

V.—A GOLD SIGNET RING FROM HOUSESTEADS

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In 1968 a gold signet ring with a garnet intaglio pl. VI, 1 and fig. 1) was found in the drain of the private latrine, for family use, in the west range of the Commandant's house at Housesteads. The latrine was in use in the 2nd century and later covered over. According to the Roman sumptuary laws, still more-or-less in force in the 2nd century, the commandant, a man of equestrian rank, was entitled to wear a gold ring and the quality of this ring, as well as its find-spot, suggests that it was his personal property.

The hoop is small (internally 1.4 cms, externally max. 2.2 cms), too small for an adult's finger and too thick and heavy to be worn by a child. It may have been worn as a pendant on a chain. In section it is flat inside and rounded outside, expanding smoothly towards the bezel without any emphasis on the shoulder. The stone is flush with the setting. This type is well-known in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Individual examples are not closely dated as many will have had a long period of use before being lost, deliberately concealed with other treasure, or offered at a shrine. Similar rings in this area include a gold ring with a narrow hoop, expanding more sharply than the Housesteads one at the shoulder, from Backworth (61),¹ with a nicolo intaglio depicting Cupid leaning on a pick-axe, a silver ring from Corbridge (62), the intaglio depicting Hercules, and others in bronze, iron and jet.

The intaglio (length 9 mm) is of unusually good quality. The use of a garnet, which was introduced in the Hellenistic

¹ AA⁴ xxxix (1961) 1-36, *Roman jewellery found in Northumberland and Durham*. The figures in brackets all refer to this catalogue.

period,² is rare in Britain, the only known example being from Colchester.³ It is not at all likely that the stone was engraved in Britain. The subject is a theatrical mask, representing either a young man or a woman. It has not the

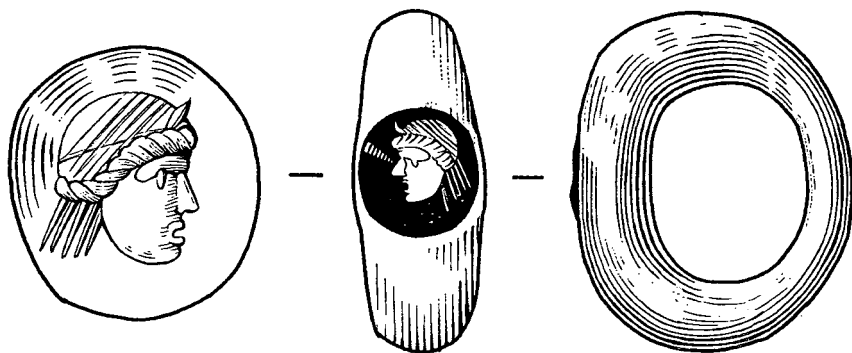


FIG. 1. SCALE INTAGLIO 4/1. RING 2/1

exaggerated mouth, either grinning or depressed, which would make its comic or tragic character obvious.⁴ The eye and brow are firmly drawn and the hair, dressed in a coil round a fillet, hangs straight at the back. It resembles the mask, three-quarter face, on a theatre ticket (pl. VI, 2),⁵ although here the *onkos*, the hair dressed high over a wreath or fillet, characteristic of the tragic and satyric masks, is conspicuous. The hair of the Housesteads mask is not piled so high. An ivory mask from Caerleon⁶ has the same strongly delineated features, but curly hair appears below a high diadem. Also comparable are a female mask in marble with

² H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of engraved gems* . . . British Museum 1926 p. xiii.

³ I am indebted to Mr. M. Henig for this information and reference. F. H. Marshall, *Catalogue of finger rings*. . . . British Museum 1907 no. 453, an identical ring, intaglio Cupid and a herm.

⁴ *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* supplement 11 (1961) T. B. L. Webster, *Monuments illustrating the new comedy* gives a comprehensive list.

⁵ I am indebted to Professor D. E. Strong for pointing this out. M. Beiber, *The history of the Greek and Roman theatre* (1961) Princetown University Press fig. 811 a on p. 246.

⁶ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (1964) p. 359 pl. lxxxia.



Fig. 1. Impression of the Intaglio



Fig. 2. Theatre Ticket

a wreath⁷ and one from Pompeii⁸ with a roll of hair, but with side curls. Masks on a mosaic from Hadrian's villa show the same well-drawn features without undue exaggeration, except in the case of the comic mask.⁹ There are many examples on wall-paintings and mosaics. None of the gemstones in the British Museum collection resembles the Housesteads stone. There is one mask on a convex garnet (Walters 2210). One of the heads on a jasper intaglio (Walters 2215), a youthful mask in profile bears a strong resemblance to the Housesteads mask, but it is linked, hair to hair, with two bearded masks.

The stone could well have been cut in the late 1st or 2nd century. The comparable masks in many cases can be dated to this period. The style of the hoop also belongs to this period. There are few gems in this area of comparable quality, but the head of a woman from South Shields (30) is an exceptionally good intaglio. Two in the Alnwick Castle collection, which may not be local finds, the rhinoceros (38) and the head of a maenad (29)¹⁰ are also outstanding.

The context in which the ring was found demonstrates clearly that there need be no professional link between the owner and the subject of the gem, which he may use as a seal. Jupiter or Mars, both fairly common in the area of Hadrian's Wall, would be more suitable for a commandant and indeed the lost gold ring with a martial figure (89) found at Housesteads in the last century probably belonged to a later commandant. Other examples of theatrical gems from this area include three from Corbridge, Bacchus looking at a mask (23), a bearded head backed by an elephant's head (35) and a damaged jasper, which probably has three conjoined masks, not two as depicted (35). The lost gems from Binchester with an old and a young mask (34) and from South Shields with two confronting masks (32), a lost gold ring from Piercebridge (57) with a similar representation and

⁷ A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The dramatic festivals of Athens* (1953) fig. 59.

⁸ *ibid.* fig. 116.

⁹ Beiber, *op. cit.* fig. 808.

¹⁰ Mr. Henig suggests that this may be an 18th century intaglio.

another lost gold ring from Newcastle (60) its stone depicting a bearded mask to which Cupid is offering a bunch of grapes, may be the few recorded out of a much larger number. It is of some interest that there should be seven theatrical gems known in a part of the province where there is no evidence of a theatre, even an amphitheatre.

The ring, which is the property of the National Trust, is placed on loan at the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle upon Tyne.