

SIGNET RINGS FROM ROMAN LONDON

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Four rings, evidently found in London at various times in the 19th century, were located recently in the reserves of the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities, British Museum. Although one ring had been recorded by Roach Smith and thus received a mention in my corpus of gemstones, this is the first time that the other three have been described and none of them has yet been illustrated. This note also takes the opportunity of recording a fifth ring from London (now in an American private collection) which has been brought to my notice, and of an intaglio found recently west of Queenhithe on the Thames foreshore.¹

1. Iron ring with simple hoop (incomplete) which expands sharply at the bezel. It contains an intaglio of chalcedony, perhaps an onyx, bleached and stained by chemical action — possibly through having been subjected to intense heat at some time. The device is a warrior, nude but for his helmet, holding a shield in his left hand and with his right arm outstretched before him.² He appears to be falling backwards as the result of an arrow piercing his right ankle. This detail suggests an identification of the figure with the mortally-wounded Achilles. The device is surrounded by a cable border.

Dimensions. Diameter of ring 21.5mm; width across bezel 11.5mm (at narrowest surviving point on the hoop c. 2mm). The intaglio is a flat oval measuring 12mm by 10mm. (B.M. 55 8-4 66). The ring was found in London, during February 1846.

The ring is of a type common at about the time of the Roman conquest of Britain. It may be compared with another example from London, containing a glass gem showing Hercules fighting a giant, and a ring found at Hod Hill set with a paste depicting the Spartan hero, Othryadas.³

In the present instance the gem appears to be considerably earlier than its mounting. The cable border and the crisp, slightly archaic cutting of the central figure recall the work of Etruscan gem-engravers. Indeed 4th-century scarabs depict the death of Achilles in almost identical manner.⁴ Ringstones became more popular after c. 300 B.C. and an 'Italic' (i.e. Roman Republican) gem in Vienna provides an almost exact parallel to the London stone.⁵ It is possible, as we have seen, that the gem had at one time been in a fire. Could it have been rescued from the ashes of a cremation to serve as an heirloom, a reminder of an ancestor's martial prowess? In any case the choice of Achilles as a signet device would suggest a highly 'Roman' virtue to its owner, namely that Fame was to be preferred to Long Life.⁶ This gem is not the only signet of Republican date to have been found in Britain. A cornelian from Waddon Hill, Dorset, portrays Ajax carrying the dead Achilles, while a sard found at Verulamium depicts Diomedes stealing the palladium from Troy. The style of the Verulamium stone, with its emphasis on heavy musculature, is very close to that of the intaglio under discussion.⁷

2. Iron ring with simple hoop, expanding slightly towards the bezel. It is set with a chalcedony bleached and crazed through the action of fire, and the intaglio shows a youthful male figure who stands towards the front and faces right. He holds a long staff, curved at its end, over his left shoulder and an indeterminate object in his right hand. Although the figure was originally described as Cupid, he seems to lack wings and is more probably to be interpreted as a satyr with his hunting-stick (*lagobolon*) and either his kill or a bunch of grapes.

Dimensions. External diameter of ring 26mm (internal diameter 22mm); width across bezel 9.5mm (at narrowest point 2mm). The intaglio is a flat oval with bevelled sides. It measures 10mm by 8mm (upper engraved surface 8mm by 6mm). (B.M. 56.7-1.806).

Originally published by C. Roach Smith (*Catalogue of the Museum of London Antiquities* (1854) 60 No. 269) it was described as a 'bronze ring, set with an opaque white stone, bearing a nude youthful figure, or Cupid, with two faces; in his left hand he carries a staff resting on his shoulder; in his right, extended backwards, is a purse, which the hinder face appears to be inclined towards, and regarding.'⁸

The ring should be dated to the late first or early second century A.D. and may be compared with an example from the Walbrook set with an onyx intaglio.⁹ The type of a satyr with his stick and bunch of grapes is very common on gems but cupids are sometimes depicted in the same attitude.¹⁰

3. Silver ring of massive proportions. The flat ribbon-hoop expands below the shoulders and the upper side is set with a cornelian intaglio now somewhat damaged. It portrays Fortuna holding her rudder, with the wings of Victory and the aegis and helmet of Minerva.

Dimensions. External diameter of ring 25mm (internal diameter 21.5mm); width across bezel 19mm (at narrowest point c. 2.3mm). The gem is a slightly convex oval 15mm by 10.5mm (B.M. 55.8-4.65).

