

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL LIVES OF RINGS

MOTION, GENDER, AND PRESERVATION

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WHEN ON MARCH 13, 1940, construction work was carried out in Calle de la Merced 27—located in the former Jewish quarter—in Pamplona (Navarre), workmen discovered a hoard of 117 gold coins, two embroidered purses, and one gold ring set with a large sapphire. A year later these pieces arrived at the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (MAN) in Madrid, where today a selection of the find is on display in the medieval section: circa 80 coins, the ring, and one of the embroidered purses (Figure 0.1).¹ In scholarship, the coins, of which 90 florins were minted in Aragon during the reign of Pedro IV (1335–1387), have received the most attention. Based on the identification of their issuing authorities, the hoard can be dated around 1400. The combination of coins struck in different regions also gives us an idea about the circulation of money in Navarre as well as its political and economic connectedness with Castile, France, and Italy.² Whoever owned the coins and one lone ring gathered the gold valuables in two small bags before safely putting them away.

1 The ring is Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional (MAN), inv. 63601; one of the purses is MAN, inv. 65440; and the coins are catalogued individually inv. 105302; inv. 106031 to 106158. See [https://ceres.mcu.es/pages/ResultSearch?txtSimpleSearch=Tesoro%20de%20Pamplona&simpleSearch=0&hipertextSearch=1&search=simpleSelection&MuseumsSearch=MAN%7C&MuseumsRolSearch=9&listaMuseos=\[Museo%20Arqueol%F3gico%20Nacional\]](https://ceres.mcu.es/pages/ResultSearch?txtSimpleSearch=Tesoro%20de%20Pamplona&simpleSearch=0&hipertextSearch=1&search=simpleSelection&MuseumsSearch=MAN%7C&MuseumsRolSearch=9&listaMuseos=[Museo%20Arqueol%F3gico%20Nacional]). It is impossible to say whether all found objects were actually handed over to the museum, or that the items at the MAN are only a fragment of what was originally unearthed.

2 Ibáñez Artica, “Circulación de moneda foránea,” 247–59; Ibáñez Artica, “El tesoro de la calle de la Merced de Pamplona.”

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Figure 0.1. Pamplona Hoard as exhibited in room 27 at the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid. Photo by author.



Figure 0.2. Purse, fourteenth century. White linen embroidered with silk, h. 16 × w. 18 cm. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. 65440. Photo by Raúl Fernández Ruiz. Used with permission.



Figure 0.3. Ring, fourteenth century. Gold and sapphire, h. 3.10 cm; diameter 2.20 cm. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. 63601. Photos by Raúl Fernández Ruiz. Used with permission.

The purse shown in Figure 0.2 (h. 16 × w. 18 cm)—the most eye-catching of the two—is lined with white linen fabric and embellished with a wave-like embroidered pattern in white, which is combined with geometrical patterns consisting of stars, shields, and squares in red, black, and yellow silk.³ Based on its workmanship, the bag is attributed to a Nasrid workshop in Granada. While much of the embroidery has been damaged and its colours have faded, it is not difficult to imagine it once was a splendid purse.

But what about the ring (Figure 0.3)?⁴ Amidst the numerous coins, the sole ring from Pamplona manages to catch our eye not only because it is clearly not a coin, but also because of its fine ornamented hoop (measuring 2.20 cm in diameter), which is made of a flat gold band engraved with the kind of geometrical patterns also found in late medieval illuminated manuscripts, which corroborates the dating of the ring in the fourteenth century.⁵ The shoulders of the hoop are decorated with two animal heads, whose eyes are indicated by pierced holes, flanked by elegant leaves that resemble wings. From the animals' beaks emerge "tongues," which are actually the outer ends of the flat band that truly buttress the fat gold bezel. The bezel consists of an upper and lower part that were soldered together and decorated with a dented edge. It is set with a bright blue irregularly shaped bulky cabochon stone, a sapphire, kept in place with four claws. The axis of the sapphire has been pierced, which led María Luisa Galván to suggest that the stone was used as a pendant before it was set in a bezel.⁶ In an earlier life, the sapphire perhaps was part of an earring or necklace, of which multiple examples from the Roman and Byzantine world survive. But it is equally thinkable that the stone adorned votive objects, such as the crown of the Visigothic King Recesvinto that is part of the treasury of Guarrazar, which contains an impressive number of 243 sapphires.⁷ First-hand observation of the ring at the museum revealed little traces of wear, which is perhaps not so surprising for an object made in the fourteenth century and ready to be hoarded around 1400.

3 A detailed description of the purse can be found in Galván Cabrerizo, "Bolsa o escarcela del siglo XIII," 175–77, where the second bag is described as made of a thick white linen with crude embroidery in red silk. See also Franco, "Panorama del románico español," 249.

4 Ring, h. 3.10 cm; diam. 2.20 cm. Bezel, w. 1.20 cm; d. 1.20 cm; l. 1.60 cm; h. 1.50 cm.

5 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 205–6.

6 Galván Cabrerizo, "Anillo de oro," 177–78.

7 MAN, inv. 71202; Cózar Cuello and Sapalski Rosellóski, "Estudio de las gemas," 83.

The Pamplona ring is known to us foremost through its display at the MAN and its record in the online museum's database CERES.⁸ Even though the visual energy of medieval rings radiates through museum displays, heritage databases, and auction catalogues, it is, in fact, easy to overlook these small items in favour of larger artifacts about which we think to know more. Some rings have escaped attention due to their very simple designs when compared with stunning counterparts, such as architectural rings for which multiple elements were soldered together to create a rich, micro-architectural form sometimes topped with a colourful stone.⁹ This, together with their manufacture in larger quantities and similar styles,¹⁰ the frequent absence of traces of medieval ownership, and their unknown object histories in general, explains why rings are demanding artifacts to study.¹¹ It is true that they have long been collectables, but their study by medievalists is hampered by the factors mentioned above.¹² Nonetheless, the lavish publications on rings under the direction of Sandra Hindman, owner of Enluminures (a gallery specialized in the sale of rings and jewellery as well as medieval manuscripts) and a leading expert when it comes to medieval rings, testify to the appeal and relevance of these usually diminutive artifacts.¹³ Recent articles discuss medieval rings as embodiments of status, power, and religious affiliations, as well as expressions of personal devotion and healthcare, thus showcasing rings as vehicles for self-representation.¹⁴

8 The ring is likely to garner more attention after the forthcoming article coordinated by Helena Lahoz Kopsiske, curator at the MAN.

9 For examples, see Hindman et al., *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*, cat. nos. 13, 14, and 15.

10 That they could be produced and made accessible in large quantities is indicated by the ring-savvy Henry III, who gave away 2,769 rings between 1245 and 1252; see Carpenter, *Henry III*, 395.

11 The challenges when studying rings have also been pointed out by Moreira, "Rings on her Fingers," 306–8; and see also Chapter 2 in this volume.

12 On collectors, see Scarisbrick, "Introduction: Collecting Rings," 13–23; and also The Epilogue to this volume.

13 Hindman and Miller, *Take This Ring*; Hindman, *The Fashioned Hand*; Hindman et al., *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*; Hindman and Scarisbrick, *Golden Marvels of Byzantium*; Scarisbrick, *Historic Rings*.

