

XIV.—ON A ROMAN SIGNET-RING, REPRESENTING A  
CHARIOT RACE, FOUND AT CILURNUM  
IN JULY, 1882.

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READ ON WEDNESDAY, THE 26TH MARCH, 1884.

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THE Roman station of Cilurnum, on the west bank of the river North Tyne, has from time to time yielded objects which evidence the advanced stage of cultivation and of art which the Romans had reached during their occupation of Britain. Some of these objects have, and some of them have not, been described in the transactions of our Society.

The object to which we are about to give our attention has not been so described, and the writer of this paper having no particular knowledge of the subject, will therefore be content with bringing before the Society the views and comments of antiquaries distinguished for such knowledge.

On the 17th of July, 1882, an excavator, in the course of examination of the remains of a building of some consequence near the south-eastern corner of the station of Cilurnum, met with a signet ring of handsome form and of a metal which probably was intended to pass for gold, but which, from its corrosion, was of a less pure material. The gem is of carnelian, and is remarkable for the design upon it and for the number of objects represented in so small a space.

The Rev. Henry James Richmond, Rector of Sherburn, near Durham, happened to be on the spot at the time of the discovery, and addressed to the writer of this paper a letter, from which we quote the following :—"I beg very sincerely to thank you for the kindness which enabled my little party to visit the Roman remains of Cilurnum, and particularly for the sight of the most interesting ring found yesterday. I mentioned what I thought it represented, but could not remember the technical names, which, perhaps, it may save you a little trouble if I venture to communicate. The platform on which

the pillars, &c., are standing, is called in circus language the *spina*. At each end of it is a *meta*, or goal, and upon it two little slabs, each on two columns. On one are four eggs, and on the other four dolphins, which were added or removed as the races completed a circuit. I have seen other ornaments on the *spina* with Castor and Pollux (patrons of riding and boxing), and a column between them. These, certainly, I saw upon your ring.”



Our energetic colleague, Mr. Blair, next laid this signet-ring before the Rev. C. W. King (Senior Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge), one of the highest authorities in Britain on subjects of this nature, who thus expressed himself on the subject:—"The intaglio, the work of a good epoch, shows the *Circus Maximus* in the very heat of a grand race—the Derby of the times. The *spina* running down the centre with the great obelisk (now a part of the Lateran), the dolphins and statues that adorned it, are all given with unusual accuracy and minuteness. Of course, the original ring, if too decayed for preservation, ought to be replaced by a facsimile in gold—and in 22-carat gold also, as the ancients never used worse—and such a godsend as the present deserves the additional expense."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As the goddess on the lion exactly agrees with the type of the Astarte of Carthage, to be seen upon certain coins of the African Severus, and has no direct connection with Rome, it is possible that our gem represents the Circus of the former city.—C. W. KING.

This object came also before our colleague, Dr. Bruce—to whom the world is so much indebted for enlightenment in matters of Roman antiquity—and on it he makes the following observations:—"On the extreme right and left of the scene are the *metae* or goals round which the chariots turned. These consisted of three spindle-shaped columns, each surmounted by an egg, and standing upon a base consisting of an upper and lower torus moulding. The eggs have reference to Castor and Pollux. Next we have the *spina*, a dwarf wall, stretching along the middle of the field; the whole length of it was decorated with various objects. In its centre is an obelisk having a considerable elevation. Near the right extremity of the *spina* is a *sacellum*, on which are four dolphins; and near the other extremity is another not so elevated. Besides these, some statues occupy the intervening space, one of them being probably intended to represent Cybele on a lion. Four chariots, each drawn by four horses, occupy the field."

