

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

A BRONZE-AGE 'TRESS-RING' FROM SHIMPLING AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

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Background

At the monthly meeting of the Mildenhall and District Metal Detector Club in August 2000 a group of 'mystery finds' was brought in for identification by their finder, Mrs Linda White. Amongst these objects was a fragment from a gold penannular 'tress-ring' (Fig. 139). At the time of its discovery some four years earlier, with the aid of a metal detector, the age and importance of the piece were not recognised.¹ In view of the fact that this appears to be the first 'tress-ring' recorded outside Ireland this piece, despite being fragmentary, is significant, hence this short note.

Description

The remains of the 'tress-ring' amount to a 19mm length of a 10mm wide and 0.5mm thick (maximum, i.e., from the top of the longitudinal ribs) curved gold sub-rectangular sheet strip, weighing 1.09 grammes. Due to its incompleteness and damage it is not possible to make an accurate estimate of its complete dimensions but it is likely the remains represent about one-sixth of the whole, giving an approximate original diameter of about 30 to 40mm. Like most other 'tress-rings' this is too small for a bracelet and their function remains unknown, although they often occur in pairs.

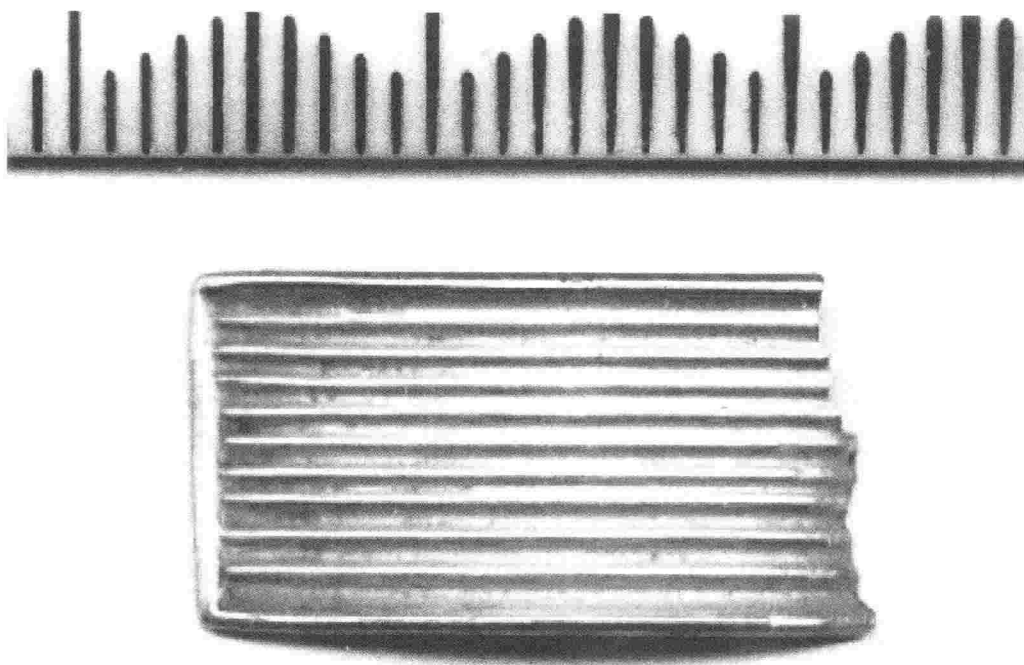


FIG. 139 – The Shimpling 'tress-ring': outer face.

The inner side is plain and flat apart from slightly raised edges (see Fig. 140). The end itself is asymmetric/sub-square. The outer face has a raised rounded border enclosing nine parallel longitudinal ribs separated by ten concave grooves in a corrugated effect. The ribs and the grooves have rounded profiles. Some of the grooves have linear scratches along parts of their length, which may be from a manufacturing or post-manufacturing process. The series of diagonal abrasion marks on the reverse seem likely to be the result of relatively crude finishing or cleaning. In addition the object has extensive minor abrasion marks, both on the body and the break, which also has stress marks. This is to be expected in a piece recovered from plough-soil and subsequently handled for a number of years.

Manufacture

The method used to construct these pieces is difficult to determine without scientific analysis. To my knowledge none has been carried out on 'tress-rings' and we are left with visual interpretation. Eogan (1994, 50) claims the grooves in the Irish examples 'may have been formed by chasing', although, in view of the flatness of the backs, Taylor (1980, plate 30) favours the lost-wax (*cire-perdue*) method of moulding. The rounded profile of the ribs and grooves suggests chasing or incising to be unlikely (as does the need for construction by vertically soldering two halves together, which occurs with the majority of the Irish specimens; *ibid.*). The flat back seems likely to exclude the repoussé technique. The lost-wax method could be an explanation but it is a complicated and difficult technique for such a small and comparatively plain piece, and for this reason seems unlikely. Another complicated and delicate method is the possibility of fusing together strands of gold wire onto a flat base (note the edge view in Fig. 140 which appears to show a ledge under the rounded edging). Although fused-together wires do occur (especially in 'hair-rings'), the practice is usually associated with Late Bronze Age artifacts. The Suffolk 'tress-ring', if contemporary with the Irish examples, is a Middle Bronze Age product.

