A Roman Gold Ring from Bromham, Bedfordshire

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The ring which is the subject of this note was found in a ploughed field at Bromham in mid-September 1988.[1] The finder took the ring to Bedford Museum on October 4th that year, and a fortnight later, as a potential Treasure Trove case, it was submitted to the British Museum for examination. No other objects were found with it, and this being so, the Coroner's jury in the Treasure Trove inquest held in Bedford in April 1989 decided that the ring had not been deliberately concealed, and was therefore not Treasure Trove. It was subsequently acquired by Bedford Museum.[2]

The Bromham ring is a fine example of a classic type of late-Roman gold jewellery, and is in good condition. It has a large, raised bezel set with a truncated conical stone banded in blue-grey and brown. Surrounding the box-setting in which the stone is mounted is a decorative gold flange worked to produce a pie-crust effect. The shoulders flanking the setting are broad where they join the bezel and taper to form a triangle with fairly simple curves and re-entrants along the edges and two engraved lines in the centre; the hoop of the ring is narrow and flat. The ring was bent out of shape when found, and the finder, taking advantage of the malleability of the gold, restored the hoop to a wearable, roughly circular form. However the hoop has since been restored to approximately its original Roman shape, flattened rather than round, and displaying a marked angle where the shoulders meet the hoop[3] (Fig 1).

The overall size of the bezel is 16 x 13 mm, and the internal maximum diameter as restored to its Roman shape is 19 mm. The width of the hoop at the back is 2 mm, and the ring weighs 5.19 g. The metal was analysed semi-quantitatively by X-ray fluorescence in the British Museum Research Laboratory, and the results indicate a composition of 91.5% gold, 6.2% silver and 2.3% copper.[4] For-
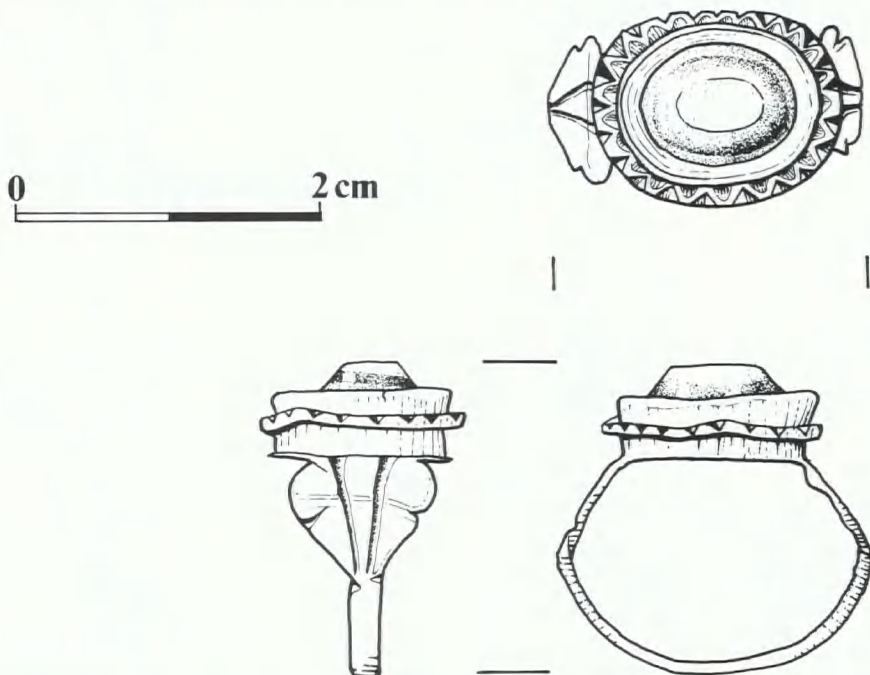

Fig 1   Roman gold ring set with banded agate, Bromham (x 2)

tuitously, this is very close to the gold content of modern 22-carat gold (91.6%). It is a little less pure than many late-Roman gold items, which are frequently over 95% fine, but the presence of silver as the principal alloying constituent is very typical. The stone is set with a form of banded quartz (agate or chalcedony).

