

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF LATER MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN FINGER-RINGS IN BRITAIN

RINGS, EXPERIENCES, AND EMOTIONS

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IN THE PAST, as they are today, finger-rings were imbued with and embodied emotions and memories. Remarkable survivals of gold, gem-set rings, and portraits showing sitters wearing jewels may give the impression that only the elites owned and cherished rings in the medieval and early modern periods, however, finger-rings of a range of materials and monetary value were owned by a variety of people, including those of lower status. While some may not have been able to afford expensive rings, the emotional value of the cheaper forms may have been equally important to their owners. To advance the archaeology of emotion as an approach, I have defined tangible archaeological evidence that is characterized by or serves in the capacity of emotion as an emotant.¹ This approach has been employed in order to develop the study of emotion in archaeology, particularly for the later medieval period in which the subject has had little focus compared with the archaeology of prehistory or the post-medieval period.²

In this chapter, I will present examples of finger-rings from Britain that reveal some of the ways that they were linked with people's experiences and emotions during the period ca. 1200–1660. The discussion of the designs, materials, deposition, and recovery of the rings is intended to illuminate some of the varied facets of their uses and meanings. By exploring the social,

1 Standley, "Love and Hope," see p. 745 for definition.

2 See Standley, "Love and Hope"; Standley, "Ffylle the Cuppe"; Tarlow, "Emotion in Archaeology"; Tarlow, "The Archaeology of Emotion."

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political, and religious contexts of use, light can be shed on the lives of the rings, and the experiences and emotions of their owners. I will use the terms “emotion,” “feeling,” and “affect” interchangeably as the word “emotion” was not in use during the later English Middle Ages, and only from around 1600 came to mean an agitation of mind or intense feeling.³ I have argued that emotants can be affected by human emotion and/or can influence the emotion felt by a person,⁴ thus, we may consider how finger-rings were emotants and how they could communicate, change, create, or intensify emotions, or be used in ways prompted by human feeling.

Firstly, I will present some of the limitations of the data, particularly the relatively low numbers of finger-rings recovered during archaeological excavations. I will then consider how archaeological chance finds can supplement the excavated artifacts and museums’ existing collections. In the rest of the chapter, rings and their emotional, social, and intellectual value and roles will be explored. Many of these aspects were, and are, interpreted through their materials, imagery, inscriptions, symbolism, and findspots. Devotional use—whether it be secular devotion to a person or cause, or religious devotion to a saint or member of the Holy Family—is also revealed; the protective agency of the rings is recognized by the symbols and materials. The role of rings in the development and promotion of individual memorialization and identity, and as intellectual material culture of elite society is also touched upon. Finally, rings that have survived in hoards are considered. These are particularly significant in providing evidence of past experiences during religious and social changes. No individual identity, such as gender, age, or status, forms a specific focus of the chapter as identities were intersectional, and attributing a single ring or ring type to a particular person, gender, or even household, can be difficult.⁵

The Archaeological Evidence in Britain

The superb ring collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) provides us with the opportunity to enter the sumptuous world of medieval and early modern rings.⁶ This institution, like the British Museum and the Ashmolean

3 Standley, “Love and Hope,” 742; *OED*, “Emotion.”

4 Standley, “Love and Hope.”

5 Intersectional meaning that identity “characteristics” were multi- and co-valent, and entangled. Some of these difficulties are considered further below.

6 Abbreviations of the names of institutions will be used throughout the chapter when referring to them and their accession numbers, i.e., Victoria and Albert

Museum, benefited from the donations of Dame Joan Evans's unique and important personal finger-ring collection.⁷ Scholars have utilized the collections, among others, to publish academic and more general-interest works on finger-rings and other jewellery, demonstrating the ever-enduring attraction of these objects.⁸ A search of the online collections of the V&A reveals that of the 132 rings that are recorded as being from England, eighty-seven are made of gold with a further fifteen of silver.⁹ We could assume therefore, from this collection alone, that precious metals dominated the form of rings worn in medieval England and such jewellery was limited to the wealthy. However, museum collections are inherently varied and biased, whether due to the methods of recovery and personal interests of collectors, or to the collecting policies of the institutions.¹⁰ How can we therefore explore this bias and expand our view of medieval finger-rings and their wearers?

Archaeologically excavated examples can aid our understanding, but these too cannot reveal the whole picture. It is normal for archaeologists to recover none or only a couple of rings at an excavation, regardless of site type or scale of excavation.¹¹ The reasons for this relatively low number of excavated rings are numerous and are affected by practices in the past and modern excavation foibles. For example, rings could have been recovered by someone if they were accidentally lost; they were unlikely to be regularly thrown away as rubbish; buildings were often kept clean during occupation thus reducing the number of small finds carelessly lost or left to be later found as excavated artifacts; and personal adornments were often bequeathed as heirlooms and gifts, thus being passed down through gen-

Museum, London: V&A; British Museum, London: BM; Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford: AM; London Museum (formerly Museum of London): LM; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: MMA; National Museums Scotland: NMS; and the Portable Antiquities Scheme: PAS.

7 V&A, *V&A Archive Research Guide*; BM, "Dame Joan Evans"; AM, *Report of the Visitors*, 18.

8 For example, Evans, *English Posies and Posy Rings*; Oman, *British Rings*; Scarisbrick, *Finger-Rings*; Scarisbrick, *Rings: Jewelry of Power*; Taylor and Scarisbrick, *Finger Rings*; Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery*.

9 V&A online collections search carried out on September 23, 2022, using filters: object type: "ring," dates: "1200–1649," and place "England."

10 For example, see Burgess, "State of the Field;" MacDonald, "Counting When, Who and How."

11 For example, thirty-seven rings were recovered from sixteen different excavations in London, and made up only 2 percent of the 1,784 dress accessories catalogued in Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories* (which excluded badges).

erations rather than entering the archaeological record. Similarly, the large amount of recycling of metals that would have been carried out reduces the number that survive.¹² Additionally, the burial-tradition for the period under consideration here also limits the number of finds recovered from graves, as the vast majority of burials were not accompanied by grave goods.¹³ Activity at the sites in medieval and later periods (particularly during the Reformation in England and construction of Victorian cellars), and the scale and methods of excavations also affects artifact recovery.