14 Renou, "Rings of Power," 13–29; Moreira, "Rings on Her Fingers," 303–36; Kennedy, "English Iconographic Rings," 80–100; Hindman, "Medieval Iconographic Rings," 485–502; Evangelatou-Notara and Mavrommati, "Not Even a Band on My Finger?" 45–62.

The brief presentation of both the Pamplona ring and hoard might be understood as a clear-cut story about the hoarding and finding of a costly ring, its place in a society that valued jewellery, and its arrival at a museum. Yet, a much more intricate story can be told if we understand the Pamplona ring as a node in a web of social connections. Within this web, the ring moved as it was made, sold or gifted, and owned. Perhaps it was also worn (even if just for a short time) before its arrival in Calle de la Merced, where it was subsequently stored in purses. After its recovery centuries later, it became part of a highly curated presentation at the MAN. In sum, the ring has a social life; a theme that I will excavate more fully in this opening chapter. It is the focus on the social aspects related to medieval finger rings that unites the contributions of nine scholars with backgrounds in art history, history, archaeology, museum studies, and collecting. Together their contributions cover material roughly ranging from 1100–1500 in Iberia, France, England, Germany, Rus, and Byzantium.

Social Lives

The “social lives” in this book’s title is inspired by the first part of the title of Arjun Appadurai’s famous edited volume, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (first published in 1986) in which he argues that “commodities, like persons, have social lives.”¹⁵ Appadurai and the authors of his volume investigate how things—including medieval relics—“circulate in different regimes of value.”¹⁶ The author points out that objects receive their economic and cultural worth not merely because of their raw materials, processes of manufacture and labour, or a neutral market, but because of the significance people attach to them depending on their social and cultural contexts. And since these can vary, the worth of things can change at different points during their lives.

For rings, this has been poignantly discussed by Julie Renou, who emphasized that the value of early medieval rings fluctuates “depending on its social framework of appraisal.”¹⁷ In her insightful analysis of the normative scholarly framework often applied to the study of rings, Renou argues that rather than focusing on material worth, we should also consider craftsmanship, the distances material travelled (that is, the econom-

15 Appadurai, “Introduction,” 3

16 Appadurai, “Introduction,” 4.

17 Renou, “Rings of Power,” 15.

ics of import), as well as moments of display and traces of wear, tear, and repair. By taking such aspects into account the meaning of rings can shift from economic valuables to agents in the creation and maintenance of hierarchical relationships.¹⁸ The social lives of rings can be further investigated when scholars bring them into dialogue with other artifacts, such as sculpture, paintings, and coins.¹⁹ This furnishes insights in the artistic, social, and religious *milieux* (or regimes of value) rings were part of and that help us to understand why rings mattered. Hindman, for instance, has shown that when rings with representations of saints (also called iconographic rings) are studied together with devotional manuscripts, we can grasp these small adornments as wearable prayers. Wearing them “transformed prayer into an activity that punctuated every moment of daily life anywhere.”²⁰

Where Appadurai is interested in a social history of commodities with its strong emphasis on demand and value and its focus on long-term shifts and larger-scale social dynamics, most contributors to the current volume deal with a specific item or multiple rings, or discuss rings in a variety of textual sources (including wills, inventories, literary narrations, and scholastic treatises) related to a specific place and time. Rarely do they discuss rings as commodities, although these items certainly were part of regimes of circulation and exchange. Instead, the contributors focus on rings as small objects that have touched upon people, places, and events, and that featured in theological debates, and which have formed our modern museum collections. This means they were active things that embodied gendered, religious, and class identities and forged worldly and spiritual connections, perhaps even evoking multi-sensory experiences through descriptions in written sources and display at public events. That is, rings are material and narrative actants that give life to events and stories.²¹

In the remainder of this chapter I want to highlight three aspects that give shape to the social lives of rings and deserve closer scrutiny: material and motion; status and gender; and safekeeping and presentation. Taking the Pamplona ring as my guide, I bring my observations in conversation with the contributions of the authors, who interrogate rings in various ways. The plural “lives” here is purposely chosen to underscore that

18 Renou, “Rings of Power,” 22.

19 Hindman et al., *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*.

20 Hindman, “Medieval Iconographic Rings,” 501.

21 On the agency of rings, see also Bildhauer, *Medieval Things*, ch. 4.

rings as a category have different object trajectories, but also that just one ring can hold multiple lives, depending on its moments of activity, immobilization, retrieval, and display. Considering diverse moments within an object's life also inspires us to think about the question Renou posed of rings, namely how people live and engage with rings, which includes a consideration of the gestures connected with rings and the awareness of wearing a ring or multiple rings.²² To some, "life" may suggest the kind of object biography as applied by Igor Kopytoff, who puts forward that a cultural biography of things not only includes commoditization (resulting in "an item with use value that also has exchange value"),²³ but also singularization so that things become non-commodities. This singularization can happen when items become heirlooms, regalia used in rituals, or cultural heritage.²⁴ In this volume, singularization is a recurring theme. To give just three examples: Inés Calderón (Chapter 3) finds medieval stipulations that rings of virtue are not to be sold or passed on because of their saintly, healing, or magical properties. Therese Martin (Chapter 7) details how bishops' rings turned into relics. And Elizabeth McCord (Chapter 8) discusses Byzantine marriage rings as twentieth-century commodities that become collectables gifted to a museum, where they turn into objects of study and preservation. In a critical response to Kopytoff's concept of biography, Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie have pointed out that this metaphor implies that "bodily integrity is essential for the continuity of existence."²⁵ The reality of many artifacts—rings included—is, however, that they are broken or have been transformed, or that their trajectories are incomplete (or at least not completely known to us). For this reason, Joyce and Gillespie suggest speaking about object itineraries. However, by using the plural "lives," I acknowledge rings as active agents in motion, while also allowing the authors to focus on specific aspects of a ring's itinerary without detailing it in the fullest possible way.²⁶

22 Renou, "Rings of Power," 18.

23 Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography of Things," 64.

24 On regalia, see also Holcomb, "The Adorned Body," 22–23.

25 Joyce and Gillespie, "Making Things out of Objects that Move," 11.

26 On the movement of medieval artifacts, see also Hamilton and Proctor-Tiffany, *Moving Women, Moving Objects*.

Material and Motion

Before ending up in anyone's possession, the Pamplona ring had to be manufactured. Its gold and sapphire may have been hailed from Sri Lanka and arrived in Europe via long-distance travel and trade in which the Mediterranean functioned as an important commercial centre from where goods were stored, traded, and exported. Where the ring was made we cannot say, because the method of making and its design are too general to be pinpointed to a specific area.²⁷ So, rings and the raw materials they were made of were part of the process of commoditization. Like our Pamplona ring, many others were further embellished with precious or glass stones, gems, pearls, and enamel.²⁸ The way these were set onto their hoops, together with the decoration of the hoops and bezels, determined rings' visual appearance, appeal, and wearability.

