

NOTES

This series of notes is used to provide a place to publish important individual objects or finds that would otherwise remain unpublished.—*Editor*.

THREE ROMAN OBJECTS FROM THE CITY OF LONDON

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The three objects described in this note passed through or were recently acquired by the Guildhall Museum, and in each case they have sufficient intrinsic importance to make their publication worthwhile, though they are all in the technical sense "unstratified".

NO. I PART OF A NECKLACE OF AMBER BEADS (ACCESSION NUMBER 25869)

In 1973 the Museum had the opportunity to purchase a collection of Roman antiquities found in the City of London in the period between 1920–1935. As a result several objects were bought and accessioned into the collection, including the amber necklace and the gold ring described below.

The recorded provenance, on a card attached to the necklace, is "From excavations in Old Jewry, London. (The bed of the River Walbrook) January 1934". The surviving length of the necklace consists of 70 beads closely threaded on a string measuring (not including the loop) 439 mm. The beads themselves are of two different shapes, 64 of them being "ellipsoid" beads (Beck's classification)¹ of great uniformity, measuring on average 5.49 mm. in length, 3.9 mm. at the greatest diameter, with a hole through their length of c. 0.93 mm. diameter. These 64 smaller beads are divided into seven groups (4–10–9–12–10–11–8) by 6 "barrel disc"² spacer beads, diameter 8.90 mm., width 3.95 mm. and with a central hole of c. 0.95 mm. The spacing has no apparent significance.

The beads vary in colour from pale orange-yellow to light tawny brown and are, with three exceptions, translucent, it being possible in the case of most of the beads to see the string passing through. The amber is, therefore, lighter in colour than the majority of ancient amber, and does not have the cracked and crinkled patination that is so often present on amber from ancient deposits. The beads still in fact exhibit their original polished surface.

Given the waterlogged nature of the find-spot, there is no reason to doubt that the string is original. It too is encrusted and matted in places with the fine-grained silt that still clings to some of the beads. The string, which is of flax,³ consists of three main strands plaited together to produce a single cord. At one point it is looped round and doubled through one of the spacer beads to form a separate loop some 64 mm. long, with a knot (type unidentifiable) tying the two original ends of the string together near the bead. The purpose of this loop is not clear but it could have provided a method by which the total length of the necklace was adjusted.

Before discussing the necklace in the context of other Roman amber from Britain, it is important to state the grounds for ascribing the necklace to the Roman period.

The find-spot is important. The group of objects to which the necklace and the ring (below) belonged had originally formed part of the collection amassed by the dealer G. F. Lawrence⁴ whose activities in the City in the early decades of this century are well known. At one time he acted as "Inspector of Excavations" for the then recently formed London Museum to help increase the new collections, but he resigned this position in 1928.

There is no doubt that he had a good eye for objects and when possible recorded their provenance and detailed site location.

The provenance is, therefore, accepted, though the "bed of the River Walbrook" that Lawrence observed is likely to belong to one of the stream's western tributaries rather than the main course, which lies some 90 m. to the east of Old Jewry. Though perhaps a circular argument, confirmation is offered by the necklace itself. The survival of the string from a waterlogged deposit is no surprise and the colour and condition of the amber beads also indicates a similar environment. Amber when exposed to the atmosphere slowly changes its colour, becoming darker and deeper red, and the surface weathers, developing the characteristic cracked and crinkled patina so often found. Amber, on the other hand, which has been kept in water or a waterlogged deposit and excluded from contact with air, retains its original colour and surface patination.⁵

In all probability, therefore, the necklace is of Roman date⁶ and likely, as it is a Walbrook deposit, to belong to the period A.D. 50-150.⁷ Further confirmation of this date and identification is provided by the shape of the two types of the beads, both of which are paralleled by beads of glass and other materials of the period.⁸ It is also during the Flavian-Antonine period that amber was most popular in the Roman world.⁹ The greatest difficulty with the necklace is that amber from stratified Roman contexts in Britain is rare and the few examples that have been noted do not include beads of this type and in general do not match the quality and richness that is represented here. Amber imports before the Roman occupation are, of course, known,¹⁰ and prolific afterwards but during the actual period of Roman occupation they are remarkably scarce. A quick, and far from complete survey of Roman Britain produced only 14 pieces of amber from known Roman contexts and none of those are comparable to the beads under discussion.¹¹