Archaeological sites take different forms and have assorted histories, making the recovery of accessories variable, but also making it difficult to identify their past owners.¹⁴ The finds from the River Thames foreshore excavations undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s in the City of London illustrate this. Made of base- and precious-metals,¹⁵ later medieval rings were recovered, including three gold rings set with garnet cabochons (polished into a rounded shape, rather than faceted) from Trig Lane.¹⁶ These garnet-set rings were among the late fourteenth-century infills of revetments created during land reclamation of the river.¹⁷ A further two gold rings were found at Baynard's Castle Dock and Billingsgate excavations; the former was originally set with two cabochon stones (only one emerald survives) and the latter contained a sapphire cabochon.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it cannot be known if the material culture in the infills illustrates activities and life near these areas of the river, or simply how the Thames was used as a dump for material coming from other locations; the material remains also have no signature to suggest they were primarily either domestic or craft waste.¹⁹ Quite how and why the gold and other rings ended up in the dumped material is unknown. The best guess is that they were accidental losses that ended up in the rubbish, but from whom or where is not known, with the possible

12 Of course, not all finger-rings were made of metal; some are of glass, bone, or other natural materials such as gemstones.

13 See Gilchrist and Sloane, *Requiem: The Medieval Monastic Cemetery*.

14 See Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*.

15 "Precious-metals" are gold or silver that may also be alloyed, while "base-metals" include the other non-ferrous metals and their alloys, for example copper alloys or lead-tin alloys.

16 Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, 325–35.

17 Milne and Milne, *Medieval Waterfront Development*, 26, 91.

18 Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, nos. 1611 and 1614.

19 Milne and Milne, *Medieval Waterfront Development*, 85.

exception of the Baynard's Castle Dock find that may have been associated with the noble waterfront mansion, rebuilt in 1428, and then again as a royal palace by Henry VII in 1501.²⁰ Regardless, the finds as a whole reveal the types and styles of rings worn and lost by Londoners in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

Attempting to understand the full range of finger-rings worn by the medieval and early modern population and their significance from only excavated sites or museums' collections is challenging. Fortunately, archaeological chance finds discovered in England and Wales have been recorded for more than 25 years through the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) and can supplement excavated finds and museum collections.²¹

While there are limitations to the resource, there is a lack of archaeological contexts for the finds, and only a small percentage become part of English or Welsh museum collections via donations or through the Treasure Act 1996, the PAS is an excellent resource for the study of finger-rings.²² As most of the chance finds are recovered by metal-detectorists, and it is a legal requirement to report gold and silver objects over 300 years old, the majority of the rings recorded are made of precious- or base-metals.²³ Furthermore, the number of rings found by chance is vast in comparison with the volume from excavations, and they provide a far broader picture of the types of metal rings worn in the past. Many of the chance finds are recovered in rural areas, so they supplement the meagre finds at rural excavations where the number of small finds is typically lower than at urban sites. The rings found outside of rural domestic buildings could have been deposited with rubbish, some of which was also manured into agricultural land, or were lost by accident as people moved through or worked in the landscape. Some may even have been buried or hidden on purpose.

20 Schofield with Maloney, *Archaeological Excavations in the City of London*, 93.

21 PAS, www.finds.org.uk. Chance finds of ancient objects (whether of precious metal or not) found in Scotland are reported and recorded through the Scottish Treasure Trove System.

22 See also Standley, "Love and Hope"; Kennedy, "English Iconographic Rings," 80–100.

23 Out of 5,682 finger-rings recorded on the PAS dating to between ca. 1066 and 1720, 56 percent are gold or silver; only three rings made of animal skeletal material have been recorded. Data on the PAS database as of June 24, 2022. For details of the Treasure Act 1996 and requirements for reporting of treasure, see PAS, www.finds.org.uk.

Troth and Hearts

Finger-rings, as now, were a common betrothal gift, and formed an important part of the betrothal ritual in the later medieval and early modern periods. In the painting of *A Goldsmith in his Shop* by Petrus Christus (see Figure 9.5 in the Epilogue),²⁴ the types of rings a couple could choose from in ca. 1440s Bruges are on display in a workshop-cum-shop; the gold rings are stacked, and some are set with gems. Some are closely comparable with rings found in Britain; for example, a diamond set stirrup-ring found at Holyrood Palace in Scotland, and a double gem-set ring with an inscription from a parish on the outskirts of York (North Yorkshire).²⁵ Equivalent styles are not limited to Britain as similar finds have been found elsewhere in Western Europe, for example, in the Netherlands and Germany. The stirrup-ring design had a long life and was used from the mid-twelfth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, however, the popularity of diamonds rose in the fourteenth century. Diamonds are naturally octahedron in shape and by 1400 diamond-cutting allowed for more varied forms, the technique first achieved perhaps in Paris or the Low Countries by 1300.²⁶ The diamond's perceived virtues were recorded in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century lapidaries. Wearing a diamond was believed to provide a man with strength and virtue, it encouraged conception and prevented miscarriage for women.²⁷ The ring from near York which is dated to the fifteenth century, is set with a ruby and an emerald, with the apt heartfelt inscription, “bon ♥ ne ment [or meut]” (the good heart does not lie [or move]). The two stones represented two lovers, and their virtues—passion and new love.

Although rarer recoveries, gold or gem-set rings are found through excavation, such as those from the City of London discussed above. Another excavated gold ring from London is a find from the Rose Theatre.²⁸ The concave cross-sectioned ring provides an example of an emotionally charged ring worn by a Londoner in the sixteenth century. Its outer inscription reads “PENCES POVR MOYE DV” followed by a heart pierced with two arrows, thus “Think of me from the ♥.”²⁹ This lost ring ended up embedded in the yard

24 MMA,1975.1.110.

25 NMS, H.NJ 68; Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*, 88; Standley, “Love and Hope,” fig. 3.

26 Campbell, “Gold, Silver and Precious Stones,” 137.

27 Evans and Serjeanston, *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, 30–31.

28 Bowsher and Miller, *The Rose and the Globe*, 62.

29 In Bowsher and Miller, *The Rose and the Globe*, fig. 114, and the LM record SBH88[183]<283>, “DV” are considered to be an abbreviation of the Latin, *Deo*

surface of the theatre, which would naturally have seen a high level of foot-fall by standing audience members.