Precious stones added a specific lure, which made rings singular things—to use Kopytoff's framework—rather than commodities.²⁹ According to Marbode of Rennes's *De lapidibus* ("On Stones," ca. 1090), sapphires were considered only "for the fingers of kings to wear."³⁰ The French inventories studied by Mariah Proctor-Tiffany in Chapter 1 of this volume and the documents connected with the Iberian nobility analyzed by Inés Calderón in Chapter 3, speak volumes of the elite character of sapphires. At times, these written sources mention that rings were cherished and donated because of the protective and healing qualities their stones held; virtues already advertized by Marbode, who wrote that sapphires preserve health and disarm treachery.³¹

27 On the method of working with gems, see Campell, "Gold, Silver, and Precious Stones," 135–37.

28 Not all rings were made of metal, see Chapter 2 in this volume. An interesting category is the straw ring, which was not meant to last, as has been pointed out by Judith Bennett, Ruth Karras, and Janelle Werner in their analysis of what courtship in medieval England could entail. Straw rings were made to adorn the fingers of young women to suggest a marital bond. Not only was such a ring quickly made without any expense, it could also be easily torn or simply disintegrate so that any sign of the marital bond disappeared. The social life of these rings came to a quick end, sometimes destroying the personal lives of the women who once wore them. See Bennett et al., "No Romance Without Finance," 79.

29 On the process of singularization, see Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography of Things," 73–83.

30 Marbode of Rennes, *De lapidibus*, 42.

31 For a discussion of virtues connected with stones set in rings, see also Speakman, "Pearls, Sapphires, Diamonds & Toadstones."

It is no wonder, then, that people were keen to add such powerful stones to their rings.

The philosopher-sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out that the social purpose of jewellery's material is its brilliance, which makes the wearer appear "as the center of a circle of radiation in which every close-by person, every seeing eye, is caught."³² However, in her glowing analysis of stones in medieval secular culture, Brigitte Buettner explains that the attraction of what she labels "minerals" lays not just in visual or economic appeal, but also in their ability as actants to set things into motion.³³ The virtues of stones set in glistening metals went beyond the visual, as they seem to have been rubbed, turned, and tasted by their wearers.³⁴ Physical engagement with stones is also emphasized by Marbode, and in the *Lapidary of King Alfonso X* (ca. 1283) we find multiple references to touch, which also include digestion. For example, the stone called "mover has this name because when it is polished and the powder that it gives off is given to a pregnant woman in a drink, it will move the baby and push it, be it dead or alive."³⁵ This stone, like many others in the lapidary, cannot be identified and might well be a mixture of minerals.³⁶ While the swallowing of stone particles may not have been a likely use of rings set with stones, licking or rubbing them possibly was. In fact, in this volume Therese Martin narrates the interactive use of "miracle rings" at the monastery of Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil in the seventeenth century. The rings were carried to the sick, who put them on, touched them, or washed them by pouring water through them for the effects of healing. Due to their small size, rings could be easily and inconspicuously transported to offer aid where needed. Their portability becomes abundantly clear when turning to a late medieval piece of paper to which a simple ring (1.5 cm in diameter) is stitched at the bottom. The unknown sender of the letter written in German informs his noble lady (also unknown) that he delivers to her a small ring (*ein cleins ringlein*) with which he has touched several holy places connected with the Holy Sepulchre he visited. As Folker Reichert has pointed out, this little gift held little material value, but was imbued with great spiritual worth.³⁷

32 Simmel, "Secrecy and Adornment," 342.

33 Buettner, *The Mineral and the Visual*, 6, 73–81, esp. 77; also Barthes, "From Gemstones to Jewellery," 60.

34 Bildhauer, *Medieval Things*, 138.

35 *Lapidary of King Alfonso X*, 27. For stones in connection with pregnancy and childbirth, see also two examples mentioned in Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery*, 98.

36 *Lapidary of King Alfonso X*, 17.

37 Reichert, "Ein cleins ringlein," 609. I owe this fascinating ring reference to the

The simple metal ring had become a contact relic in which the power of the holy places was preserved. Through sight and touch, the female recipient of the ring could visit the holy sites in her mind's eye. So, contrary to what Simmel proposed, rings and other adornments were not merely designed for others to see, or be enjoyed by the wearer foremost through the eyes of the beholder.³⁸ Instead, rings forged more intimate connections between themselves and their wearers, being both observed up close and manipulated by the hands of their wearers to invite further appreciation. In this volume, this is analyzed in more detail by Proctor-Tiffany, who speaks of rings' haptic histories when she traces the gifting of rings, that is, their movements from one hand to the next. These rings in motion were literally touched, and this sensory experience stimulated the creation of additional layers of meaning preserved within the gifted object.

Rings directed gestures of the hand and articulated the motion of the fingers they adorned.³⁹ In medieval Germany before the fourteenth century, rings' attachment to the finger is indicated by the word *vingerlîn*, the diminutive of *finger*, rather than *rinc* (or *ringlein* used in the letter mentioned above).⁴⁰ Recent reflections on the sensory experiences of wearing jewellery encourages us to think more about how individual items of adornment are both moveable and touchable objects.⁴¹ Ideas on jewellery and movement had been formulated earlier by the architect and architectural historian Gottfried Semper (d. 1879), who in 1856 theorized that bodily adornments are shaped according to the laws of nature. His analysis of what he called the formal qualities of jewellery ("Schmuck" in German) is based on his architectural vision that bodies, like buildings, should be adorned in a harmonious way in order to convey their balanced character. To this end, he created three categories of adornment, of which *Ringschmuck* is one.⁴² This encircling type of jewellery is directly connected to the body part it adorns and is meant to enhance form and proportion.⁴³ According to Semper, crowns, girdles, and necklaces belong to the most elevated adornments. Finger rings,

peer reviewer. For an image of the letter and ring, see www.flickr.com/photos/stadtmuseum/6666463513/, accessed February 4, 2025.

38 Hannah Korn speaks of dual accessibility, see Korn, "Arms and Hands," 51–55, at 51.

39 Holcomb, "The Adorned Body," 17.

40 Bildhauer, *Medieval Things*, 132.

41 Williams, "Appealing to the Senses," 77–96; Holcomb, *Jewelry: The Body Transformed*.

42 The other two categories are hanging jewellery ("der Behang") and directional jewellery ("der Richtungsschmuck").

43 Semper, *Über die formelle Gesetzmäßigkeit des Schmuckes*, 15.

Figure 0.4. Finger reliquary of St. James, twelfth–thirteenth century. Gold set with stones and enamelled medallion, ca. 13 cm. Eichstätt, Diözesanmuseum, inv. no. DK 11. Photo by Helmut Bauer. © Domschatz- und Diözesanmuseum Eichstätt.

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on the other hand, are aesthetically the least meaningful.⁴⁴ Semper writes that they do nothing to emphasize beautiful qualities, but are purely practical items functioning as signet rings or amulets. Here, I believe that Semper has not done justice to his own theory that encircling jewels literally encompass and thus empower a body part. After all, this encircling type of jewellery is directly connected to the body part it adorns and is meant to enhance form and proportion. A hand adorned with a ring, or multiple rings, attracts attention and gains gesticulating presence.