The Bromham ring belongs to a type which was developed in the third century AD and continued to evolve in the fourth. The typical features are the raised setting with a decorative surround, the triangular shoulders and in particular the angular shape of the hoop. Many rings of this type have far more elaborately worked shoulders than the Bromham specimen, utilising pierced work or sometimes filigree to create a stylised foliate feature.

Stones set in rings of the earlier Roman period are generally engraved with devices which would have had amuletic significance for the owner of the ring, usually figures of gods and goddesses or other motifs connected with pagan religion. Gem-engraving was certainly practised in Britain, but there was an Empire-wide decline in this very specialised skill in the later Roman period, and plain settings, as well as engraved gems re-used from older pieces, are common in late-Roman jewellery. Certain stones had symbolic meanings in themselves, and the effect of their various colours against gold was also highly prized in late Antiquity, so the natural banding of the colours in the quartz set in

Plate 1   Roman gold ring, Bromham
(scale in mm)

the Bromham ring, carefully emphasised by the way it has been cut, would alone have made it into a desirable jewel. In addition the stone may have been thought to have had some talismanic quality in itself. Symbolic values are still attached to gem-stones, for example, in the idea of a 'birthstone' which has a special meaning for a wearer born in the appropriate month or under the appropriate sign of the zodiac.

There are two rings from Roman Britain in the collections of the British Museum which provide parallels for this new find. One of the four rings found with a coin-hoard at Sully Moors, Cardiff, in 1899 has a very similar bezel and shoulders.[5] It is set with a cameo-cut stone depicting a head of Medusa, a popular apotropaic device in the Roman period. The latest coin issue in the hoard is of AD 306, and this places the deposition of the group in the early fourth century. Though this *terminus post quem* establishes that the ring is of third- or very early fourth-century date, it does not answer the question of how old the ring was at the time of its conceal-ment, but the object displays a certain amount of wear resulting from use, and a date in the second half of the third century would seem to fit all the circumstances.

Not so close in style to the Bromham ring, but still a relevant parallel, is a ring from Odiham, Hampshire, which is set in a nicolo engraved with a figure of Victory.[6] The decorative flange round the bezel is diagonally crimped, a simpler effect than that on the Bromham and Sully Moors rings, but the treatment of the shoulders is the same. The overall hoop form of the Odiham ring is rounded rather than angular, but this is probably caused by modern re-shaping, as formerly happened to the Bromham ring. The dating of the Sully Moors and Odiham rings therefore suggests that the gold ring from Bromham is likely to date from the late third century AD.

Amongst the various types of Roman rings found in Bedfordshire, either through excavation or as casual finds, relatively few can compare to the Bromham ring in quality or in the use of precious metal and a semi-precious stone. The only other example of a Roman gold ring occurring within the county is of the rare *opus interrasile* (openwork) type, inscribed with the phrase EVSEBIO VITA — '(long) life to Eusebius' — which was found at Kempston, about 3 km from the Bromham find-spot, in 1980.[7] Rings of silver have been slightly more common: examples are known from Dunstable (set with a small bronze key);[8] Eaton
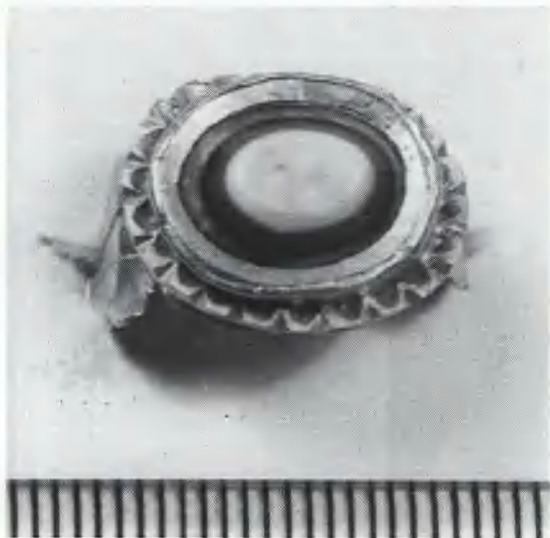
Socon,[9] Farndish,[10] Ruxox[11] and Sandy[12] (all set with intaglios of glass or stone), and also from Harrold.[13] Recent excavations at Sandy in the area of the Roman settlement have produced three or four silver rings fused together and evidence to suggest that metal-working was practised in the vicinity.[14] None of these rings provide good stylistic parallels to the Bromham find, except perhaps the silver ring from Farndish which displays similar, triangular shoulders and a raised, oval box-setting, and may also be dated to the late Roman period.