Such a ring would have been a suitable betrothal or marriage ring and had the potential to have its own agency in order to become an emotant and stimulate emotions and memories of a loved one. The heart motif, as seen on the Rose Theatre ring and that from York, was an all-encompassing entity for the emotions borne by the rings and felt by the wearer.³⁰ The heart formed an intrinsic part of the agency of the objects, and the word or symbol is found on more finger-rings than the word “love” or any other affective word.³¹ It was the centre of the passions and thus, the symbol was conceptually essential to the feelings that the emotant objects were entwined with.

The motif of the heart with crossed arrows is worth considering further. By the fourteenth century it was a symbol found on material culture associated with love; pendants and badges incorporated the motif with the word *Amour*, and fourteenth-century ivory mirror cases often depicted the God of Love with their arrows aimed at couples.³² The motif continued in use on dress accessories, and we find hearts pierced with arrows, and sometimes flaming hearts, on seventeenth-century silver cufflinks. Michael Lewis has suggested that the motifs were associated with the celebrations around the marriage of Charles II and Catherine de Braganza in 1662.³³ I posit that the pierced heart has deeper Royalist connections that can be traced to earlier material culture, including finger-rings.

Pendants and lockets show that the heart-with-arrows motif was adopted by the martyrdom cult of Charles I after his regicide in 1649. Examples are known with a variety of inscriptions, including “I live and dy in loy-altye” and “Who can refrain from tears.”³⁴ The motif is also found with eyes, often weeping tear drops. Those with weeping eyes reference the sadness, but also God’s all surveying eye that would pursue the rebels for spilling the innocent blood of Charles, and in some cases the teardrops could also dually represent the spilt blood. An incomplete copper alloy seal-ring with

volente, with the inscription reading, “Think of me God willing,” but this seems unlikely.

30 Standley, “Love and Hope,” 746.

31 Standley, “Love and Hope,” fig. 2.

32 For example, Beuningen et al., *Heilig en Profaan*, afb. 904–5; BM, 1856,0701.2132; V&A, 221-1867.

33 Lewis, “Crown and Heart.”

34 BM, M.7289 and M.7291.

this motif is in the Ashmolean, and two others recorded on the PAS,³⁵ while the motif is also found on seal matrices of copper alloy and silver that are currently broadly dated to the seventeenth-century (Figures 2.1a–b).³⁶ I suggest that these pieces are objects of the post-January 1649 martyrdom cult, indicating the troth and devotion of the owners to Charles I and to his exiled son (the future Charles II). The eye motif was easily modified to depict, or simply interpreted as, a crown after the Restoration in 1660 (see Figure 2.1b).³⁷ Such an iconographic change can help refine the dating of these objects so often found without datable contexts and reveal their political and social significance; they were not referencing romantic love, but love of and devotion to a cause.

Materials and Holy Veneration

Other private reminders of love and remembrance of a deceased loved one or of Christ are found inscribed on rings, often on the inner band. For example, a small gold ring with a finely carved inner inscription of “*Iè: lamèntè: Iusguès: a la*” was found in a context of the early 1660s at Auckland Castle (County Durham), the palace of the bishops of Durham.³⁸ The inscription is a form of *Je lamente jusqu’à la fin* (I lament until the end), and perhaps the unending form of the ring meant it was not necessary to add the last word. Remarkably, a second rare ring has been excavated at the palace: a fragment of a faceted, carved jet ring. This is probably of an early sixteenth-century date, based on a comparable find in London.³⁹ The physical and attributed properties of jet gave the stone powerful virtues and it was used in apotropaic amulets in the later medieval and early modern periods. Its rich, true black colour, smoothness, and warmth to the touch increased its desirability, alongside its magical values of protection. Jet was thought to protect from venomous creatures, act as an anaesthetic, cure cataracts and toothache, improve vision, and protect from witchcraft.⁴⁰ Dress accessories made

35 AM, AN1920.360 (no provenance); Reavill, *HESH-B5CCB2*; Webley, *HAMP-7377D7*.

36 For example, Oakden, *LVPL-00F0F7*.

37 It is difficult to differentiate between an eye and a crown on some.

38 Christopher Gerrard personal communication, 2022; excavated by Durham University and Auckland Project Trust; Standley, “The Small Finds.”

39 Excavated from Abbots Lane, Southwark, London, see Egan, *Material Culture in London*, 54, no. 237.

40 Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*, 86.



Figure 2.1. Two silver seal matrices, seventeenth century. (a) An example of the proposed post-January 1649 Royalist martyrdom eye and heart motif, found in Shropshire. Image rotated and cropped from Oakden, LVPL-00F0F7, National Museum Liverpool. CC BY-SA 4.0.

(b) An example of the proposed post-1660 Restoration crown and heart motif, found in Dorset. Image cropped from Hayward Trevarthen, DOR-455AD3, Somerset County Council. CC BY-SA.

from the material, such as rosary beads, pendants, and rings, would have been touched and kept close to the body to draw on the magical powers.

Glass rings that could have imitated precious materials were also manufactured. In York, two glass rings—along with evidence of glass working from the twelfth or early thirteenth century—were excavated, and three yellow glass rings in Winchester (Hampshire) are dated to a similar period, and are comparable with one from Carfax in Oxford (Oxfordshire).⁴¹ A roughly contemporary gold and sapphire stirrup-ring was also found at Carfax showing the variety of materials afforded by residents of medieval Oxford.⁴²

Glass could also be used as settings in ring bezels, usually with the intention of imitating natural gems. An unusual moulded-glass cameo setting in a brass ring was excavated from dumped material at Swan Lane, London.⁴³ The glass is coloured blue and white with localized streaks of red. Such a setting is rare for the date of its context (ca. 1270–1350), and is more common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century imitation glass cameos.⁴⁴ While the colour may have been part of the attraction to a consumer and wearer in London, its moulded decoration of a scorpion lent it a special significance

⁴¹ Tweddle, *Finds from Parliament Street*, 222; Biddle et al., *Artefacts from Medieval Winchester*, 653, nos. 2095–97; AM, AN1921.196.