The reason for the scarcity is not hard to find. The main source of amber in the Roman world was the coasts of the east Baltic from where it came overland to the head of the Adriatic and to *Aquileia* in particular. Here it was carved and manufactured into articles of jewellery and other small luxury goods before being re-exported to other parts of the Empire. Though highly prized before the opening up of the trade route in Nero's reign, after which it became more available, amber never ceased to be a precious material used for the manufacture of luxury goods and prized for its amuletic virtues as well as its decorative qualities.¹² Considering its general rarity and the errant route required for its arrival in Britain, a province on the extreme edge of the Empire, its scarcity is not surprising. Its proliferation in the post-Roman period is readily explained by the replacement of the Mediterranean based trade-route with direct contact, through migrating groups, with north-west Europe and the amber-producing coasts of the Baltic, west Jutland and Schleswig Holstein.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that Pliny (*N.H.*, XXXVII, 30) tells us that articles of adornment made of amber were exclusively worn by women. The reasons for its loss can, of course, only be guessed at, but with an object of such obvious value, deliberate deposition as a votive offering is most likely and perhaps the magical virtues attributed to amber in the Roman period have some significance here.

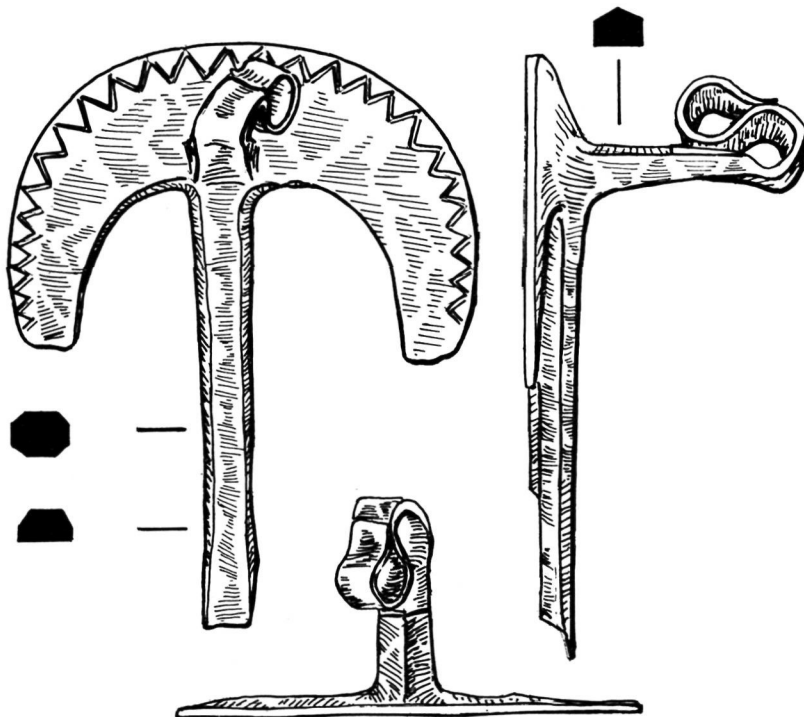
NO. 2 GOLD FINGER-RING SET WITH A GARNET (ACCESSION NUMBER 25868)

The ring was acquired together with and from the same collection as the amber necklace described above. It also comes from the same site, the written information with it giving "From excavations in the bed of the old Walbrook River, Old Jewry, London, 1934".

Therefore, the comments above referring to the original collector, site and likely date range (A.D. 50–150) of the necklace, apply also to the gold ring.

