

An intaglio ring from the City Ditch, London

Photograph by Jon Bailey

A FINE GOLD RING was found during recent excavations at Capel House, New Broad Street, EC2¹. It came from dumping in the City Ditch, together with a large quantity of pottery and other finds datable to the first half of the 17th century.

The ring has a prominent bezel emphasised by a concentric band of pearl beading just above the shoulders. These are chased with a device of vine leaves, two large ones above, two smaller ones below, all springing from a calyx. A cornelian intaglio is set in the bezel and held in place by a collet, also of gold. The device is a male bust, draped and bearded in profile to the left on the original stone. The hairstyle is somewhat reminiscent of Hadrian, but it is quite clear both from the general physiognomy and from specific details of the cutting such as the misunderstood ear, shoulder-garment and brooch that the gem is not Roman but dates from the same period as the ring².

Dimensions: external diameter 24mm; internal diameter 20mm; bezel 17mm by 15mm; intaglio 14mm by 12mm.

There are numerous parallels to rings of this type. Not infrequently they have been described as Roman and I have, indeed, published a specimen from Brancaster, Norfolk, which, apart from a slight carination of the shoulder waist bringing third-century rings to mind, is almost identical to ours; it too has chased vine ornament on the shoulders and a wide collet around the gem. The intaglio likewise depicts the head and shoulders of a bearded man³.

1. By the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London, supervised by Ian Blair. The excavation was generously sponsored by Haslemere Estates.
2. G. M. A. Richter *Engraved Gems of the Romans* (London 1971), nos. 545 and 546 for ancient intaglios showing this Emperor.
3. M. Henig 'Objects of gold' in J. Hinchliffe and C. Sparey Green *Excavations at Brancaster 1974 and 1977* (East Anglia Archaeology Rep. no. 23, 1985) 194-5 and fig. 85, no. 1.
4. E. Zwiertein-Dichl *Die Antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien II* (Munich 1979) 68 no. 821, also 165-6, no. 1261 Plate 163.
5. D. Scarisbrick in J. Boardman and D. Scarisbrick *The Ralph Harari collection of Finger Rings* (London 1977) 58 no. 152. The intaglio depicts a female bust but it is clearly in the same style. For a cornelian head of Vespasian in intaglio set in a similar ring (beading but no leaf-ornament) *ibid* 57-8, no. 151.
6. Compare items in the Cheapside hoard, especially the Cameo of Elizabeth. London Museum, *The Cheapside Hoard of Elizabethan and Jacobean Jewellery* (London Museum Catalogue No. 2, 1928).

MARTIN HENIG

I unreservedly retract my ascription of this ring to the third century: was it lost by an Elizabethan, of antiquarian tastes, visiting the Roman fort? Two other gold rings, simpler and without the vine shoulders, in the Vienna collection are also said to be ancient, but the historicist legend *CAPTUS IN IUDEA* on one of them coupled with a glass intaglio showing Vespasian makes a Renaissance example date much more likely⁴.

The true context is made abundantly clear by Diana Scarisbrick in her publication of a silver ring in the Harari collection. On this ring there is vine decoration chased on the shoulders, here clearly combined with a formal sixteenth century cartouche. It may be supposed that this is derived from the Mannerist ornament often associated with Fontainebleau but, as Diana Scarisbrick remarks, 'the ring and gem probably exemplify a style common to various parts of Europe rather than being particular to any one centre'⁵. Our ring might indeed have been made in London where we know that the crafts of the jeweller and gemcutter were practised in the Elizabethan period.