⁴² AM, AN1928.328.

⁴³ Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, no. 1618.

⁴⁴ For example, AM, AN1685.A.466, 477, 480, 489, 555, and 539; see Forsyth, *London's Lost Jewels*, 185–88.

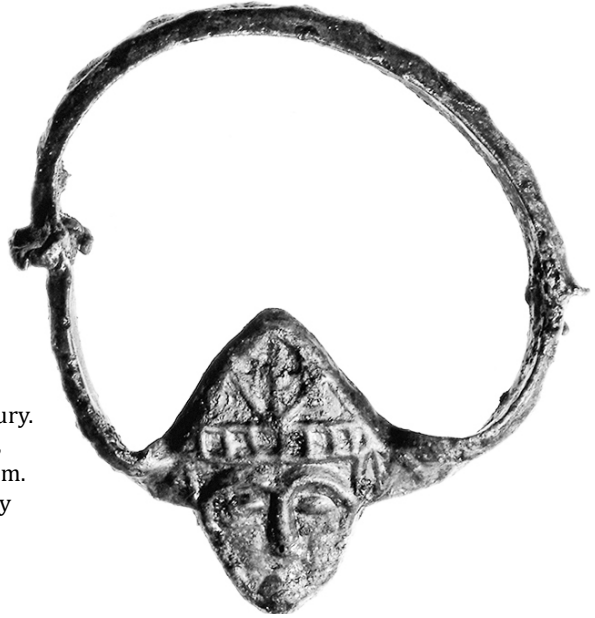


Figure 2.2. Pewter ring with the bezel cast in the form of a mitred head, late fourteenth–fifteenth century. Excavated from the Billingsgate site, London. Diameter (maximum) 16 mm. BWB83[310]<5810>. Reproduced by permission of the London Museum. © London Museum.

and, like the jet rings, it could have acted as a protective or healing amulet. In medieval bestiaries, the scorpion's poison was recommended for the treatment of kidney stones, the animal could be used to heal patients from poisoning and have a cooling effect on fever.⁴⁵ In the thirteenth century, Ibn al-Bayṭār wrote that a bezoar stone when set in a ring or pendant should be engraved with the figure of a scorpion when the moon is in that sign, and it could then be put in a patient's mouth or pressed onto their wound to treat the poison.⁴⁶ The association of the Scorpio zodiac sign with water may also explain why a blue and white glass was used. A finer onyx seal-ring version is in the V&A; this scorpion intaglio is Roman (ca. 200–100 BCE), while its silver setting is probably fourteenth century in date (see below for the reuse of ancient gems in finger-rings).⁴⁷ The power and desirability of these two rings lay in the role of their settings as astrological talismans; they were, and had the ability to make, powerful astrological *sigilla*.⁴⁸

Of course, images of saints, and secondary or tertiary relics were also believed to have healing and protective properties. A small group of cast

⁴⁵ For example, see Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum*, Valenciennes, La Médiathèque de Valenciennes, MS 0320, fols. 138r and 138v; V&A, *Object Record 724-1871*.

⁴⁶ Evans, *Magical Jewels*, 41.

⁴⁷ V&A, *Object Record 724-1871*. Its surrounding legend is now indecipherable.

⁴⁸ See Weill-Parot, "Imprinting Powers."

pewter face-mask rings were excavated from the London Thames foreshore site of Billingsgate and date to the later fourteenth to fifteenth centuries.⁴⁹ One is a mournful, bearded face, another is a crowned head, and the last is a mitred head. Egan and Pritchard have commented that these rings are similar in style to contemporary pilgrim tokens, such as badges; the idea that the crowned head represented St. Edward the Confessor has been dismissed, but the mitred figure is confidently considered to be St. Thomas Becket (Figure 2.2).⁵⁰ This suggests that the Becket-head ring was a pilgrimage token, and most likely purchased in Canterbury (Kent).⁵¹ It is closely comparable to pilgrim badges from the same period that depict the head reliquary of Becket, and therefore forms part of the large number of pilgrim signs or tokens that are found throughout Europe.

While the Becket-head ring closely resembles the badges of Becket, other rings were also made for the Becket cult. In the Ashmolean's collection are rings made of copper alloy with engraved bezels. The first has an octagonal bezel (that may or may not have acted as a seal ring) and depicts Becket's mitre decorated with two small crosses and a fleur-de-lis, with two or three indecipherable letters underneath divided by a floral sprig.⁵² It is dated to the fifteenth century. The second, which was a seal ring (engraved retrograde), has a large "T" on its oval bezel, surrounded by smaller letters that altogether spell *Cappi[or v]te + Thomae* (Thomas's Head).⁵³ This is likely to be slightly earlier in date, due to the lettering and shape of the ring. Buying rings such as these, and the pewter examples, would have provided proof of the visits to the shrine by the devotees and reminded them of the event.⁵⁴ If purchased before accessing a shrine or tomb, the pilgrim could create a tertiary relic by touching it to the holy structure. For the Becket rings, the head reliquary that held part of Becket's skull in a life-sized, mitred bust in the *Corona* chapel in Canterbury Cathedral, would have been very apt, and

49 Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, nos. 1641–43.

50 Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, 335. The crowned head could be Henry VI if the rings were made in the later fifteenth century. The mournful face could possibly be St. John the Baptist.

51 Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*, no. 1642.

52 AM, AN1948.196, unprovenanced.

53 AM, AN1948.197, unprovenanced.

54 Proof of being a pilgrim could also provide protection, as shown by a 1450 story of a man who was abducted by seafaring "enemies." When they found out he was a pilgrim they released him and gave him money (a female pilgrim was also abducted before being robbed and then released). Fenn and Greenwood, *Paston Letters*, no. 8.

the proximity to the relic could have transferred some of Becket's power to the rings. These evocative personal accessories would have then been worn on the hand in direct contact with the skin, thus keeping the power of the saint as close as possible. Those with the dual function of being a seal matrix could also transfer the power to the wax impressions.