The ring has an internal diameter of 16.11 mm., and 19.08 mm. externally. The width of the bezel is 5.35 mm., and the garnet *en cabochon* has a height above the bezel of 2 mm., and the greatest measurement across its base, which is oval, is 5 mm. The shape of the ring indicates a date in the first or early second century A.D.¹³ and thus agrees with the date range suggested by the provenance. Gold rings with garnets in comparable settings are known from Britain and Germany.¹⁴

The sumptuary laws and the right of free-born men of equestrian and higher orders to wear a gold ring have recently been commented on in the context of several gold rings from Roman Britain,¹⁵ so no addition is needed here, except that the small size of the London ring suggests that it belonged to a woman or child. If the restrictions imposed by the laws were still being enforced, then presumably we have here another indication that wives or children were allowed to wear a gold ring to reflect their husband's or father's respective rank. It is likely, however, that by the end of the first century and certainly by the end of the next, the significance of the gold ring had diminished and its presence was no longer a reliable indication of rank.¹⁶



Roman linch pin from the City ($\frac{1}{2}$)

NO. 3 IRON LINCH PIN

The linch pin was brought in for identification in 1972, but, unfortunately, it proved impossible to retain it for the Museum's collection.

The area of the find was Upper Thames Street near the north end of Southwark Bridge where public service trenches were being dug at the time. It was clear that it was found in a Roman deposit, closely associated with Roman pottery, including sherds of samian. Patches of blue coloured surface patination suggested a waterlogged deposit.

The iron linch pin had a length of 155 mm., and a maximum width across the arms of 123 mm. The length, however, is not complete, the bottom tip of the shaft having been broken off. The crescentic shape head had a zig-zag decoration punched around its outer edge.

The linch pin belongs to a well-known group of iron or bronze and iron crescentic headed linch pins, whose origin Ward Perkins claimed to be Belgic.¹⁷ However, as Manning has pointed out,¹⁸ there is no real evidence for this and all of the known examples either are or could be of Roman date, and therefore the type is likely to owe its origin in Britain to the Roman conquest. Their presence at Pompeii (*i.e.* before A.D. 79)¹⁹ and as far away as Thrace²⁰ (modern Bulgaria) also seems to preclude a Belgic origin. The very different highly decorated linch pins with crescentic heads from Kings Langley, Herts., and Colne Fen, Hunts.,²¹ which are pre-Roman in date, must, therefore, reflect another tradition which does have its roots in pre-Roman Britain.

It is difficult to date the London example, but by comparison with the late third century types from Verulamium²² and the even more developed 4th century examples from Sandy and elsewhere,²³ an earlier date in the late second century could perhaps be suggested.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have to thank Mrs. Hilary Guise for the drawing of the linch pin.

NOTES

- ¹ H. C. Beck, "Classification and Nomenclature of Beads and Pendants", *Archaeologia* 77 (1927), Pl. II, Long Beads Group 1 D1 a.
- ² H. C. Beck, *op. cit.*, Pl. II, Disc Beads Group 1 A1 b.
- ³ I have to thank Mr. Henry Hodges and Miss Elizabeth Pye of the Institute of Archaeology, London, for identifying the material of the string.
- ⁴ R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, 1965, 9-10, and the *Daily Express*, June 27th, 1928. For a less complimentary assessment see W. F. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London*, 1968, 220.
- ⁵ D. E. Strong, *Catalogue of the Carved Amber in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, British Museum, 1966, 14-15. For the most extensive recent bibliography on amber in antiquity see "The Provenience of Archaeological Amber Artifacts", *Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts*, 6 (1966), No. 2, and (1967), No. 3.
- ⁶ The late Professor D. E. Strong kindly examined the necklace and identified the beads as amber, and he too thought that they were of Roman date. Mrs. M. Guido also saw a photograph of the beads and agreed that "in all probability" they were Roman and that the shape of the beads suggests that they are pre-third century A.D. and probably earlier.
- ⁷ R. Merrifield, "Coins from the bed of the Walbrook and their significance", *Antiq. J.* 42 (1962), 38-52.
- ⁸ *e.g.* R. E. M. Wheeler, *Maiden Castle, Dorset*, Oxford, 1943, 292-93 and Fig. 98, Nos. 13-16. Also B. Cunliffe, *Excavations at Fishbourne II*, Leeds, 1971, 148 and Fig. 69, Nos. 1-2.
- ⁹ D. E. Strong, *op. cit.* 33.
- ¹⁰ *e.g.* the necklace with the Birdlip mirror see J. Bellows, "On some bronze and other articles found near Birdlip", *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol. Soc.* 5 (1880-81) 139 and Pl. 14.
- ¹¹ (i) M. Rostovtseff, "Commodus—Hercules in Britain", *J. Roman Stud.* 13 (1923), 94, and Fig. 4 No. 2, a large circular bead. (ii) J. P. Bushe-Fox *Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent*, II, Oxford, 1928, 31, and Pl. 14, Fig. 2, No. 11, a large circular bead. (iii) R. E. M. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavations . . . Lydney Park, Gloucestershire*, Oxford, 1932, 84, and Fig. 18, No. 81, a rectangular bead. (iv) K. Kenyon, *Excavations at the Jewry Wall Site, Leicester*, Oxford, 1948, 271, and Fig. 94, No. 10, an ear-ring (unstratified). (v) G. F. Beaumont, "A Roman Coffin found at Braintree", *Trans. Essex Archaeol. Soc. N.S.* 7 (1898-99), 401-2, "some small amber beads". (vi) T. May, *Catalogue of the Roman Pottery in the Colchester and Essex Museum*, 1930; 280, Grave 97/12, No. 59, armet of amber, and No. 64, a bead; 260, Grave 29/47, No. 275, two armlets. (vii) T. May, *The Roman Fort of Templeborough near Rotherham*, 1922, 54, and Pl. 40, No. 1, small amorphous lump of amber. (viii) *Catalogue of Antiquities in the Museum . . . at Devizes*, Pt. II, 1934, 177, and Pl. 55, No. 5, a large amber bead; 193-94, No. 491, an amber bead. (ix) J. Liversidge, *Britain in the Roman Empire*, 1968, 139, Fig. 52, bead (a). (x) V.C.H., *Shropshire I*, 1908, 255, No. 4, a ring.