For example, the arm reliquary of St. Blaise, with its fingers seemingly frozen in blessing, is not the static object it appears to be. All fingers are adorned with a variety of rings; some small, some larger, some with a colourful stone, others with decorated hoops. The rings have been fixed to the fingers with tiny hooks so that they cannot slip off, an indicator of the performative use of the arm. During liturgical feast days the arm of Blaise was used to bless people, whose eyes must have gravitated towards the rings on the hand—which was closest to the recipient of the blessing. Set in motion in an ambience lit with candles, the stones glistened and further animated the fingers that were performing the gesture of blessing.⁴⁵

The animating function of rings is highlighted even further in a somewhat uncanny reliquary in the shape of a slightly curved finger fully covered with gold filigree (Figure 0.4).⁴⁶ This small shrine made

⁴⁴ Semper, *Über die formelle Gesetzmäßigkeit des Schmuckes*, 18.

⁴⁵ The arm reliquary of St. Blaise is preserved at Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Germany, <https://3landesmuseen-braunschweig.de/en/herzog-anton-ulrich-museum/collection/departments/medieval-arts>.

⁴⁶ On finger reliquaries, see Rückert, "Fingerreliquiar," cols. 1207–24. Here it is also mentioned that, when opened, the inscription on the door reads S.I.ĀC / fr. DÑI

in Italy in the twelfth or thirteenth century contains a relic of St. James (the brother of Christ), which is hidden behind a small door resembling the bezel of a ring set with an irregularly shaped blue stone.⁴⁷ In addition to this sizable ring, five differently shaped filigree bands decorated with red stones and a pearl also evoke rings. Unlike the rings of St. Blaise, here the rings were designed as an integral part of the finger that measures about 13 cm (including its base). Clearly, the patron and/or maker envisioned that the saint's bone deserved a decoration that would emphasize the "fingerness" of the reliquary. The effect is that the finger almost comes to life because the encircling ornamentation emphasizes its slight curve.

The reliquaries and extant rings themselves suggest that metal rings were created with the idea of longevity, but this was not necessarily so. As a commodity, metal itself could be reason to melt rings down, just as the sale of stones and pearls was cause to deconstruct them. These acts of dismantling are one of the reasons that explain—as both Therese Martin and Inés Calderón remark in their contributions to this volume—why many items mentioned in the written record cannot be connected with surviving rings. From items that once adorned moving fingers and bodies, rings changed into separate elements ready to be sold and remade into new jewellery. While their social value as rings may have come to a halt, the material elements that they originally were made of were passed on, creating new artifacts that would accumulate lives of their own.

Rings' ability to set things into motion—including devotion, healing, religious debates—depended not only on their materiality, but also on their portability.⁴⁸ Their movements are a reoccurring theme throughout this volume. Taking us from 2020 back to the tenth century, in Chapter 7 Therese Martin traces the history of four "miracle working" rings at Santo Estevo. While her questions evolve around the rings' authenticity and modern perceptions of what episcopal rings should look like, her chapter also provides insight as to how, throughout the centuries, the rings and saintly bones together were moved from one container to the next. In Chapter 3, Inés Calderón highlights the potential of these small adornments of the fingers to cross territorial boundaries that made up the Iberian world. By so doing,

(Sanctus Iacobus frater Domini). The door has been reinstalled upside down at some point.

47 Böhm, "H 54, Fingerreliquiar," 3:149–50.

48 Appadurai, "Introduction," 5, uses the phrase "things-in-motion"; see also Joyce and Gillespie, *Things in Motion*; Hamilton and Proctor-Tiffany, *Moving Women, Moving Objects*; Shalem, "Objects as Carriers," esp. 45–47 on rings.

documented rings are material witnesses to the forging of dynastic and religious ties. And they are also indicators of portable wealth that allowed men and women to distribute their properties in targeted ways. Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, in Chapter 1, analyzes wills and testaments of French royalty that mention impressive numbers of rings, tracing the haptic itineraries of some rings in order to capture their affective and political potential. That rings indeed could be highly political and were therefore moved from one person to another is one of the aspects discussed by Ana Labarta in her analysis in Chapter 5 of signet rings (usually made of silver) in chronicles from al-Andalus. These sources demonstrate that the presentation of such rings to heirs was a crucial step in the transfer of legitimate authority to the new ruler. The political nature of such personal adornments was attested more dramatically when rings were removed from the hands of their former owners in order to exhibit they had died.

Like all medieval rings, the Pamplona ring's social life started with the metal it was wrought from and the methods and materials used to further embellish it. In this sense, medieval rings, like Pamplona's, were commodities responding to a demand that was either particular (unique pieces) or more general (rings produced in larger quantities). Yet an analysis of the cultural meaning attributed to materials, an understanding of rings as actants engaging with human bodies, and an acknowledgement of them as being moving participants in networks demonstrate that rings could be singularized. Depending on their histories—and what we are able to unearth about them—rings embodied political and affective relationships, emotions, health, and religious identities. At some point, different categories of value may have overlapped, but time could also erase former meanings as well as affix new ones to the social lives of rings.

Status and Gender

Rings as things in motion—which, despite an enigmatic trajectory, also includes our Pamplona ring—interacted with the categories of status and gender, which, too, were a part of rings' social lives. Here, I take Roland Barthes's essay "From Gemstones to Jewellery" (1961) as a starting point, because his reflections on gemstones and jewellery stimulate further thinking about status and gender. He states that modern jewels have a "next-to-nothing" character because they are made of fragile, soft, and inexpensive materials rather than heavy gemstones and true gold.⁴⁹ The use of cheaper

49 Barthes, "From Gemstones to Jewellery," 63.

materials led to a democratization of jewellery, with “the copy ... no longer a hypocritical way of being rich on the cheap—it is quite open about itself, makes no attempt to deceive, only retaining the aesthetic qualities of the material it is imitating.”⁵⁰

If we bring this observation to medieval rings, it is only fair to say that the use of less expensive materials is not limited to the modern period.⁵¹ Archaeologists have done much to uncover how the non-elite adorned their bodies with rings made of base metals such as copper (the basic ingredient of bronze) and brass (an alloy of copper and zinc which has a gold-like appearance).⁵² They have also warned against an understanding of non-precious materials as “cheap” and simple imitations, and therefore of lesser status (that is, until the 1950s and 1960s discussed by Barthes). Such rings do merit attention because, as Renou has already pointed out, they can reveal how materials were crafted and socially appreciated. In Chapter 2, Eleanor Standley examines a wide range of rings from the medieval and early modern period, each time with the understanding that, no matter what their material, these were personal items that could be imbued with different emotions, including humour.