The ring was purchased with other London material (Lot 267 Chaffers Sale). The ring is a magnificent specimen of a late-Antonine and Severan type. It may be compared with a fine signet from the *Colonia Traiana* at Xanten and another from Klein-Stürlack in East Prussia.¹¹ Somewhat similar rings found in London (No. 4 below), at Mucking in Essex and at Alchester, Warwickshire, are of slightly less ample proportions.¹²

This is only the second example of a representation of pantheistic Fortuna on a gem from a British site. The other came from a Roman sewer at York, containing material no later than the early third century.¹³ Syncretism was popular at this time and it is interesting to compare the York and London gems with the relief of the winged and helmeted *Brigantia Caelestis* from Birrens.¹⁴

4. Silver ring, of similar type but with somewhat narrower hoop. It is set with an onyx intaglio, unfortunately badly cracked, which depicts an Eagle standing in profile to the left but with its head turned to the right. It holds a wreath in its bill.

Dimensions. It has proved possible to examine only oblique photographs of the ring, from which it appears that the ring has an external diameter of c. 22mm. The intaglio is a flat oval with a bevelled edge, and its upper surface measures c. 8mm by 5mm.¹⁵

The ring, which is said to have been found in London, is in a private collection in the U.S.A.¹⁶

Intaglios showing eagles are reasonably common and we may cite similar representations to ours from Great Chesterford (Essex) and Bath.¹⁷ However it may be appropriate here to recall that these birds were especially associated with legions, and a gem from Southwark has been published recently showing an eagle standing between a pair of standards.¹⁸

5. Bronze ring with narrow hoop and carrinated shoulder. The raised bezel contains an intaglio of nicolo-paste which shows a bust of Minerva in profile to the right.

Dimensions. External diameter of ring 19.5mm (internal diameter 17mm); width across bezel 10mm (at narrowest point on hoop 2mm). The intaglio is a flat oval 9mm by 7mm (B.M. 62.3-21.5). Found in London and presented to the British Museum by A. W. Franks, Esq.

The ring is of typical third-century form and may be compared with similar examples from Augsburg, Cannstatt and Augst.¹⁹ Amongst busts of Minerva shown on gems we may note one from an Antonine context in Canterbury and another in a gold ring of similar date found at Verulamium.²⁰

6. Nicolo intaglio portraying a satyr dancing towards the left. He holds some object, perhaps a hare, in his right hand.

Dimensions. Flat oval with bevelled sides, measuring 11mm by 8mm. I am very grateful to Mr. Dexter Bedwell for showing me the stone, which remains in private possession.

The gem is similar to very many others which portray satyrs most of whom are depicted holding a bunch of grapes.²¹ Stylistically the intaglio would seem to belong to the second century A.D.²²

Although the five rings and one loose ringstone listed here do not form any kind of closed group, they are of considerable interest. No. 1 was already old when it was lost, perhaps by a soldier in the early years of the province. It is likely that Nos. 3 and 4 also belonged to soldiers, but at a later date when the Cripplegate Fort was garrisoned. If such surmise is a matter of opinion, the good state of preservation of all the rings does provide some firm evidence at least as to the manner of deposition. Metalwork only survives well in London in waterlogged conditions such as the Walbrook stream-bed and the Thames foreshore. Roach Smith acquired much of his collection from the Thames and perhaps ring No. 2 was discovered here as well. The ringstone No. 6 certainly came from the foreshore and by coincidence also portrays a satyr.²³ Deposition in streams may sometimes attest casual loss, but it must also be remembered that this was an obvious way of making an offering to the divine powers of these sacred places.

NOTES

1. I am very grateful to Mrs. Monica Robinson for first drawing my attention to the B.M. items, and to Miss Catherine Johns and Mr. Kenneth Painter both for their help and for supplying me with photographs of the rings themselves. Mr. Jack Ogden told me about the ring in America and Mr. Dexter Bedwell supplied me with information on the new Thames find. Mr. David Brown kindly

arranged for the casts of Nos. 1-5 to be photographed at the Ashmolean Museum, and the illustration of No. 6 was supplied through the kindness of Hugh Chapman by courtesy of the Museum of London.

