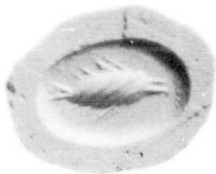
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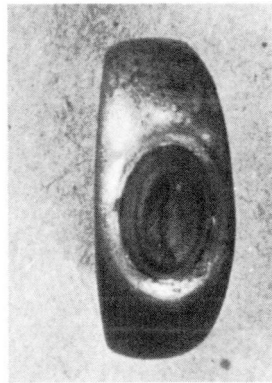
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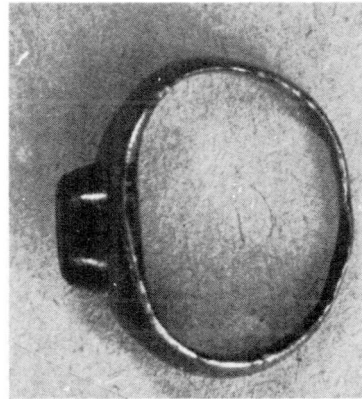
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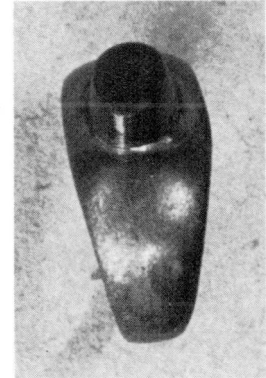
No 7



No 7



No 7



No 7

No. 5 Moulded glass intaglio set in bronze ring
side view
impression of intaglio

(3:1)

Henig
Henig
Ashmolean

No. 6 Minerva intaglio set in bronze ring
side view
impression of intaglio
impression of gem (cornelian) from Kenchreai, Greece,
showing similar scene

(3:1)

(3:1)

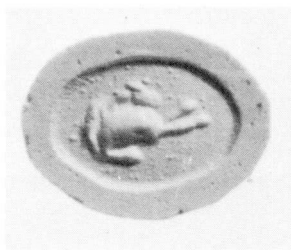
Henig
Henig
Ashmolean

Ashmolean

No. 7 Fish intaglio set in silver ring
oblique view
profile
impression of intaglio

(3:1)

Henig
Henig
Henig
Ashmolean



No 8



No 9



No 10



No 10



No 10

- | | | | |
|--------|--|-------|-------------------------|
| No. 8 | Impression of hare intaglio | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| No. 9 | Impression of intaglio with modius and ears of corn | (3:1) | Ashmolean |
| No. 10 | Gold ring set with amethyst
oblique view
side view | | Henig
Henig
Henig |

6. Bronze ring with an intaglio of pale orange glass imitative of cornelian, depicting Minerva. The goddess holds a Victory in her right hand, above a lighted altar. From St. Martin's Field, 1965.
Museum inv. no. 332. R. 1976.
- Dimensions* Diameter of ring 16 mm; width across bezel 8 mm. Oval intaglio, 7 mm by 6 mm.
- A similar ring from Möhn in the Rhineland is assigned to the early empire. The intaglio may be compared with a sardonyx in the British Museum and with a recently published stone found at Kenchreai in Greece.⁶
- 7-10 are from unpublished excavations at Newgate/Pepper Street.
7. Silver ring set with a pale cornelian intaglio showing a fish.
Museum inv. no. 333. R. 1976 (excavation no. NP 1963 AC).
- Dimensions* Ring: external diameter 21 mm; internal diameter 19 mm; width across bezel 9 mm.
- The gem, a truncated cone, is 3 mm high and the upper face measures 6.5 by 4.5 mm.
- The gem is virtually identical to one in a third century ring from the Rhineland and although our ring appears to be rather earlier (?end of second century), the fish is rendered in a patterned manner not current before the end of the Antonine Age. It is possible that the Christian ICHTHYS is represented, but more likely that the device recalls the journey of the soul after death to the Isles of the Blessed.⁷
8. Bronze ring fragment containing an intaglio of nicolo-paste showing a hare or some other rodent.
Museum inv. no. 334. R. 1976 (excavation no. NP RE).
- Dimensions* Ring: width across bezel 11 mm.
Intaglio: 11 mm by 8.5 mm by 2.3 mm.
- The animal depicted has long forelegs and at least one of the back legs held at right angles to the body. Above the creature's back we can see the other leg held at an oblique angle or, if the beast is not in fact a hare but a squirrel, a curving tail. The animal has a small head and fairly prominent ears.
- cf* Henig, No. 622, a cornelian from Alcester for a hare; there are nicolo pastes, in third century rings, from Saalburg and Cologne depicting squirrels.⁸
9. Intaglio on a greyish burnt stone (perhaps Agate) depicting a modius which contains four ears of cereal (two upright and two hanging over the side of the vessel), and a poppy-head.
Museum inv. no. 335. R. 1976 (excavation no. NP 1964 XI UB).
- Dimensions* 13.5 mm by 11.3 mm by 2.5 mm. The stone has a flat upper surface and bevelled sides.
- For the type *cf* Henig No. 404 from a Flavian cache of gems found at Bath. An intaglio found in the Praetorium of Chester (Henig No. 688) is of similar shape and shows two hawks pulling a cart containing a basket, like the modius emblematic of rural prosperity. There is a corn ear in front of the birds. Both stones are well composed, crisply cut studies typical of the first century.
10. Gold ring, possibly from Chester, containing a plain amethyst cut 'en cabochon'.
Museum inv. no. 310. R. 1975, previously registered as no. Z55.
- Dimensions* external diameter 22 mm; internal diameter 19 mm; width across bezel 11 mm.
The stone measures 11 mm by 6 mm.
- This type of ring with prominent bezel and triangular shoulders, here simply decorated with notches and lines, is typical of the third century. There is a very similar gold ring from Sully Moor near Cardiff in the British Museum (Henig No. 729).