Despite the important and exciting work done by archaeologists, art historians’ eyes are more quickly caught by gold objects that do not tarnish than by stained and corroded metals, as is my own experience when studying rings at the MAN. The combination of some well-known rings set with precious stones—such as our Pamplona ring—and the mention of similar rings in romances, chronicles, and inventories of various sorts have shaped the idea that expensive or exclusive artifacts mattered the most. As a result, we have also come to expect that medieval secular and religious elites would only wear the most expensive and fancy stuff. The consequences of this assumption are investigated by Therese Martin in Chapter 7. Moreover, as Eleanor Standley observes here “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” (p. 59). This has obscured our thinking about how medieval people may have appreciated coloured glass, painted stones, and base metalwork that sparkles like gold and silver do.

50 Barthes, “From Gemstones to Jewellery,” 62.

51 Craddock, “Metal,” 371–91; Blair and Blair, “Copper Alloys,” 81–106.

52 Willemsen, “‘Man is a Sack of Muck girded with Silver,’” 171–202; Standley, “Love and Hope,” 742–59; Evangelatou-Notara and Mavrommati, “*Not Even a Band on My Finger?*,” 45–62.

Returning to Barthes, in his reflections on the democratization of contemporary jewellery, he is less explicit whether this fashion detail was worn by both women and men. Medieval grave finds, chance finds, hoards, and documentary sources (sumptuary laws included) indicate that men and women—including children—from all walks of life adorned themselves. Because of rings' relatively small size, the wide range of materials available to make them—including organic stuff—and their symbolism as signs of friendship and commitment, rings were accessible and highly wearable items, even though working classes may not have worn them every day or wore simple, unadorned bands. But who wore the Pamplona ring? Clearly, the ring belongs to what Barthes categorized as gemstones, "which grew old and so were, despite everything, alive."⁵³ This kind of stone set in gold was an elite object that only from the seventeenth century onwards was relegated to the realm of women.⁵⁴

Based on its materials, it likely was an affluent person, but the absence of an inscription indicating ownership or religious affiliation hinders a straightforward attribution. Nor does its diameter (2.2 cm) indicate whether its wearer was male or female. Not only because the size of fingers differs from person to person (also depending on age, medical status, temperature), but rings could also be worn on different fingers, which vary in size as well.⁵⁵ In her analysis of Merovingian rings, Isabel Moreira has pointed out that assuming gender based on size may result in faulty interpretations of monogram rings. Moreover, rings found in graves of which the sex of the skeleton has been established do not automatically indicate original ownership as they may have been presented to the deceased by a family member.⁵⁶ However, some rings that have the names of possible owners or wearers inscribed on them can actually tell us something about their gender as well as faith.

For example, in Chapter 5 Ana Labarta records the names of Sukayna and Shunayf on rings found in graves in al-Andalus. The combination of these names with the complete profession of faith inscribed on their rings suggests

53 Barthes, "From Gemstones to Jewellery," 59.

54 Barthes, "From Gemstones to Jewellery," 64.

55 I owe the ideas about age and medical status to Su'aad Redan. On women's economic status, see also Evangelatou-Notara and Mavrommati, "Not Even a Band on My Finger?," 45–62.

56 Moreira, "Rings on Her Fingers," 307. The "gendered" challenges posed by Spanish Visigothic rings become apparent in Ballester, "El Chatón Visigótico de Eivina[s]," 51–81, esp. 73–74.

that Sukayna and Shunayf desired to visually affirm their religious identity and show their piety. In a Christian context, rings found in tombs belonging to bishops, abbots, and abbesses also offer clues about their owners' gender, although the exact meaning of their rings deserves careful analysis. Some hoards with rings are more instructive, because they contain a variety of adornments that scholars have identified as female. This is also the case for a pair of signet rings discussed in Chapter 4 by Christian Raffensperger, who studies them as valuable sources for unravelling women's power in Rus. Even if the actual use of these rings cannot be established with certainty, just wearing them, and moving hands and fingers while doing so underscored the political and religious identities of their wearers. If we can imagine "finger-ness" for reliquaries, surely we can envision how signet rings of the type must have elevated the performative actions of the elite Rus women who wore them

Yet, the gendered picture remains complex, especially when we include the passing on of rings as heirlooms, tokens of friendship, or diplomatic gifts between men and women—both religious and secular—at various points in their lives. An example of objects' movement between people is presented by the English gentlewoman Margaret Paston in a letter from 1441 to her husband, and in which an iconographic ring is mentioned: "I pray you that ye will wear the ring with the image of St. Margaret that I sent you for a remembrance till ye come home. Ye have left me such a remembrance that maketh me to think upon you both day and night when I would sleep."⁵⁷ Margaret was pregnant—the "remembrance" her husband left her—when sending her ring engraved with the patron saint of childbirth, who was popular with both women and men.⁵⁸ While it is tempting to attribute rings with female saints—like St. Margaret—to female owners, the reality of rings changing hands complicates such readings.⁵⁹ Moreover, the Paston letter beautifully shows the mobile and affective nature of jewellery. What at first glance appears to be a straightforward devotional female item based on size and saintly iconography, is an emotionally charged artifact, or what Eleanor Standley has called an "emotant," which, once gifted, receives additional layers of feelings (e.g., love, joy, hope, anxiety) and memories of people, places, and events.⁶⁰

57 *The Paston Letters*, 5

58 Kennedy, "English Iconographic Rings," 89. See in this volume also Hindman, "Epilogue," 242.

59 I thank Su'aad Redan for discussing this with me.

60 Standley, "Love and Hope," 743, 745.

Despite the rich evidence for women as owners, wearers, and donors of rings, we cannot deny that medieval men ruled the world of rings, whether as manufacturers, merchants, wearers, theologians, scholars, or collectors.⁶¹ Mining chronicles and treatises for the existence and meaning of the signet ring in al-Andalus, Ana Labarta's chapter details that this type of ring clearly showed a man's religious affiliation and social status. How deeply the personal was entwined with the political is not only showcased by the bestowal of rings on male heirs, but also by the violent yet fascinating stories about the looting of rings from the fingers of their male owners to underscore the submission of the enemy and the triumph of the true ruler. Clearly, the men writing such narratives imprinted the use and meaning of signet rings in the hands of men on the minds of their readers.

In her discussion of bishops' rings in Chapter 6, Juliette Calvarin also places rings squarely in debates dominated by men. Different from Islamic thinkers who debated the material and design of rings, Christian intellectuals were concerned with what seal rings could signify when adorning the hands of bishops. Through complex metaphors, rings not just sealed church men as bishops, but also marked them as keepers and custodians of Christ's bride, the church. The mark left on the use and meaning of rings by scholastics also impacted the ordination of abbots and abbesses. Until the tenth century, pontificals record that both abbots and abbesses received ring, crozier, and monastic rule from the bishop when he ordained them. In the tenth century this changed: abbesses and abbots lost the ring, but where abbots still received the crozier, abbesses were given the rule only.⁶² Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis has interpreted the loss of ring and crozier in the hands of the abbess in connection with gender and status. In order to distinguish abbots from bishops, the first were left with just the crozier (and not the ring) as visual and tangible sign of their authority. As a result, the importance of the staff in the (ringless) hands of the abbot was emphasized by no longer investing the abbess with a crozier, nor the ring for that matter. The loss of crozier and ring rendered the abbess's authority ritually "impotent, or at least less potent than an abbot's."⁶³ By the thirteenth century, as documented by Durandus in his authoritative pontifical, things had changed

61 On gender and class restrictions related to the wearing of rings as written down by men, see also Moreira, "Rings on Her Fingers," 309; Jasperse, "Metal Jewellery." For prohibitions on the wearing of jewellery (including rings) in Jewish law (Halakha), see Schnitzer, "The Treasure," 717–29; Yahalom, "Men's Jewelry," 59–77.