Finally the subject was brought under the notice of the German savants, and the following is an extract from a letter from Professor Hübner, of the University of Berlin, to Dr. Bruce:—

"I have just received your letter with the drawing of the signet-ring, and I immediately proceed to give you the promised notes. It belongs to the numerous class of representations of the *ludi circenses*, so frequent, especially since the reign of Domitian. In its upper part is the *spina* of the circus, on both sides are the *metae*, the end points around which the chariots had to turn in their seven-fold races. On the *spina*, which consisted of an oblong basin of water, out of which the arena could be watered, there was a great quantity of sculptures, of which the signet-ring gives only the most prominent. In the middle is the obelisk, placed there by Augustus; on the right of it the statue of the *Magna Mater*, or Cybele, on the lion; on the left a male statue, perhaps that of Hercules. On the right of the *Magna Mater* are the dolphins, one of the arrangements by which, after the model of the Stadium at Olympia, the number of races run in each *missus* was indicated. On the complete monuments their number is that of seven (equal to that of the races of each *missus*); here only five are to be counted. On the left of the Hercules is the corresponding structure, with the eggs placed upon small columns or staffs. They were also of the number of seven, and served, together

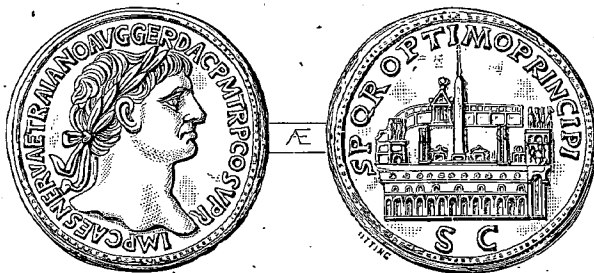
with the dolphins, we do not know exactly in what manner, to show and to count the number of the races done or to be done around the *spina*. Here they are only four in number. Besides, on the left of it is the statue of a winged Victory on a column, which is also frequent or rather constantly to be found on the representations of the *spina*. The two statues (or figures) on both ends of the same, standing men in the usual attitude of prisoners are often to be found on the similar representations; they seem to have got their place on the *spina* in memory of the triumphal procession in which the prisoners never were wanting. This is the *spina* with part of its monuments. In the lower part of the signet-ring are the four *quadrigae* (this was the usual number in each *missus*) and represented in a very compendious manner after one and the same pattern. In the larger representations the victorious chariot is always distinguished from the others whose various schemes and accidents used to be figured with great variety and vigour. On the Mosaics the names of the winning horse and those of the Aurigae and the other horses are often given in full—horsemen and footmen, watering the arena, &c., are adjoined. Although the artist who made the signet-ring could not represent all those things, it is nevertheless admirable how he managed to give on so small a space a sufficient indication of the most important features of the most fashionable sport of those times. It is, after all, no wonder that men whose chief interests are known to have been ‘*panem et circenses*’ paid willingly for signet-rings like that from Chesters.”

There would seem to be no doubt but that the amusements and exercises of the Circus engaged much the attention of the inhabitants of the City of Rome. Horace tells us:—

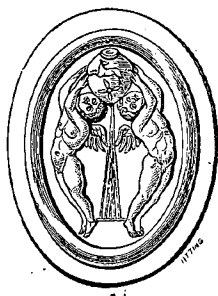
“Sunt quos curriculo pulverem Olympicum  
Collegisse juvat.”

The Roman youth gloried in supporting the character of charioteers on these occasions. The *Circus Maximus* was an important building between the Arch of Titus and the Colosseum, of which nothing remains but the meagre ruins of a shattered wall. The recollection of the structure is preserved on the reverses of some Imperial coins. The hand of the engraver supplies us with a specimen of these reverses on a coin of the reign of Trajan (see opposite page).

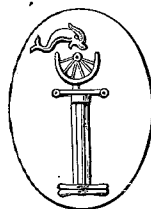
In compliance with the suggestion of Mr. King, this beautiful gem has been reset in 22 carat gold, which is a facsimile of the original setting, and a wood engraving of it on a larger scale is now submitted to this Society.



### CLEPSYDRAE.<sup>1</sup>



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1.—Of the primitive form supported by two genii, used at races in the *Circus Maximus*. Banded agate intaglio, formerly in the collection of the Rev. C. W. King, of Trinity College, Cambridge, now in the New York Museum. Double actual size.

2.—In its perfected state furnished with dial-face and indicator. Diameter, double actual size. (From a cast.) (See Early Christian Numismatics, by C. W. King, M.A., p. 113 *et seq.*)

<sup>1</sup> The two woodcuts kindly lent by Mr. King.