Far more common but less spectacular are finds of copper alloy finger-rings, sometimes set with intaglios such as the 'Achilles' ring from Chalgrave,[15] or the small (child's?) ring bearing a carnelian engraved with an eagle[16] and like the lost silver ring from Sandy, also found in a cremation urn in the Tower Hill cemetery. Copper alloy rings set with small stones or glass are recorded from Farndish, Odell, and Dunstable;[17] another find from Roxton extends the range of decorative techniques to include enamel inlay.[18] Even simpler are the plain or coiled wire rings of copper alloy such as those from excavations at Odell.[19] An iron ring has been noted at Dunstable.[20] Finds of jewellery other than finger-rings are almost exclusively of copper alloy and offer nothing comparable to the Bromham ring. This brief survey of the range of Roman rings known from Bedfordshire places the Bromham specimen in context as an exceptional find locally and one distinguished by its opulence from the large quantity of cheaper ornaments worn by the mass of the rural population.

The place of the discovery, approximately ¼ km from the present course of the River Ouse, is in an area of river-valley gravels within a large bend of the Ouse. The find-spot offers few clues as to the identity of the owner or to the circumstances of its loss; the finder searched the surrounding area in vain for associated objects or features and it must be assumed that the ring was accidently lost in antiquity. Unlike the find-spot of the Chalgrave ring, there is no spring or indication of an ancient watercourse in the immediate vicinity therefore it would not appear to be a votive offering, nor have any roads or trackways of Roman date been recognised in that area. While crop-marks and fieldwork indicate that the Ouse Valley was extensively farmed in the Roman period, the nearest occupation site known to the ring's find-spot is about 1½ km away to the west and was in any case abandoned by the close of the third century (apparently due to flooding), thus it would not have been contemporary with the ring's deposition.[21] However, the area covered by the parishes of Bromham, Biddenham and Kempston has produced many finds of Roman coins, pottery, building debris and other objects over the years. Material in Bedford Museum from F.W. Kuhlicke's investigations of a site at Moor End, Kempston hint at a fairly substantial building, if not a villa, occupied in the late Roman period, and the Roman well uncovered at Biddenham in 1857[22] contained sculptural fragments suggesting the existence of a relatively wealthy settlement in the neighbourhood. More recent fieldwork and finds brought into Bedford Museum for identification tend to reinforce the picture of the area centred on the 'Biddenham loop' of the Ouse as a local concentration of comparatively well-to-do, though essentially rural settlement. It may not be entirely coincidental that the only other recorded find of a gold Roman ring was also made within this area.

Outside the urban settlements of Sandy and Dunstable the great majority of the Romano-British population would have made their living off the land and, with the exception of the few wealthy land-owners, civil servants or merchants, would have been unlikely to be able to afford gold or silver jewellery. Yet the finding of the Bromham ring and the handful of other gold and silver rings from Bedfordshire show that here, as elsewhere in Roman Britain, there were people capable of indulging a taste for fashionable jewellery and the finest craftsmanship of the day. The gold ring from Bromham is the first example of this type of late-Roman ring to be recorded in Bedfordshire, and it would have belonged to a person of substantial wealth and status. From its comparatively small size, we may infer that its owner was a woman, but this cannot be absolutely certain. A large quantity of fine gold jewellery survives from the Roman period in Britain, and this example is a worthy addition to the list.