These rings of the Becket cult formed part of the active participation in devotional and venerative experiences, and as emotants would stimulate memories and emotions that were generated during the close encounter with the holy saint. Although cheaper and from large-scale production, the cast pewter rings were perhaps equally emotionally important to their owners as more expensive devotional rings. Lead alloy souvenirs costed around a penny for a dozen, so they were cheap but extremely desirable, as shown by the numbers sold at shrines, their use as evidence to falsify pilgrimages, their ability to admit owners to local confraternities, and the numbers recovered today.⁵⁵ We may also see their elevated or equal emotional value in the fact that it was not only the poor who bought the cheaper tokens; Queen Charlotte de Savoie (1443–1483), wife of Louis XI of France, had a collection of lead alloy signs—kept in a satin bag—which were inventoried in 1483.⁵⁶ Such cheap tokens, including the rings, contained and had the ability to impart the power of saints and the Holy Family to combat fears and ills.⁵⁷ It was the association with the shrine, role as a contact relic, or the imagery that gave this type of base-metal pilgrimage ring (and the other pilgrim tokens) agency, importance, and emotional value to their owners.

At the other end of the scale from the pewter rings—at least in terms of monetary value and materials—are two gold rings from Oxfordshire; one is a large fifteenth-century iconographic ring from Godstow Abbey, and the other is an exquisite reliquary ring found near Thame. From Godstow Abbey, a Benedictine nunnery on the outskirts of Oxford, the elaborate fifteenth-century iconographic ring was found by chance in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ It is a wide band that is richly decorated on the outside with images of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin and Child, and a male saint, interspersed with flowers and leaves, while on the inner band is an inscription in black-letter, “Most in mynd and in myn hert / lothest from you fer to depart.” The nunnery was

55 Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs*, 1–24.

56 Gay et al., *Glossaire*, 635, no. 1483.

57 Standley, “Fear, Matter and Miracles,” 240–42.

58 BM AF.1075.



Figure 2.3. Two views of the reliquary ring, ca. 1400.

Gold, amethyst, and enamel, the box-bezel (maximum)

l. 26 × w. 16 × h. 7.4 mm. From the hoard found near Thame.

AN1940.228. Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

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a relatively wealthy institution; with an income of over £275 in ca. 1535,⁵⁹ it is not unlikely that an abbess could have owned such a ring. Alternatively, it may have been a shrine offering, or lost by a lay corrodian or guest. The abbey was acquired by Sir George Owen after its dissolution in 1539. He was one of Henry VIII's physicians, but also a Catholic recusant, so this ring could have been owned by his family and lost later in the site's history. As with most rings, we will never know the true owner or how it was lost. Nevertheless, the inner, private inscription indicates that Christ and the Holy Family were in the wearer's heart—the centre of emotions—and their mind, never to depart. The words and imagery were a reminder for constant devotion and remembrance, but also the stimulation of affective piety.

The reliquary ring from Oxfordshire is a unique survival and dates to ca. 1400 (Figure 2.3).⁶⁰ It is made of multiple components of gold, amethyst, and enamel. The comparatively large rectangular cuboid void for a relic

59 Knowles and Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses*, 253. Only seven Benedictine nunneries in England and Wales (out of a total of 101) had a higher net income.

60 Standley, "Hid in the Earth."



Figure 2.4. Two views of the gold ring found in Bolnhurst and Keysoe, ca. 1400, set with cut garnet, pearls, and decorated with the monogram “AM.” Internal diameter 18.5 mm. AN2016.1. Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

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(most likely a piece of the True Cross) is accessed by rotating flowers on the shorter ends of the bezel, which releases the openwork upper-frame, amethyst, and its supporting back-plate. The ring is also decorated with the invocation MEMANTO MEI DOMINI, and an enamelled scene of the Crucifixion on the reverse of the bezel. Amethyst makes up not only the double-armed cross, but also settings on the outer hoop. The double-armed cross may have been chosen to echo the cross form of the Byzantine world from where relics in the medieval West often originated,⁶¹ or indeed was reused from an older Byzantine reliquary. We cannot know exactly when or how often the ring was opened, but the experience of venerating the relic by the owner would have been enhanced by the act of carefully opening the ring and revealing the precious relic. They would then have the treasured relic itself, the amethyst cross, and an emotive image of the Crucifixion to contemplate and pray over as part of their devotional practice.

The skilled stone-cutting and goldsmithing of this unique piece is echoed in other contemporary jewellery that has survived in collections, but is relatively rare in the corpus of archaeological finds. An exception is a metal-detected ring from Bolnhurst and Keysoe (Bedfordshire), now in the Ashmolean (Figure 2.4). This ring also dates to around 1400 and is unusu-

61 A trend discussed by Anne Lester in “Beyond the Borders, Outside the Frame: Translating Presence from Byzantium to the West after 1204,” a paper presented at the 54th Annual Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, March 2023.

ally set with a pyramidal cut garnet rather than a cabochon setting which was the norm until around the end of the fourteenth century. The pearls and attachment method are comparable to other examples of jewellery, such as pendants, but pearls are rare survivals in the archaeological record with them being subject to degradation in soils. The gold openwork letters of “A” and “M” on either side of the collet under the shoulders, most likely the monogram for *Ave Maria*, are unusual as most invocations to Mary or Christ are more simply inscribed on the hoops of rings.⁶²

If the letters were an abbreviated invocation to the Virgin Mary, this prayer and the gold openwork form echoes the reliquary ring from Oxfordshire. Not only did the materials and skilled craftsmanship add value to the rings, but the pearls and the garnet on that from Bedfordshire were perceived to have particular virtues, for example, the garnet could protect its wearer from poison and vapours (i.e., the plague).⁶³ It was also associated with light and fire due to its colour, and as such the theological salvation of souls from darkness.⁶⁴ The faceted nature of the stone would have intensified this quality as the cut faces would catch sunlight, candlelight, or firelight as it was worn on the hand. The pearls too were symbols of purity, chastity, virginity, and heaven: such qualities or elements being synonymous with the Virgin Mary, thus strengthening the interpretation of the gold AM lettering standing for *Ave Maria*.⁶⁵ The elements made up an attractive, valuable, symbolic, protective, and emotionally charged piece of jewellery, providing the owner with reassuring feelings when they experienced anxiety or fear.

