

# A ROMANO-BRITISH SILVER AND GOLD FINGER RING FROM DRAYTON II VILLA

*Ian J. Marshman*

The site of Drayton II Villa is located in south-east Leicestershire, close to the crossing point of the Gartree Roman Road and the River Welland (SP 817 918). It was first noticed in the eighteenth century and is mentioned in Nichols' *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, but was not rediscovered until deep ploughing in the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> It then became the focus of both rigorous field walking and geophysical survey by the Leicestershire Museums Survey Team and the University of Leicester.<sup>2</sup> The villa was then excavated jointly until 1993 as a field school for the University, and for the Employment Training Scheme of County Council.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably this interesting Roman rural site has never seen full publication. The chance has been taken here to report a finger ring, which must be one of the most significant finds from the site that has yet to receive comment.

The finger ring (Fig. 1) is made up of a broad ribbon hoop 8mm across and 1mm thick (max) of Henig Type XI form.<sup>4</sup> To this has been fixed, probably by solder, a gold collet containing an orange carnelian gemstone intaglio in form F3 or F4.<sup>5</sup> This is engraved with the image of a helmeted figure presumably standing frontally but facing left, holding a spear in its left hand, and holding out its right hand, or perhaps a shield.<sup>6</sup> The finish of the hoop is rough and unpolished which might suggest that the whole ring was once gilded, but no traces are visible. The ring is broken and buckled and so its diameter cannot be reconstructed. It was found in Trench 4 which was situated 18m north of the villa (Fig. 2), during the 1992 season, and comes from a layer interpreted as a buried soil.<sup>7</sup> This probably represents either horticultural or agricultural land associated with the villa, and pottery and other finds suggest use throughout the Late Iron Age and Roman periods but with the majority of

<sup>1</sup> N. J. Cooper, P. Beavitt, D. M. O'Sullivan and R. Young, A Report on the Geophysical Survey and Trial Excavations at the Site of a Roman Villa near Drayton, Leicestershire 1988, *TLAHS* 63 (1989), pp. 7–179.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> For interim reports see N. J. Cooper, An Excavation at Drayton, *TLAHS* 64 (1990), p. 101; R. Pollard, Drayton Roman Villa, *TLAHS* 65 (1991), pp. 85–8; R. Pollard, Drayton II Roman Villa, *TLAHS* 66 (1992), pp. 172–3; A. Conner, Drayton II Roman Villa, *TLAHS* 67 (1993), pp. 79–83; A. Connor, Drayton II Villa, *TLAHS* 68 (1994), pp. 161–2.

<sup>4</sup> See typology in M. Henig, *A Corpus or Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*. Oxford: BAR, British Series No. 8 3rd edition, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> I follow the convention of describing the intaglio image as it would be viewed in an impression, as these objects were used as seals, but it is unlikely that this example was used for this function.

<sup>7</sup> Leicestershire Archaeological Resource Centre: context card for layer 313 in site archive.

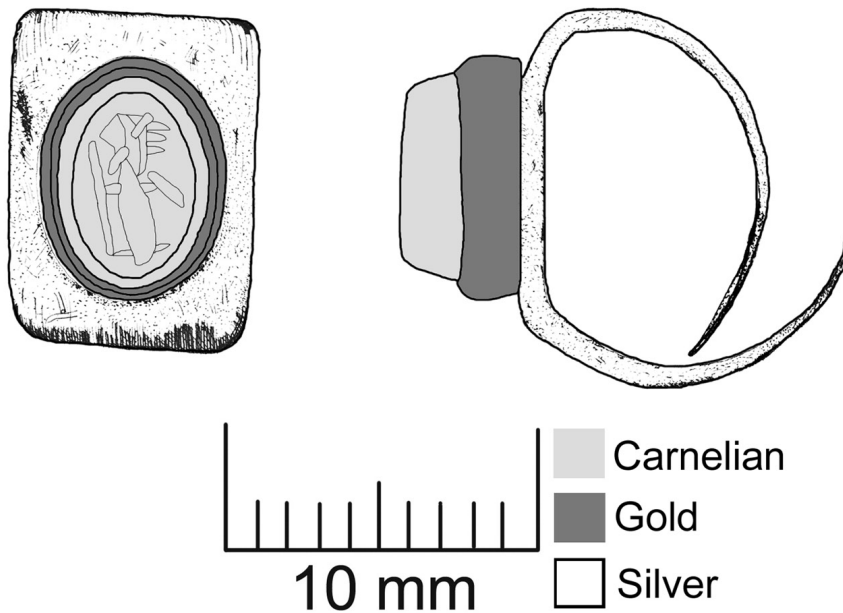


Fig. 1. Romano-British silver finger ring with gold collet and carnelian intaglio.  
Illustration: Author