2. Here, and elsewhere, I take my descriptions from impressions rather than from the actual gems for these were what the recipients of letters actually saw.

3. London Museum Catalogue *London in Roman Times* (1930) 100 and Fig. 30 No. 16; J. W. Brailsford *Hod Hill* 1. (1962) 20 and Plate 14a No. M6 *cf.* M. Henig 'The Veneration of Heroes in the Roman Army' *Britannia* 1 (1970) 249-265 for the significance of heroic themes to the Roman soldier.
4. G. M. A. Richter *Engraved Gems of the Greeks and the Etruscans* (1968) 202 Nos. 820 and 821. E. Zwielerlein-Diehl *Die Antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien* (1973) 64 No. 106.
6. Henig *op. cit.* in note 3, 252-256. Also *cf.* A. Wardman, discussing Homeric epics in *Rome's Debt to Greece* (1976) 65 'For many Romans ... the *Iliad* was a poem which bestowed lasting fame on the hero Achilles. If serious epic meant a poem about deeds of war, the *Iliad* was the more obvious choice'.
7. M. Henig *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* British Archaeol. Rep. 8 pt.ii (1974) 64 No. 447 (Waddon Hill); No. 444 (Verulamium). Plate 14.
8. Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, 26 No. 143.
9. Henig *ibid.* 55 No. 381 Pl. 37 (*cf.* Pt. i Fig. 1 Type III).
10. Henig *ibid.* 28-30 Nos. 161-177 Pls. 5 and 6. A. Furtwängler *Beschreibung der Geschnittenen Steine im Antiquarium. Königliche Museen zu Berlin* (1896) 279 No. 7544 Pl. 56 for a cupid.
11. F. Henkel *Die Römischen Fingerringe der Rheinlande* (1913) 57 No. 416 Pl. 21. C. Beckmann 'Metallfingerringe der römischen Kaiserzeit im freien Germanien' *Saalburg Jahrbuch* 26 (1969) 38 and Pl. 1 Form 21a, Ring No. 487.
12. Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, 22 and Pl. 28 No. 116 (Mucking); 84 No. 622 (Alchester) (Pt. i Fig. 1 Type V).
13. M. Henig in A. MacGregor *Finds from a Roman Sewer System and an Adjacent Building in Church Street, York* (1976) 8 and Pl. i No. 11.
14. J. C. Toynbee *Art in Roman Britain* (1962) 157 No. 80 Pl. 77.
15. Dimensions taken from a wax impression.
16. Information from Mr. Jack Ogden. The ring corresponds with Henkel *op. cit.* in note 11, 56 No. 410 Pl. 21 (Kastell Zugmantel).
17. Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, 91 Nos. 689, 690 Pl. 21 and 43. The wreath, of course, is an emblem of Victory in each case.
18. M. Henig "'Eagle and Standards'" Intaglio from St. Thomas Street, Southwark' *London Archaeologist* 2 No. 10 (Spring 1975) 243.
19. Henkel *op. cit.* in note 11, 114 No. 1254; 115 Nos. 1255 and 1261. Pl. 48. (The ring-type may be compared with Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, Pt. i, Fig. 2 Type Xb).
20. Henig *ibid.* Pt. ii 35 No. 227 Pl. 31. The Verulamium ring is published in *Hertfordshire Archaeology* 4 (1974-6) 176 and Pl. 49.
21. Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, 28-30 Nos. 161-177 Pls. 5-6, *cf.* also Ring No. 2 above.
22. M. Maaskant-Kleibrink *Classification of Ancient Engraved Gems* (1975) 196 on the 'plain grooves style' of the second century characterised by 'thick rounded disk grooves' with little detailing. The gem in our ring No. 2 would also appear to have been cut in this style.
23. Satyrs as denizens of the wildwood and companions of Bacchus, must have been close to the affections of the Roman Londoner. Opportunity is taken of this note to correct an attribution of a gem from Moorgate Street which I had previously published and later cited in this journal as showing Diana with her bow and quiver (Henig *op. cit.* in note 7, 38 No. 252 Pls. 8, 33; also *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 26 (1975) 284). It is almost certainly a bust of a satyr wearing a fawn-skin (*nebris*) and with his lagobolon or game stick. The reference to hunting thus remains. (*cf.* Henig *ibid.*, 27 No. 150 Pl. 5 for an intaglio from Colchester showing a satyr head with lagobolon).