The complex features in the designs of rings and their material components—such as the multi-element bezel in which a piece of the True Cross was kept, the invocation to the Virgin combined with pearls and garnet, or even the form of Becket’s mitre—contributed to heightened emotional experiences in the praxis of holy veneration.

62 Such as a silver ring from Fyefield and Tubney (Oxfordshire) inscribed with +IHC NAZARENV. AM, AN2011.31.

63 Carbuncle or carbunculus is the medieval name used for the stone, and is discussed in Albertus Magnus’ *De mineralibus*. Magnus and Wyckoff, *Book of Minerals*, bk. 2:ii, ch. 3; Evans and Serjeanston, *English Medieval Lapidaries*.

64 The light was not even extinguished at night. Evans, *Magical Jewels*, Appendix D, 227.

65 The pearl was known by its Latin name *margarita*, and was believed to be formed in shellfish by dew. The twelve gates of heaven were made of pearls. See Evans, *Magical Jewels*, 72, 146; Appendix D, 231; Book of Revelation 21:18–21.

Reuse, Riddles, and Personal Identities

Amongst the garnets, pearls, sapphires, emeralds, and rubies, jewellers also reused gems originally carved in the ancient world. These old intaglios entered an organized and international trade network of Classical gems during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and were reused in seal-rings and matrices.⁶⁶ Although the organized trade was significant, Roman objects could also have been encountered by medieval people in England and Wales while working in fields or robbing Roman stonework, for example. Even today, at least fifty loose Classical intaglio gems have been found by chance and recorded on the PAS, as have hundreds of Roman rings with or without their original intaglios.⁶⁷ Carved cameo gems were also reused, such as the Roman green chalcedony bust of a woman in a thirteenth-century gold claw setting found near Witney (Oxfordshire) in 1856.⁶⁸ Contemporary medieval intaglios and cameos copying the Classical style were also produced, revealing the influence on medieval craftsmen and the popularity of the forms.⁶⁹

What was the appeal of these gems, and how were they manipulated in a later medieval context? The colours, images, and presumably relative novelty of the gems made them attractive; certainly the engraved nature of the gems was believed to increase their amuletic powers.⁷⁰ Finds of gold and silver seal-rings with inscriptions around the gems illuminate the recontextualization of the stones, but are rarer than the pendant-form seal matrices of precious- or base-metals set with the Classical gems.⁷¹

What were the interpretations of these Classical objects, and what role did they have in everyday experiences? Some of the Classical imagery could have been reinterpreted in the medieval period as either representing the individual owners of the seal matrices, or given Christian mean-

66 Henig, "The Re-use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios."

67 Recovering metal rings is not unexpected given the large-scale recovery of metal-detected finds, while the small, loose stone intaglio finds are more remarkable.

68 V&A, 646-1871.

69 See above for the impressed glass setting from London and notes 43 and 44. A ca. 1300 agate intaglio depicting a lion in the gold seal-ring of Artaut de Doyn is also recorded in Cherry, "The Rings," 42, no. 14; Campbell, "Gold, Silver and Precious Stones," 137-38.

70 Evans, *Medieval Jewels*, 94-95 and 118-20; Weill-Parot, "Imprinting Powers."

71 Medieval seal matrices tend to be one of two broad forms: flat with a pierced lug on the reverse; or conical with a pierced terminal. They have a central design and inscription on their face, usually added to the matrix by engraving. Reused intaglios are normally set in the flat form.

ings. For example, a later thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century gold ring from Hereford (Herefordshire) that contained a first-century BCE sapphire intaglio carved with the Hellenistic depiction of a Ptolemaic queen's head in profile, could have been interpreted as the Virgin Mary.⁷² This was surrounded by the retrograde-engraved inscription of “* TECTA: LEGE: LECTA: TEGE.” (Read what is hidden, hide what is read) incorporating elements of secrecy that reiterated the role of the impressed wax seal. Other inscriptions of contemporary seal-rings similarly highlighted secrecy, for example, “+ EGO: SECRETA: TEGO” (I hide secrets). In the thirteenth century, personal names were often included to indicate the owner, such as “+SGILLV OSBERTTI” (Seal of Osbert) which surrounded a Roman chalcedony intaglio that depicted Jupiter—perhaps Osbert saw himself in the image.⁷³ When sealing a folded letter using one of these seal-rings, it may have led to feelings of reassurance that the private correspondence in the letter packet was protected from prying eyes, but also that the writer's identity was physically being sent with it in the form of the seal.⁷⁴ Upon receipt the recipient could feel curiosity, and the letter and wax seal could bring the writer to their mind's eye, perhaps generating feelings of love, sadness, or even emotions associated with gossip, such as curiosity. From the fifteenth-century Paston Letters we know that many aspects of a personal nature were written about and sealed (remains of the wax seals still visible on them), each with the potential to convey news and emotions of the writer, and to delight, amuse, upset, or frustrate the recipient.⁷⁵

Other inscriptions on seal-rings are more intriguing, such as that found in 1760 which remained undeciphered until now. The reused first-century CE, carnelian intaglio in its later, gold ring setting was found near Sandal

72 V&A 89-1899. A gold seal matrix containing a medieval green jasper intaglio is carved with a similar image. Found by chance in Epwell (Oxfordshire) in 2015, now held in the Oxfordshire Museums Service, see Byard, *BERK-2A91CA*.

73 Henig, “The Re-use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios,” fig. 7; BM, P&E AF 558, ring donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, early 1300s, gold with a late Roman sard intaglio carved with the bust of Jupiter or Hercules. For Osbert's silver ring, see Richardson, *KENT-FF33F7*.

74 Wax seals could have been used with letterlocking techniques, see Dambrogio et al., “The Spiral-Locked Letters.”

75 Fenn and Greenwood, *Paston Letters*. For example, the robberies and destruction caused by the duke of Suffolk's men in Hallesdon (Norfolk) (no. 130), Margaret Paston expresses her anger in a letter to her son (no. 229), and there is a humorous description of a rabbit farmer in a letter to Lord Fitzwalter (no. 307).



Figure 2.5. Sketch of the impression made by the intaglio set in the seal ring found near Sandal Castle. Drawing by the author. Adapted from photograph by Peter Guenzel in Estorick, *I Bought it at Christie's*.