NOTES

1 The ring was found by Mr Richard Martin, using a metal detector on land belonging to Mr D.S. Stewart, in the area of TL 03 52. Bedford Museum is grateful to both the finder and the landowner for allowing the Museum to acquire the ring, and to the finder for allowing the Museum to purchase at a reduced cost equal to the price of a replica.

2 Bedford Museum accession number 1989/46. The ring was acquired with the aid of the MGC/V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

3 The re-shaping of the hoop was carried out by Mr Peter Shorer by pressing the gold between small pieces of hardwood. The drawing (Fig 1) shows the ring as restored to its approximate Roman shape.

4 The analysis was carried out by Mr Duncan Hook, and we record our thanks to him and Dr Michael Tite, the former Keeper of the British Museum Research Laboratory.

5 Marshall, F., 1907, reprinted 1968, *Catalogue of the Finger-rings, Greek, Etruscan and Roman, in the Departments of Antiquities, British Museum* (London), no. 544; Kent, J.C.P. and Painter, K.S., 1977, *Wealth of the Roman World* (London), no. 125. British Museum registration number 1900.11-23.3.

6 Marshall, F., *ibid.,* no. 545. British Museum registration number 1865.10-19.1.

7 Johns, C., 1981; "A Roman gold ring from Bedford", *Antiq. J. LXI pt II,* 343-45. This ring can be seen on display in the British Museum, Roman Britain gallery.

8 Matthews, C.L. and Hutchings, J.B., 1972, "A Roman Well at Dunstable", *Beds. Arch. J.,* 7, 21-34.

9 See this journal, p. 116, no. 14.

10 Bedford Museum accession number 1989/20. See this journal, p. 70.

11 A plain silver ring with a small intaglio, and three other intaglios (presumably also from rings) were acquired with other finds from Ruxox by Bedford Museum in 1991, accession number 1991/19. They were formerly in the collections of Longsands Community College Museum, St Neots. The ring was previously thought to be iron but was found to be silver during conservation.

12 Johnston, D.E., 1974; "The Roman Settlement at Sandy, Bedfordshire", *Beds. Arch. J.,* 9, 41.

13 Bedford Museum accession number 3400; erroneously published as "bronze ring from Kempston" in Simco, A., 1984; *Survey of Bedfordshire — The Roman Period* (Bedfordshire County Council/RCHM), 44 fig 35(e).

14 Excavations 1989 by Bedfordshire County Planning Department's Archaeological Service. Publication by Dawson, M. *et alia* forthcoming.

15 Simco, A., *op. cit.,* 56, 59 fig 60 and 100 G53.

16 Bedford Museum (no accession number recorded).

17 Farndish ring, Bedford Museum accession number 1989/22, see this journal p. 69; Odell ring ('stone' missing), Bedford Museum accession number 1985/18.Giv.16, publication forthcoming; Dunstable ring in Matthews, C.L. *et alia,* 1981; *The Roman Cemetery at Dunstable, Durocobrivae, Beds. Arch. J.,* 15, 44 no. 4.

18 See this journal p. 116, no. 13.

19 Bedford Museum accession numbers 1985/18.Giv. 3, 9, 21 and 24; excavations by Brian Dix, Bedfordshire County Planning Department, publication forthcoming.

20 Matthews, C.L. *et alia,* 1981, *op. cit.,* 44 no. 5.

21 Tilson, P., 1973; "A Belgic and Romano-British site at Bromham", *Beds. Arch. J.,* 8, 23-66.

22 Dyer, J., 1976, "The Bedfordshire Region in the First Millenium BC", *Beds. Arch. J.,* 11, 17; Simco, A., *op. cit.,* 56-7 and 98 G23.