REFERENCES

In the text, 'Henig' stands for M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*, BAR 8, 1974 (part ii unless otherwise stated).

1. Nine are listed in the Corpus, but No. 286 is a finger ring of Hellenistic date which may not have come to Chester in Antiquity; another gem was published in the Journal last year. No. 579, from the Deanery Field, 1928, has not been located.
2. A first century paste which seems to show the same subject as the Hunter Street intaglio is published by P. Gercke, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen III Archäologischen Institut der Universität Göttingen*, Wiesbaden 1970, 93 and plate xl No. 136. For another paste, depicting Cupid in a two-horsed chariot in motion, cf P. Zazoff, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen IV Hannover, Kestner-Museum*, Wiesbaden 1975, 166 and plate cv No. 819.
3. The Venus with Mirror motif is well known in Classical Art from the fifth century BC onwards. For example, an ivory relief from Weiden near Cologne shows a nude Venus Fortuna with mirror arranging her hair (F. Fremersdorf, *Das Römergrab in Weiden bei Köln* (Cologne 1957) 50 Taf. 61). A close parallel to the Chester Venus is illustrated in Henig, *The Lewis Collection of Engraved Gemstones in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, B.A.R. Supplementary Series 1*, 1975, 21 no. 43 pl. 3.
4. C. C. Oman, *Catalogue of Rings; Department of Metalwork, Victoria and Albert Museum*, 1930, 55 and plate v No. 125.
5. Henig, part i, 164f and Fig. 3 Type 5.
6. F. Henkel, *Die Römischen Fingerringe der Rheinlande*, Berlin 1913, 105 and plate xlv No. 1141 (ring).
G. M. A. Richter, *Engraved Gems of the Romans*, 1971, 34 No. 95.
E. Goring, 'A Roman Gem from Kenchreai', *Bull. Univ. of Birmingham Arch. Soc.* XIII, 1975/6, 66f and fig. (thymiaterion instead of altar).
7. The gem from the Rhineland is shown by Henkel, *op. cit.* 60 and plate xxii No. 434 (plate lxxvii, 280).
G. Sena Chiesa, *Gemme del Museo Nazionale di Aquileia*, Aquileia 1966, 399 and plate lxxi No. 1399 and P. Zazoff, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen IV Hannover, Kestner-Museum*, Wiesbaden 1975, 301 and plate ccxviii No. 1647 for Christian gems, depicting two fish and a cross.
For the ring type (Henig No. 458 = Type V).
8. Henkel, *op. cit.* 62 No. 449 (plate lxxviii, 374); 115 No. 1267 (plate lxxviii, 375 also *ibid* 376, Kastell Feldberg).