the material dating to the third century AD.<sup>8</sup> The form of the ring is one more commonly associated with base metal finger rings and generally dates to the third century, although the gold collet is an uncommon feature and was most popular in the second century.<sup>9</sup> The style of the intaglio's engraving is highly cursory and conforms to the 'Incoherent Grooves' Style of Maaskant-Kleibrink, which is typical throughout the empire from the late second to third centuries AD.<sup>10</sup>

The motif engraved on the Drayton intaglio cannot be interpreted with certainty. As mentioned, it represents work of the most hasty schematic kind, which probably belongs to the end of the decline in the craft of gem engraving in Britain and throughout much of the Western Empire, in the third century.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to find comparanda for the crudeness of this engraving. A flawed carnelian cut with a sketchy Victory set in a chunky third-century AD gold ring from Denton with Wooton, Nr Canterbury, is the only Roman engraved gem to my knowledge that might be described as 'worse'.<sup>12</sup> Similar, but slightly more clearly executed, is a carnelian in

<sup>8</sup> R. Pollard *pers com.* and A. F. Hancocks, *Drayton II Roman Villa: a report on the Roman ceramics from the 1988–1992 seasons*. Unpublished MA/Diploma dissertation held with the site archive, 1993, especially pp. 27, Fig. 12.

<sup>9</sup> As n. 4, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> M. Maaskant-Kleibrink, *Classification of Ancient Engraved Gems: a study based on the collection in The Royal Coin Cabinet, The Hague, with a history of that collection*. Leiden: Boerhaavezaal, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> J. Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2007, especially pp. 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> Now in Canterbury Heritage Museum CANCM:2007.56, but search the Portable Antiquities Scheme database using find no. KENT-8F44B2 at [www.finds.org.uk/database](http://www.finds.org.uk/database).

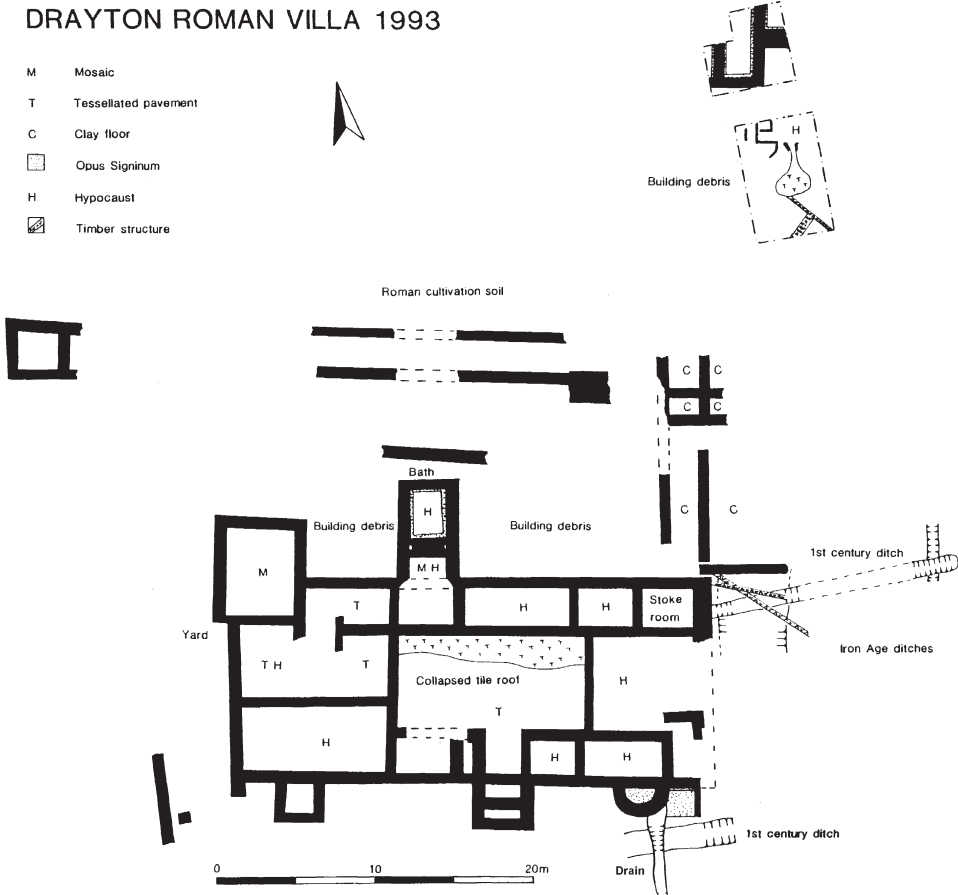


Fig. 2. Plan of Drayton II Villa excavations up to end of final season 1993. The ring was found in the Roman cultivation soil to the north of the main building. (Plan drawn by Wayne Jarvis and edited by Matthew Beamish.)