62 Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination*, 82.

63 Bugyis, "The Development of the Consecration Rite," 138.

for the abbot, who was now again invested with the ring, but the pontifical is silent on the insignia of abbesses. Perhaps Durandus's statement that abbesses should use the form for abbots with feminine endings might be taken as an indication that the investiture ritual was the same, including both crozier and ring.⁶⁴ Even if ring and crozier were not officially bestowed on abbesses, burial finds and representations of abbesses indicate that they wielded the staff frequently, but the evidence for rings is opaque.

While the abbess oversaw her nuns' daily life, their consecration (like that of the abbess herself) was highly regulated by men who had designed its ritual and performed it. When young women—after years of preparation at the convent—entered the ceremony of their coronation, they received veil, crown, and ring from the bishop. In response to receiving the ring, the nun declared: "With His ring my Lord, Jesus Christ, has betrothed me, and like a spouse he has adorned me with a crown."⁶⁵ A gold ring found at Perth (Scotland) and preserved at the British Museum bears the inscription + O CEST:ANEL:DE:ChASTETE/ SEV:ESPOSE:A IhESV CRIST (With this ring of chastity am I wedded to Jesus Christ) and is an expensive and brightly shining testimonial to the spiritual betrothal.⁶⁶ The text is inscribed on the outside of the hoop and thus highly visible to its wearer, functioning as visual and haptic reminder of the nun's spiritual duties towards her heavenly husband. In her analysis of the liturgy of a nun's coronation in late medieval northern Germany, Julie Hotchin emphasizes how the texts sung during this ritual "function as emotives in that they at once express and produce emotion, singing into presence the nuns' intense feeling of love that they declare."⁶⁷ This strongly resonates with what Standley called "emotants," artifacts saturated with emotions. Like antiphonal singing (an emotional performance), the nuns' rings were affective expressions of the devotional commitment to Christ and religious life. But nuns' rings did more. As visual expressions of female monastic life these small ornaments also tied together

64 I thank Juliette Calvarin for discussing this with me.

65 Hotchin, "Emotions and the Ritual of a Nun's Coronation," 182.

66 British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-895; Jones, *Finger-Ring Lore*, 240, where he also mentions another nun's ring inscribed with "God with Maria" in the Waterton Collection at the South Kensington Museum (now Victoria & Albert), which perhaps is the ring with the inscription *god. help. anna. Maria*. See <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121878/ring-unknown/>. This inscription is however more ambiguous than the one now in the British Museum. A nun's ring is also mentioned and depicted in Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, 185.

67 Hotchin, "Emotions and the Ritual of a Nun's Coronation," 183.

the community, setting it apart from those who were not betrothed to Christ. Nuns' rings can thus be viewed as one of many visual and material signifiers of religious class and sex.

But thinking about status and gender does not stop here. In the British Museum's online catalogue, we read that the inscribed nun's ring was purchased by Lord Richard Cornwallis Neville (4th Baron Braybrooke) in London in 1858, where it was sold by a Mr. Sharp. It then came into possession of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, who bequeathed it to the museum in 1897. So here we have wealthy male collectors, of whom one endowed his rings to a museum. Collectors' tastes, interests, and connoisseurship have impacted the way we study and conceptualize rings, namely as elite items. Importantly, Diana Scarisbrick pointed out that women were collectors of rings (and other jewels) as well as significant contributors to museums' collections.⁶⁸ Focusing on the sale and acquisition of a Byzantine marriage ring and other pieces of jewellery, in Chapter 8 Elizabeth McCord details how Mildred Bliss (together with and her husband Robert Woods) created a medieval collection at Dumbarton Oaks that not only showcases their ambitions to make these items available for scholarly research, but also reflects their wealth, which allowed them to turn commodities into collectables (which could, if needed, become commodities again). As McCord observes, Bliss's wealth and drive to collect were not novel, nor do they break with earlier traditions.

Going beyond the splendour of our Pamplona ring—the kind of brilliance that, as we have seen, can captivate and blind art historians—we appreciate that rings adorn the hands of people from different class, gender, and age. We even find that intellectuals concerned themselves with these small adornments, promoting ideas of appropriate wear and moral behaviour. Rings' social lives were thus intimately connected with ideas about personhood and group identity of which gender and status were an integral part. Even when no longer in the hands of medieval people, rings remained an expression and affirmation of class, but now of those who collected and presented them.

Safekeeping and Presentation

As several authors in this volume point out, rings themselves served as miniature but mighty containers for personal memories, beliefs, political affiliations, and much more. Notwithstanding their capacity to preserve, medieval rings usually lack an inside that could be accessed, making them into

68 Scarisbrick, "Four Centuries of Ring Collectors," xvi–xvi on women collectors.



Figure 0.5. Triptych ring, fifteenth century. Gold and traces of enamel, w. 10 mm; diameter 21 mm; head 9×11 mm, weight 5 g. Griffin Collection, inv. 2016-006. © Les Enluminures. Used with permission.

“not-quite-containers.”⁶⁹ Perhaps rings that can be opened and thus present something “inside,” such as the triptych ring discussed by Hindman in her analysis of some iconographic rings (Figure 0.5),⁷⁰ come closest to the notion of a container put forward by Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail as “any object that can hold something else inside itself for an indefinite period of time, isolating the contents from the give and take of the world outside.”⁷¹ When closed, the image contained within the iconographic ring (the Holy Trinity and Annunciation) is removed from the visible and tangible outside world. Yet upon removing the pin and opening the doors on whose exterior St. George (left) and St. Catherine (right) are depicted, the interior unfolds the spiritual, inner world of its user, whose eyes and fingers engaged with the delicate carvings that testify to the craftsmanship of this ring.

With their definition, Shryock and Smail underscore that objects stored within containers are removed from circulation, even though this removal may be short-lived. The kind of containers that were used to keep rings were varied. Apart from inventories—that document and organize rings’ histories, value, and ownership—graves, and ecclesiastical institutions who received donated rings, there were also bags, chasses and chests, and larger built structures such as cellars and towers. The Pamplona ring was kept in an

⁶⁹ Shryock and Smail, “On Containers: A Forum,” 2.

⁷⁰ Hindman, “Medieval Iconographic Rings,” 495–96.

