

TWO INSCRIBED FINGER RINGS FROM THE CITY OF LONDON

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This note is concerned with two inscribed, iron finger rings which are unusual in that the inscriptions occur on copper alloy strips inlaid in their bezels. The first was

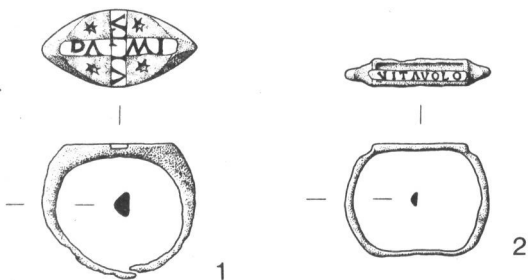


Fig. 1. The inscribed rings.

found in 1974 during excavations by the Guildhall Museum's Department of Urban Archaeology at New Fresh Wharf in the City of London¹. It was recovered from a foreshore deposit dating to the Hadrianic period, but contaminated by a small quantity of later material. It has a thin hoop of flattened section (ext. dia. 20mm) widening out to an oval bezel (Fig. 1 No. 1; Pl. 1).

The type is characteristic of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries AD², but the ornamentation of the

bezel itself is distinctive and unusual. It consists of inlaid strips of copper alloy set in the form of a right-angled cross in which the short axis appears to cross the long axis. In the centre of each quadrant of the cross is a six-pointed star. Under the microscope (X40 magnification), it is evident that each star consists of three stamped or incised lines which intersect at their mid-points. The inlaid cross bears an inscription, picked out in niello³. On the long axis are the letters DA, to the right MI; on the short axis, turning the bezel through 90 degrees clock-wise, we read the word VITA. Thus the full inscription would appear to read *da mi(hi) vita(m)*—“Give Life to me!”

This invocation may be read as a love charm, but the words could equally have a deeper significance as a request to the gods (or perhaps, specifically, Jupiter) to grant the wearer eternal life. An indication that such a meaning might indeed be intended here is suggested by the addition of the four stars, one in each quadrant of the cross. These stars indicate the heavens and are found on coins with the legend *Aeternitas*, for of all existing things, the heavens alone seemed eternal⁴. Gems from York, Silchester and Caerleon show a crescent surrounded by stars⁵. An



Plate 1. *DA MI VITA* ring.

intaglio found at Chester depicts a crescent and star, one on each side of a solar torch, and another from Chesterholm shows Jupiter Sarapis between two stars⁶. Amongst other glyptic material, we may note a gem engraved with four stars around an enigmatic, but probably cel-

A bronze ring from Bonn bears the formula *Da Vita*, and a 3rd century gem found at Ribchester proclaims *Ave Mea Vita*—"Hail my Life"¹¹. Amongst recent finds, we may also note a 2nd or 3rd century open-work ring from Bedford inscribed *EVSEBIO VITA*¹².

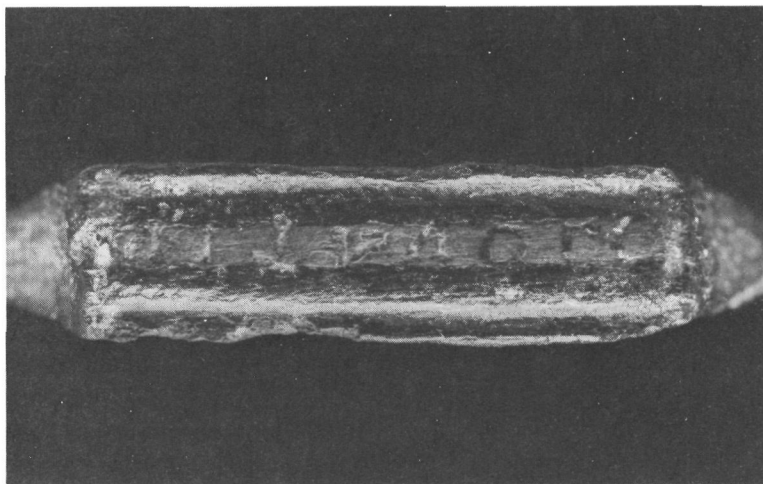


Plate 2. Bezel of *VITA VOLO* ring.

estial, motif *S*, set in a gold ring dedicated to Jupiter ruler of the sky⁷.

The second ring to be described here, also from London (exact provenance unknown), provides the closest parallel to the above in technique of manufacture (Fig. 1 No. 2; Pl. 2)⁸. In the Guildhall Museum Catalogue of 1908 it is incorrectly described as being of bronze with an inlaid strip of gold⁹. It is, in fact, of iron and copper alloy, like the New Fresh Wharf ring. The inscription is now generally accepted as reading *VITA VOLO*, "I wish for life"¹⁰. Two rings do not make a workshop, but they certainly do not make a local origin less likely.

Rings and gems carrying short legends referring to "Life", some of them love-tokens, others less certainly so, are fairly common.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

1. Site Code: NFW 74; Reg. No.: 275. For site report, see L. Miller, J. Schofield and M. Rhodes *The Roman Quay at St. Magnus House, London* London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc. Special Paper Forthcoming (London 1985).
2. M. Henig *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* 2nd. Edit. (Oxford 1978) 35f., Fig. 1, Ring form III.
3. For preliminary publication, see M. W. C. Hassall and R. S. O. Tomlin 'Inscriptions' in N. B. Rankov, M. W. C. Hassall and R. S. O. Tomlin 'Roman Britain in 1981' *Britannia* 13 (1982, 396-422) 416, No. 54.
4. Manilius *Astron* I, 495 ff. Coins: cf. Henig *op. cit.* 112, note 63.
5. *ibid.* 106; No. 409, App. 81; and D. Zienkiewicz, pers. comm.
6. P. Carrington, pers. comm.; and Henig *op. cit.*, No. 355.
7. J. Boardman and D. Scarisbrick *The Ralph Harari Collection of Finger Rings* (London 1977) 29, No. 39.
8. M. O. L. Acc. No. 825.
9. E. M. Borrajo *Catalogue of the Collection of London Antiquities in the Guildhall Museum* 2nd. Edit. (London, 1908) 29.
10. R. G. Collingwood 'Inscriptions of Roman London' in Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London. Vol. III. Roman London* (London 1928) 176, No. 49.
11. F. Henkel *Die Römischen Fingerringe der Rheinlande* (Berlin 1913) 82, No. 833; Henig *op. cit.*, 275, No. 745.
12. Hassall and Tomlin *op. cit.*, 411; C. Johns 'A Roman gold ring from Bedford' in 'Exhibits at Ballots' *Antiq. J.* 61 (1981, 335-69) 343-5.