Castle (West Yorkshire).⁷⁶ Its form suggests a manufacture date in the later thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The oval gem depicts a helmeted figure, holding a spear and leading a horse with its head turned towards its back (Figure 2.5), surrounded by the incomprehensible medieval Latin inscription: “+MANIA MENTITUR IANUA NOSTER EQUUS.” The enigmatic words are in fact a play on language and feature in contemporary manuscripts, including the collections of miscellaneous texts from Cerne Abbey and St. Peter’s Abbotsbury (Dorset).⁷⁷ Versions of the riddle sometimes include the “answer,” for example in the chapter on *rhetorica* in the early fourteenth-century copy of *Secretum philosophorum* in the British Library, which reads: “Mantica mentitur ianua noster equus, id est, malement porte nostre chival.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Society of Antiquaries, *Minutes of Meeting*; described as a “cryptic inscription” in Scarisbrick, *Rings: Jewelry of Power*, 28–29, no. 36. The ring is now in a private collection; see Estorick, *I bought it at Christie's*.

⁷⁷ For the later thirteenth-century Dorset manuscripts see *Miscellaneous, Cerne Abbey*, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.2.45, p. 3, and British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra B.IX, fol. 17r as cited in Hunt, “Deliciae clericorum,” 173. The Latin text is also included as a scribble at the end of Bede, *In epistolas catholicas*, in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.2.32, fol. 89r. See Hunt, “Deliciae clericorum,” 162, no. 6 and Pantin, “A Medieval Collection of Latin and English Proverbs,” 144, lx, for a variation on the riddle.

⁷⁸ British Library, MS Additional 32622, fol. 14r as cited in Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 75.

French, the socially superior “language of culture” in the thirteenth century,⁷⁹ was the key to understanding the ring’s inscription. When the Latin words *mantica mentitur* are translated into Old French, *malle* (bag) and *ment* (he lies), there is a play on words in the form of a homonym and it is read (or heard) as *malement* (i.e., badly, poorly, or with difficulty); *ianua* becomes *porte* and instead of meaning a door or gateway it is “he carries”; and *noster equ[u]s* translates simply to *notre cheval*—thus *malement porte notre cheval*. To the intellectual elite of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, literate in Latin and French, the pun on the ring is “Our horse carries poorly,” alluding to the gem’s scene where the horse is led, rather than being ridden. While the image in the first century CE would have been valued for its depiction of one of the Dioscuri, in the medieval period the gem was combined with a text to create an intellectual amusement.⁸⁰ The ring may well have been a commission with the inscription chosen to work with the gem’s imagery. The place of the ring in late medieval literary and intellectual culture not only came from its function to create a seal on documents (perhaps written by an occupant of Sandal Castle) but the Classical gem, and the play on language and words as well. Its medieval owner, and those viewing the impressed wax seal it produced, would have undoubtedly felt amusement by the clever wordplay, possibly superiority at having solved it, and a feeling of reassurance from the perceived amuletic power of the *sigilla*.

This ring provides an interesting case study for the life-biography of a Classical intaglio: from its carving and use as a seal in the Roman world; its recovery in the later Middle Ages; its likely commission by a literate elite member of English society; its use to seal personal documents (probably) at Sandal Castle; its loss, and recovery in the later eighteenth century; its role in antiquarian endeavours; the long-standing mystery over its inscription and meaning; to its subsequent purchase and entry into a private collection in the twentieth century. As a medieval seal-ring it provides material evidence of the social and intellectual activities of the English noble elite, and as an emotant it is physical evidence of their intellectual humour, curiosity, and joy experienced while sending and solving such a riddle.

In the sixteenth century, with the classical revival and developing vogue of collecting Classical sculpture and art, rings set with intaglios and cam-

79 Crane, “Social Aspects of Bilingualism,” 103.

80 The identification of the twin may have been recognized in the medieval period too. A further play on words with *ianua* / *ianus* and the Dioscuri could also have been perceived.

eos experienced a resurgence in popularity, after an apparent decline in the fifteenth century. Intaglio-set ring-forms appealed not only to the laity, but also to the religious elite. For example, a reworked first-century CE green plasma intaglio engraved with the head of Minerva was reset in an elaborate episcopal ring of Bishop Gardiner (d. 1555).⁸¹ Imitation cameos and intaglios were also produced, such as the fine, sixteenth-century gold ring set with a carnelian carved with a male bust excavated from London City ditch,⁸² or contemporary cameos found in a unique hoard of jewellery at Cheapside in the City of London.

Hoarding Rings During Emotional Experiences

Known as the ‘Cheapside Hoard’ after its findspot, the hoard dates to the early seventeenth century and is interpreted as being the stock of a goldsmith. Almost five hundred jewels survived burial and discovery, and they include the everyday jewellery of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but also items of great rarity, value, and of the finest quality.⁸³ Almost half of the rings in the hoard had rosette-style settings of emeralds and garnets around a larger raised central stone or a pearl,⁸⁴ while others were set with diamonds, rubies, garnets, sapphires, amethysts, moonstones, cat’s-eyes, enamels, and Roman intaglios. The jewels provide evidence of the world-wide networks of Elizabethan trade, gem-cutting skills, goldsmithing, and fashionable styles of jewellery. It is not known exactly when the hoard was hidden or why, but it was probably buried by one of the many goldsmiths who worked and sold their wares in Cheapside sometime around or after 1640, and perhaps at a time of peril.

Tumultuous events or the threat of danger are often considered reasons for hoarding possessions with the intention for retrieval when safe to do so. The pogroms in the fourteenth century on mainland Europe are seen as the cause of the hoarding of coins, with or without ritual and secular metalwork, by persecuted Jewish communities.⁸⁵ In England, no such Black Death

81 Found in his tomb in Winchester Cathedral, now part of their treasury.

82 Henig, “An Intaglio Ring.”

83 Forsyth, *London’s Lost Jewels*. The Cheapside Hoard is held in the LM.

84 Forsyth, *London’s Lost Jewels*, 167.

85 The most famous hoards are the “Black Death treasures” in the region that is now Germany. See Descatoire, *Treasures of the Black Death*; Stürzebecher, “Jewish Wedding Rings.”

treasures exist due to the expulsion of Jewish communities in 1290. Nevertheless, finger-rings and other jewellery are recovered from later medieval British hoards, although they are found in relatively low numbers and usually accompany coinage.⁸⁶ The value of the rings made them worth hiding, whether it be the value of their materials and/or the meanings ascribed to them by their owners.