a bronze ring from Owmbly, Lincolnshire, engraved with an image which may be either Mars or a warrior, but unlike the Drayton intaglio, discernible attributes have been represented in the form of a shield and spear.<sup>13</sup> The Drayton intaglio may well have been seen by the wearer as either Mars, Minerva or, perhaps like the Owmbly gem, more generally as a 'warrior'. The gem engraver was likely attempting to follow one of the many fairly standardised images which were commonly used on intaglios, and this means we can be more certain as to what they intended it to show, than we can what viewers interpreted it as. Better executed examples of figures stood in this pose, which also include a shield to the side, are usually Minerva, as on a late second- or third-century carnelian from Winchester, Hampshire,<sup>14</sup> or a carnelian in

<sup>13</sup> As n. 4, p. 102, catalogue no. 93 and plate III.

<sup>14</sup> As n. 4, p. 121, catalogue no. 240 and plate VIII.

a late second-century context in the fortress baths at Caerleon, Monmouthshire, where she supports a small victory in the outstretched hand.<sup>15</sup> The likelihood of Minerva over Mars comes from the fact that, even on the crudest gems, Mars is always indicated as either nude or wearing a short tunic, meaning that both legs are shown, as on the Owmy gem. In contrast, simplified images of female deities are shown with one wide groove because they wear a *peplos*, which reaches the floor, and so separate legs do not need to be indicated.<sup>16</sup> The imprecise nature of the motif probably meant it was never used as a signet ring, and perhaps was viewed by its wearer as possessing some apotropaic power because of its exotic gemstone and the image of Minerva or some other, perhaps local, deity.

Roman finger rings set with engraved glass or gemstone intaglios, which were commonly used as signet rings, especially in the Early Empire, are very rare in the county (4) outside of Leicester (8). Besides the Drayton example, the remaining three from the county come from small towns or nucleated settlements: an unset clear glass intaglio of a sheep from High Cross;<sup>17</sup> a loose green glass intaglio showing a female bust from Broughton Lodge near Wymeswold;<sup>18</sup> and a copper alloy ring set with a glass gem, which imitates nicolo, moulded with an image of Bonus Eventus from near Kirby Bellars.<sup>19</sup> Of this group it is clear that the Drayton ring is of the highest status discovered so far. It is significant that the people of rural Roman Leicestershire seem not to have adopted the Roman elite fashion of wearing such rings, or the practice of sealing. There is a much higher number from the rural parts of Lincolnshire (over 40) which might suggest that the people of that area, some possibly being colonists, felt more comfortable wearing such jewellery, than the people of rural Leicestershire.<sup>20</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<sup>15</sup> As n. 4, p. 120, catalogue no. 234 and plate.

<sup>16</sup> See a third-century gem from *Carnuntum* in present-day Austria where a Victory has been engraved using only one groove to indicate the body; she is identifiable because she holds a wreath in her outstretched hand. G. Dembriski, *Die antiken Gemmen und Kameen aus Carnuntum*. Wien: Phoibos Verlag, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> E. Greenfield and G. Webster, *TLAHS* 40 (1964–65), pp. 3–41, especially 32 and 35, Fig. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme find number LEIC-A0E0B2; [www.finds.org.uk/database](http://www.finds.org.uk/database).

<sup>19</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme find number LEIC-E36406; [www.finds.org.uk/database](http://www.finds.org.uk/database). Note also a bronze ring with a retrograde Chi-Rho engraved directly onto its bezel which was recently found near Narborough, for which see W. Scott, Portable Antiquities Scheme Annual Report for Leicestershire 2008, *TLAHS* 83 (2009), pp. 267–71.

<sup>20</sup> This is based on my ongoing research, but see no. 4, pp. 84–92 for the disparity in numbers from Lincolnshire and Leicestershire visible in the assemblage of intaglios available in the 1970s when this *Corpus* was compiled.