⁷¹ Shryock and Smail, “On Containers: A Forum,” 2.

embroidered purse. Standley mentions a satin bag that served as a container for an assemblage of lead-alloy signs owned by Queen Charlotte of France (d. 1483), who, in all likelihood, valued them not because of their material worth but because of their connectedness to saints, shrines, and shielding powers.⁷² The “miracle rings” at Santo Estevo were also kept in a purse after their retrieval from the retable behind the main altar (see Figure 7.3). This early modern purse served as a portable soft shrine for these relics, but after their storage in a polychromed wooden reliquary chest mounted in a cabinet above the choir stall, their movements seem to have come to halt again.⁷³

A more extreme way of protecting precious goods was hiding them in the earth, walls, and floors. In this volume, examples of such storage are mentioned by Raffensperger and Standley.⁷⁴ Hoarding usually took place in times of crisis, although the circumstances that led to specific items being hidden away may never be fully explained. Returning once more to our sapphire ring, an inhabitant of Calle de la Merced 27 decided to safekeep it together with gold coins in a wall, which was uncovered when building activities took place in the 1940s. Until the early 1590s this street was originally called Calle Mayor de la Judería; a street at the heart of the Jewish quarter in Pamplona, and close to its *alcaicería* (marketplace or bazaar).⁷⁵ The preservation of the ring and coins suggests that the ring itself was kept foremost because of its material value as a gold object, not as a particular personal item. This tallies with Rafael Arrizabalaga Lizarraga’s interpretation of the built structure as one of multiple small Jewish workshops (ca. 50m²) in this street, which were mentioned in the Navarrese royal financial registers (*comptos*).⁷⁶ In the financial accounts for 1341, Arrizabalaga found eight silver smiths (*argenteros*), one shoemaker, one tailor, and multiple menders situated in the shops near the *alcaicería*. So perhaps the owner of the coins and ring was a Jewish goldsmith, or a supplier of gold that would be used by other craftsmen.⁷⁷ But we cannot rule out the possibility that yet another person

72 Chapter 2, p. 68; also Rasmussen, *Medieval Badges*, esp. ch. 4.

73 See Chapter 7 in this volume.

74 Examples of hoards that included jewellery are manifold, so here I only mention Cherry, “Mon Coeur Avez,” 49–57; Duczko et al., “A New Late Viking-Age Hoard from Poland,” 145–56; Labarta, “El tesorillo andalusí,” 783–802.

75 Martinaena, *La Pamplona de los burgos*, 185–86.

76 Arrizabalaga Lizarraga, “Judería y chapitel,” 857–99, at 876. On Jewish inhabitants of Pamplona and their fiscal connections with the crown of Navarre, see also Carrasco Pérez, “Juderías y sinagogas,” 123–28.

77 This has also been observed by Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 205, who

left his or her purse with coins and ring at Calle de la Merced 27 for safe-keeping. In any case, around 1400 (the approximate date of the hoard based on a dating of the coins as *terminus quem*) a person seems to have hidden his valuables. But why?

Perhaps they were simply stored in order to safeguard them from thieves. This does, however, not explain why the goods remained in place for so long, as one would expect a retrieval of the items. Maybe social unrest inspired this hoarding. For the German treasures at Colmar and Erfurt—both containing rings, coins, and other metal items such as belts and silver cups—it has been plausibly argued that they belonged to Jewish owners based on their contents.⁷⁸ Our Pamplona ring, as mentioned earlier, reveals nothing about the gendered or religious identity of its owner/wearer. While some medieval rings can securely be connected to Jewish wearers because they were found in Jewish cemeteries or because of Hebrew inscriptions, documentary evidence also indicate that Jewish people owned rings with precious stones that lack inscriptions, such as a “gold ring with ruby stone.”⁷⁹ Had the Pamplona ring been recorded somewhere, it would probably have been described in a very similar way.

When in 1347 the bubonic plague ravaged throughout Europe, Jews were frequently held responsible and were persecuted in French and German speaking territories. These intertwined events of plague and pogroms led to the burying of costly items that their owners hoped to retrieve when the dust settled. At that same time, such pogroms also happened in the Iberian Peninsula, and in 1391 Jews were persecuted in Andalusia and the states of the crown of Aragon.⁸⁰ Yet Navarra escaped such turmoil until the Jews were expelled from the kingdom in 1498, almost a century after the dating of the Pamplona hoard.⁸¹ That said, Beatrice Leroy enumerates multiple examples demonstrating that Jews in Navarre faced intolerance, which sometimes resulted in death, but more usually consisted of taxes and fines that were paid to the crown. We can only speculate whether it was general

presents the ring in connection with rings found in Jewish contexts, see 201–31.

78 Descatoire, *Trésors de la Peste noire*; Drake, *The Colmar Treasure*; Stürzebecher, “The Medieval Jewish Ring,” 72–79, with references to earlier publications. Stürzebecher, “Der Schatzfund aus der Michaelisstrasse in Erfurt,” 61–64 (with references to other German finds).

79 Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 30.

80 Leroy, *The Jews of Navarre*, 142. Navarra had welcomed Jews expelled from Aquitaine and France in 1290, 1306, 1322, and 1394.

81 Arrizabalaga Lizarraga, “Judería y chapitel,” 876.

social unrest that pressed the owner or keeper of the coins and ring to store the goods. While the plan was likely to retrieve the goods, circumstances seem to have forced its owner to abandon them. The ring—together with the coins and the small bags in which they were contained—serve as reminder of this (forced) abandonment.

Unfortunately, questions concerning ownership and hoarding cannot be completely answered. Yet the combination of the sapphire ring and 117 coins from different regions (including France and Italy) preserved in two bags created in the Nasrid kingdom of Granada is interesting, as it tells us that at one location multiple cultures and materials merged. In fact, this is how the hoard is displayed at the end of room 27 at the MAN (see Figure 0.1), where it is part of the installation that shows that the Iberian Peninsula cultivated ties with Europe during the late Middle Ages. These links explain the presence of a range of coins from different territories, and perhaps also allow us to speculate that the ring arrived at Spain from France.

After they were sold to collectors and sent to museums, the value of rings as commodities is replaced with a singularization importance based on their (art) historical value. Museums are large containers in which rings are not only preserved, but also presented. Although many rings held by museums are not on display, those that are shown are not just material items (not be touched), but also representants of a museum's narrative. The presentation of the sapphire ring at the MAN is only one of many stories that rings can tell.⁸² In her Epilogue to this volume, Sandra Hindman explores museum presentations in more detail, demonstrating the different solutions their curators reach to present these small items in accessible ways. Here, I briefly mention two temporary exhibitions that addressed rings (and other jewels) as moveable items related to status and gender. In the exhibition *Jewelry: The Body Transformed* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), rings and other adornments were presented in close connection with the human body. Asking challenging questions of “what jewelry is...how it works and why we wear it,”⁸³ the curators used “creative mounting solutions that placed jewellery in dialogue with visitors' bodies...and abstracted moulded body parts emerged from the backing fabric.”⁸⁴ Rings were combined with other artifacts in the recent exhibition *Rich in Blessings: Women*,

82 For a brief overview of five museum displays of jewellery, see Church, “Five Great Museums to see Jewellery,” <https://thelifeofjewels.com/five-great-museums-to-see-jewellery/>.

83 Holcomb, *Jewelry*, 9.

84 Colburn and Williams, “Displaying Byzantine Dress,” 230.

Wealth, and the Late Antique Household (Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 2023–2024). There, some rings were displayed together with other luxury items to analyze the practicalities and moralities of women’s wealth in Late Antiquity. The exhibition highlights that the visual and material record helps us to understand women’s access to and display of wealth.