One of the periods of peril in the later medieval period which may be the cause of some of the hoarding of small parcels of objects was the Reformation. Small groups of coins and jewellery that were offerings to shrines, or even relics themselves, could have been secretly taken and hidden before the destruction and stripping of assets by Thomas Cromwell, and such occurrences are recorded.⁸⁷ I have reassessed the hoard found near Notley Abbey, near Thame, and suggested that it was deposited at the Dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s, rather than a date in the 1460s during the Wars of the Roses as previously argued.⁸⁸ The reliquary ring (see Figure 2.3) was found with ten silver coins (all groats) and four other gold rings. These were a fifteenth-century posy ring inscribed with *tout pour vous*; a large stirrup-shaped ring set with a toadstone in a four-cusped collet with an open back allowing it to touch the skin; a smaller stirrup-shaped ring set with a turquoise cabochon; and another large late fourteenth- to fifteenth-century ring whose shoulders are decorated with pairs of panels engraved with floral and leaf motifs, set with a flat, hexagonally faceted peridot in a six-cusped collet, at its back is a quatrefoil hole allowing the stone to touch the wearer's skin. They formed a small parcel that could have been easily buried at a memorable location, and was made up of items that were commonly offered to shrines. For example, at Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury, jewels, including rings, were offered and even attached to the shrine, and the 1520 inventory of Lincoln Cathedral includes a reliquary ring that contained a piece of the True Cross and inscribed *Ecce lignum* which had been dedicated to the shrine of St. Hugh.⁸⁹

86 Coins provide a *terminus post quem* for the deposition date of a hoard, based on the latest minting date.

87 See Standley, "Hid in the Earth."

88 See Standley, "Hid in the Earth" for the reassessment. For the earlier interpretation see Evans et al., "A Hoard of Gold Rings."

89 See Standley, "Hid in the Earth"; Blick, "Votives, Images, Interaction," 48–51; Wilkinson, "Is Still Not the Blood of the Blessed Martyr Thomas Fully Avenged?"; Evans, *Magical Jewels*, 136.

I have argued that the rings and coins found in the hoard near Thame were rescued from the shrine of Our Lady at the Chapel of St. Anne at Caversham (Berkshire) (a dependent of Notley Abbey) before Thomas Cromwell's Commissioners arrived in September 1538. They were then taken and returned to Notley (ca. 30 miles from Caversham) before being buried nearby in the hope of retrieval, but this never happened. Each piece, including the coins, held devotional, protective, and emotional meanings. These would have accumulated during their lives creating palimpsests of meaning and emotions: as personal possessions worn on the body, the rings would have been associated with protecting the wearer from ills through the magical properties of the stones and the invocation to the Lord and the True Cross relic, and thus feelings of relief and reassurance; the reliquary ring would have been used to practice affective devotion; the posy ring was also connected to feelings of devotion and love to a person and/or Christ. When given as offerings to the shrine they may have induced the devotees' relief from feelings of pain, elation that they could soon be healed, or thankfulness for being saved from a threat, such as a storm at sea.⁹⁰ When they were seen by other pilgrims on the shrine, feelings of ecstasy and awe could have been triggered by the sight of it and its adornments (and eagerness to make offerings of their own, as was hoped for by the monks).⁹¹ When the rings and coins were rescued and taken back to Notley Abbey, the fear of being caught and the offerings destroyed would have been acute. At the moment of burial, the circumstances would have generated emotions of fear, trepidation, despair, and sorrow. Due to the importance and association of the offerings with the shrine of Our Lady in Caversham and the True Cross, the objects could have intensified these feelings.

The case reveals the curation of material culture and how the rings and coins, although of different monetary values, were imbued with comparable cultic properties and emotional significance by devotees who offered them, and the monks who curated and subsequently rescued these treasures.

90 A sea captain is recorded as giving a ring to the shrine of Becket after being saved from a storm.

91 See Blick, "Votives, Images, Interaction," 54–55.

Conclusions

This chapter has considered the limitations but also the potential of the archaeological record of later medieval and early modern finger-rings. These small finds were personal possessions and through their materials, imagery, inscriptions, symbolism, and provenance they can illuminate a variety of the lived experiences of the objects themselves, and their owners.

The rings can evoke vivid connections with people in the past due to their closeness to the physical body and their roles as emotants. On the whole, the people who wore the rings that have survived are those of whom we rarely have corresponding information about from historical sources. Additionally, the types of rings depicted in medieval and early modern illustrations do not fully represent the range and number of rings that were worn in the past. For example, the pewter devotional rings, or the glass moulded settings are missing from artistic depictions. Indeed, we do not even know the real materials of the rings in paintings—what appears to be a gold ring set with a red gem may have in fact been silver-gilt or gilt copper alloy with a red glass setting. Thus, archaeological evidence is vital to understand the objects of the past.

The case studies highlighted here show the variety of themes and other evidence that the archaeological rings can connect to, such as craftsmanship, betrothal and wedding practices, political and social upheaval, religious devotion and persecution, magical practices, literacy, antiquarian activities, and the history of collecting. What is also evident from the examples discussed, is the need of those studying rings to consider a range of available evidence and sources and other types of material culture, to fully contextualize and interpret the finger-rings. It is also important to consider that the rings (or their settings) may have had long use-lives, having been curated by individuals or institutions, bequeathed through generations, recycled, lost, re-found and reused, or remained hidden for centuries.

While wearing rings may have been an everyday action and became a usual feature of someone's dress, the experiences that the rings were part of were often emotional and significant. The rings were not just witnesses to the experiences, but they were characterized by emotion in the relationships and the circumstances that people experienced. As more rings are recovered and recorded through excavation and as chance finds, our understanding of the variety of types, meanings, their significance to their past owners, and their place in wider social events will continue to develop.

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