- ¹² D. E. Strong, *op. cit.* 33–34, and Pliny *N.H.*, XXXVII, 45.
- ¹³ F. Henkel, *Die Römischen Fingerringe der Rheinlande*, 1913, 24, No. 154; also A. Maiuri, *La Casa del Menandro*, 1932, Pl. 65.
- ¹⁴ F. Henkel, *op. cit.* No. 163. For a ring from Southfleet, Kent, and now in the British Museum (1912. 6–20. 4) see P. Rashleigh, “Account of . . . Southfleet in Kent”, *Archaeologia* 14 (1803), 39, and Pl. 8, No. 5. For a similar ring from farther afield see F. H. Marshall, “Catalogue of the Finger Rings . . . Department of Antiquities”, British Museum, 1968 (Reprint), 120, No. 722.
- ¹⁵ M. Henig in B. Cunliffe, *Fishbourne II*, *op. cit.* 88, and esp. note 6. Also D. Charlesworth, “Roman Jewellery found in Northumberland and Durham”, *Archaeol. Aeliana* 4th Ser., 39 (1961), 8; and “A Gold Signet Ring from Housesteads”, *Archaeol. Aeliana* 4th Ser., 47 (1969), 39.
- ¹⁶ I have to thank Dr. M. Henig for several very helpful comments concerning the ring.
- ¹⁷ J. B. Ward-Perkins, “Two early linch-pins, from Kings Langley, Herts . . .”, *Antiq. J.*, 20 (1940), 357–367. See also Sir Cyril Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, 1958, 120–21.
- ¹⁸ W. H. Manning, “A Roman hoard . . . Sandy, Bedfordshire”, *Bedfordshire Archaeol. J.*, 2 (1964), 50–52.
- ¹⁹ W. H. Manning, *loc. cit.*
- ²⁰ I. Venedikov, *Le Char Thrace*, 1960, Pl. 13, No. 39 *et passim*.
- ²¹ For Kings Langley, J. B. Ward-Perkins *op. cit.*; for Colne Fen, a note by Sir Cyril Fox in *Antiq. J.* 51 (1961), 236–38.
- ²² R. E. M. Wheeler, *Verulamium: A Belgic and Two Roman Cities*, 1936, 217–218, and Pl. 62.
- ²³ W. H. Manning, *loc. cit.* and in S. Frere, *Verulamium Excavations I*, 1972, 174.

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