

NOTES

A ROMAN JEWEL IN A MEDIEVAL SEAL



Seal Matrix from Shenley Church End. Scale in millimetres.

On the 9th July, 1991, a search over the recently stripped line of the new V2 grid road immediately west of Westbury Farm, Shenley Church End, Milton Keynes, led to the discovery of a rare and important medieval seal matrix containing a Roman intaglio.

It was subsequently purchased by Buckinghamshire County Museum with aid from the M. G. C. / V. & A. Purchase Grant Fund. (B.C.M. Reference number 1993.42.1).

18mm diameter circular silver gilt matrix is inscribed in rhyming French IESU SEL DE AMI LEL (and a six-pointed star); in translation 'I am the seal of a loyal friend'. It encloses a cornelian, cut in the so-called 'Flat Bouterolle' style, showing a helmeted man kneeling left and working at a curved object - probably Argus working on the Argo. The reverse of the matrix is flat with a looped pin soldered across the centre, probably to enable it to be worn around the neck.

Under high magnification it is evident that the seal had much use. The border and letter edges are abraded and both faces of the matrix have multiple striae associated with polishing.

The matrix is dated to the thirteenth century A. D and the intaglio is Augustan, probably first century A.D.

It may be of interest to set this seal in its context. The function of medieval seals was to indicate the source of the document or object to which a seal was attached; to show that no-one had tampered with the contents and to demonstrate authenticity: an unsealed document could be viewed as legally void.

There were broadly two types of seal. Large 'public' ones for official business and smaller 'private' ones for personal correspondence. A stolen or mis-used seal could make the true owner honour-bound to a debt or obligation, like the theft of a modern credit card. As might be expected, forgery of seals was widespread.

The Shenley seal is of the type used for private correspondence, as is made clear by its motto. Moreover, the absence of a personal name or coat-of-arms means that the recipients would have to know at a glance the identity of the owner and, indeed, of any such seals they might meet in their usual correspondence.

Medieval seals were variously made of bone, ivory and stone, but metal was preferred because it took the wear and tear of constant use best. A silver or gold matrix would have been made by a goldsmith, either in London or a provincial centre. We do not know where the Shenley seal was made. Mounting an engraved gem into a matrix was a particularly skilled task because the heat could crack the gem and it therefore had to be soldered at a relatively low temperature. Silver was desired because it was relatively easy to cut fine lettering into it and to achieve a good finish; also it was prestigious.

Antique Greek and Roman gems set into seal matrices or finger rings became highly desirable among the wealthy from about 1140 A.D. Antique originals were preferred to copies because they conferred the status of taste and learning and they were also considered to possess magical properties.

Messages with cryptic or punning allusions to the owner's name became popular from the late thirteenth century onwards. Sadly, if there is one here it is opaque to us and we shall never know who owned this seal.

Among medieval metal seals a silver/gold seal, particularly with a gem, is a rare type. Of the approximately thirty thousand seals known from England from the period 1200-1400 A.D. fewer than fifty of this type are known to exist. This is the only one reported from Buckinghamshire.

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