When we enjoy the display of the riches in any of the mentioned museums—these large repositories of heritage—we do well to remember that we do so because of the finds of archaeologists, farmers, and workmen. Many museums acknowledge the support of (often) wealthy collectors, who bequeathed artworks to museums to ensure their safekeeping. While the Pamplona hoard—as so many other hoards—is proof that concealment can lead to preservation, the rings found in inventories, caskets, bags, museums, and archaeological databases showcase that display was and is still crucial to items’ conservation and appreciation as well.

The Intricate Lives of Rings

The Pamplona ring was not merely a precious commodity, but an object with multiple lives which I have tried to uncover by thinking about its material makeup, as well as its engagement with human bodies of specific rank and gender and its safekeeping. At present, the ring is a piece of cultural heritage preserved in a showcase at the MAN and in its online database. But an analysis of its past lives—no matter how incomplete—indicates that the ring is, by no means, in the final life stage. This opening chapter is, in fact, a testimonial to that.

In Chapter 1, Mariah Proctor-Tiffany’s analysis of French wills reminds us that rings could be highly personal pieces of adornment that were treasured as heirlooms imbued with the affective and political presence of former owners. At times, this presence was literally felt when rings were touched by their subsequent owners who treasured and wore them. Their touch was also activated in moments of diplomatic gifting as well as collecting frenzies. Importantly, what Proctor-Tiffany has labelled as “haptic histories” not only inspires us to analyze when, how, and why medieval artifacts connect people, but also invites us to pay special attention to women as nodes in haptic networks. This article can stimulate further research on the haptic qualities of jewels and their containers throughout their long lives.

Focusing on England in the late medieval and early modern period, in Chapter 2 Eleanor Standley draws attention to the crucial role played by archaeology in our interpretation of the variety of connotations rings may have held to their owners. Crossing multiple centuries, the author details

different meaning for rings decorated with a heart. The heart establishes and memorializes romantic or spousal love in a medieval setting, but takes on more political and devotional connotations in early modern England. The rings discussed offer compelling evidence for the wide range of people that owned, cherished, and lost these items. Standley's article is a potent reminder that the archaeological unearthing of these material artifacts is what allows us to study them as social actants in the first place.

The wide circulation of rings crossing territorial borders and connecting religious and secular elite circles (including concubines) is further highlighted in Chapter 3, by Inés Calderón, who analyzes an impressive range of written documents from Iberia. While these sources may be known to historians studying specific Iberian kingdoms, they have not yet been studied together to provide a bigger picture of how rings moved within Iberia at large. Calderón finds evidence for their commodity value as financial resources, which explains the loss of so many items and their absence in eleventh- and twelfth-century documents. This changed by ca. 1200, allowing the author to trace how rings acted as connecting tissue between different generations and regions. Importantly, the gifting of rings also fostered religious commemoration. Yet some rings were not to be parted with, because they held amuletic value that clearly singularized them as very special, even saintly, rings.

Both Proctor-Tiffany and Calderón emphasize the importance of women as owners and movers of rings. Women's ownership is further discussed by Christian Raffensperger in Chapter 4, where he analyzes two monogram-signet rings found in Kyiv. In his article, Raffensperger recognizes that these rings do not offer crystal-clear stories about women's power in Rus. Yet, when taken together with the sparse but convincing evidence of women as landowners and their participation in decision making, these small items begin to unfold some of their agency in social networks. With the rings, the author adds another layer to the complex but important narrative of political and social power of Russian women. Thus small artifacts rather than the grand narratives told by chroniclers (and historians) draw women from Rus into the larger narrative of medieval Europe.

That signet rings were key players in the communication of political and religious status and affiliation in al-Andalus is discussed by Ana Labarta in Chapter 5. Readers not familiar with her monograph *Anillos de la península ibérica*—in which she brings together Christian, Islamic, and Jewish rings, significantly widening the corpus of material published in English—will find a wealth of source material from Islamic Spain in her current chapter. In particular, Labarta makes insightful observations about how these diminutive

jewels were noticed by viewers and inspired discussions. While men are at the heart of her chapter, her observations on rings related with women, for example in the context of conversion, might spark further research.

Animated debates are not only fuelled by men wearing rings in Islamic society, but also in Catholicism, by bishop's rings. In a novel approach to bishop's signet rings from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, Juliette Calvarin (Chapter 6) assesses letters, pontificals, liturgical commentaries, and two surviving rings in order "to trace the fate of the episcopal signet ring as lived reality, symbol, and afterimage" (p. 162). Calvarin brings to light how this type of ring was understood as an object and a symbol in the rituals of election and consecration. By including two surviving bishops' rings, the challenges of combining the written and visual evidence become apparent, if only because much remains unknown about how and when surviving rings were worn.

The rings discussed by Calvarin are the kind of rings we have in mind when thinking about bishops' rings: made of gold, set with precious stones, elaborately decorated, and preferably inscribed. As we see in Chapter 7, these elements combined with the bulkiness of surviving specimens, such as the impressive ring associated with Bishop Rosendo at Celenova (see Figure 7.7), have determined our image of what a bishop's ring should look like. Therese Martin invites us to take a fresh look at four largely unknown "miracle working" rings at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. In a grand gesture of scholarly reflection, she holds up a mirror in which we see reflected our preconceived notions about what is appropriate for bishops to wear. Martin makes clear that these can cloud our judgements when we engage with questions about authenticity that the general audience is so keen to see answered: do the four rings belong to the saintly medieval bishops? The reader is invited to follow Martin back in time as she unravels this question through a careful analysis of the material and written record.

It is doubtful whether the four relatively plain-looking rings from Santo Estevo would have attracted the attention of the twentieth-century collectors Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss. These rings are nothing like the splendid Byzantine marriage rings the couple acquired (through sale or as gifts) for Dumbarton Oaks. In Chapter 8, Elizabeth McCord uses their correspondence to paint a vivid picture of the collectors' ambitions for Dumbarton Oaks to become a research collection of Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies. In a critical assessment of their motivations, McCord also sketches how wealth, sale prices, personal financial considerations, and social status determine how and why objects become collectables. Relating these modern considerations to rings' past lives as markers

of status, wealth, and gendered identities, the authors inspire us to connect past and present.

In the Epilogue, Sandra Hindman shares her observations on how rings can be fruitfully approached if we consider more recent moments in their rich lives. Focusing on historic finger rings in museum collections, she analyzes various modes of display in order to assess how museums foster the engagement between rings and modern audiences. Her art historical eye brings to life rings and representations thereof in paintings and sculpture as sold, bought, worn, and displayed items. Hindman fosters a more refined understanding of rings because they are studied together with other artworks.

While the articles can be read individually, this volume argues that a collective closer look at these diminutive artifacts—both precious and mundane—as well as an assessment of their place within the archaeological and written record and in museum contexts tells us more nuanced stories about how and why these small and sensory items were crafted and were able to forge connections between people and institutions.

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