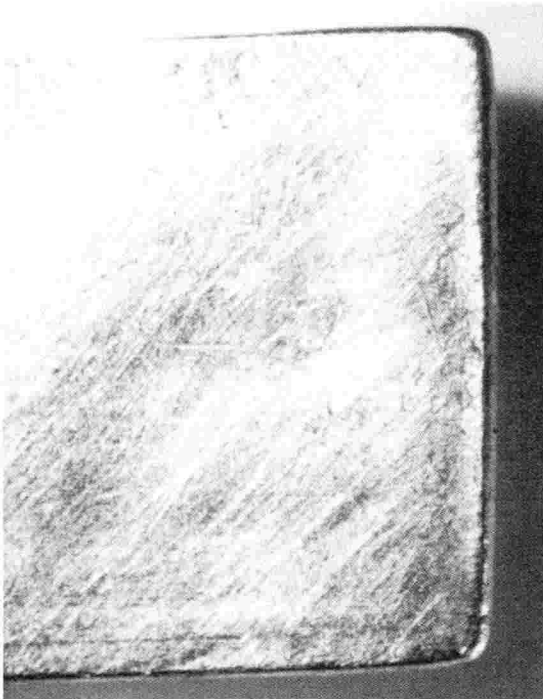


FIG. 140 – The Shimpling 'tress-ring': inner face.

There are also much simpler alternatives for a method of manufacture, which would appear to be more likely. These include stamping or punching on a flat bed, or using a simple open or two-piece mould (similar in form to the mica-schist example from Knighton Down, Devon: *Archaeol. J.*, IX, 1852, 185–86, illus.; Evans 1881, fig. 520; and O'Connor 1980, fig. 31.1), although a need for a soldered joint in such a case again seems puzzling.

Discussion

In total only eleven (four pairs and three single examples) 'tress-rings' are listed by Taylor (1980) and Eogan (1994), all from Ireland. None were recorded from mainland Britain or Europe. The Middle Bronze Age ornaments with which they were associated, however, have been particularly important as a link to the continent and are directly compared by Taylor (1980, 53), and others, to European, particularly northern French, metalwork. Despite this Eogan chooses to identify 'tress-rings' as an insular product (1994, 74 and 109). For this reason the findspot in East Anglia, with its proximity to Europe and its own contemporary centre of ornament production (cf Rowlands 1976, 121–22; Lawson 1984, 162–63; and Pendleton 1999, 53) is important and suggests that tress-rings, like other ornaments, may also have a broader European base. This is supported by the likelihood that the example from Suffolk is not a direct Irish import but possibly an East Anglian product. Although considerable variation is to be seen in the Irish examples a number of differences can be highlighted in the Suffolk specimen. Most obvious is the size. The Irish examples are all considerably wider than the 10.0mm of that from Suffolk, varying from 14.7mm to 22.5mm (measurements taken from the eight illustrated examples in Taylor and Eogan). The grooves are also much finer and more closely spaced, averaging *c.* 0.7mm apart, compared to the 1.1mm gap of the Suffolk example. The final significant difference is in the terminals. From the illustrations in Taylor's and Eogan's works all the Irish examples appear to be relatively, and surprisingly, crude, without any obvious tooled or moulded finish, whereas the Suffolk terminal, despite being curiously asymmetric (like some of the Irish specimens), has, along with the other edges, a well made raised border.

Although only a single object, the 'tress-ring' is also of some local significance, especially in view of its high status. It was found on the edge of a ridge, overlooking a minor river valley, amidst the clay soils of central Suffolk (details of the precise findspot are held in the County Sites and Monuments Record, reference sf19161). This accords well with the recent change in the nature of finds, brought about as a result of the use of metal detectors, with small (often fragmentary) Bronze Age objects becoming a frequent occurrence in the heavier soil regions (Pendleton 1999, 64–66). This supports a growing body of evidence (*ibid*) for widespread (i.e., not restricted to the light soils and fen edges) settlement and land-use across the whole East Anglian landscape during the Bronze Age.

Note

- 1 As the find was made before 24 September 1997, it is not subject to the Treasure Act 1996.

References

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