

## SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

### TWO LATE BRONZE AGE PENANNULAR RING-ORNAMENTS FROM MILDENHALL AND ERISWELL

by Colin F. Pendleton

In 1985 a copper-alloy penannular ring (Fig. 37A) was found by Mr David Tilbrook, using a metal detector, on a piece of land beside the Eriswell Lode which had been ploughed for the first time in recent years (TL7276; county SMR No. ERLO17). The surface of the ring is partially encrusted with a ferrous salt 'pan' (a common feature on many items of ancient bronze found in ferrous oxide deposition horizons) and has one small pocket of invasive corrosion. There is no evidence that it was ever gilded. The object is complete and weighs 9gm.

A few years earlier, in 1981, a similar gold ring (Fig. 37 B) was found by Mr John King, also using a metal detector, at West Row in Mildenhall (TL 6777; county SMR No. MNL Misc). Although now only identifiable from a photograph, the ring was originally recorded as weighing 12.8 gm. Like the Eriswell example, it has a slightly tapered form with a circular cross-section.

These penannular rings appear to have been in use during Late Bronze Age 3 and possibly continued into Hallstatt C (O'Connor 1980, 215), that is, at the broadest, from the 9th to the end of the 6th centuries b.c. At neither site was any other Bronze Age material recovered, though both have yielded Roman material.

The rings are commonly referred to as 'ring-money' and are usually made of cored (i.e. base metal with a gold sheath) or, more rarely, solid gold. Two sizes are known, called 'units' and 'half-units'. The Eriswell ring (20mm external and 7mm internal diameter) and that from West Row (approx. 17mm external and 6mm internal diameter) fall within the 'unit' size (Taylor 1980, 65). Examples of copper-alloy 'ring-money', as opposed to the remains of cored 'ring-money' (e.g. Benton 1930-1, 181-2) are comparatively rare<sup>1</sup>, at least as far as recognised and recorded examples are concerned. Nevertheless their occurrence in base metal is of importance, suggesting that the use of these objects was not as currency, as their name implies. However the regularity of the size and form implies that their design was for a specific function, which was probably, in part at least, ornamental (Taylor, 1980, 65).

'Ring-money' is most common in Ireland, with a secondary concentration along the south coast of England, but is scarce elsewhere in Britain (Taylor 1980, Map 5). The occurrence of both gold and bronze examples in adjoining parishes in Suffolk is

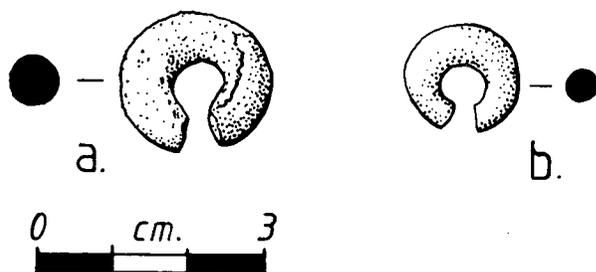


FIG. 37 – Penannular ring-ornaments from (A) Eriswell and (B) Mildenhall.

interestingly paralleled by the finding of two other rarer penannular ornaments, also most commonly found in gold, in the same general area. The latter are 'hair-rings' of bronze from Burwell (Eogan 1969, fig.4.1) and gold from Wimblington (Pendleton in preparation a) in Cambridgeshire. It is possible that these two contemporary types of rings have related functions.

One hundred and fifty-one Bronze Age metal artefacts have been recorded from the parishes of Eriswell and Mildenhall (Pendleton in preparation b), but the ring from the former parish is only the second object<sup>2</sup> from a locality east of the town of Mildenhall. The great majority, including the West Row ring, come from the south-eastern Fen edges where Bronze Age settlements are known, occasionally directly linked with the metalwork (e.g. Kelly 1967). However there is no direct evidence of contemporary settlement in the area of the findspot of the Eriswell ring, possibly suggesting casual loss.

#### Notes

- 1 Examples are recorded from Torostan and the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, Morayshire (Benton 1930-31, 182) and possibly Verne Fort, Portland, Dorset (Pearce 1983, Pl. 110), and from Hunstanton, Norfolk (*Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, III (1863), 419).
- 2 The first object was another small and extremely rare item, a bronze tanged arrowhead, from Foxhole Heath, Eriswell (O'Connor 1980, Fig. 38.7 and Pendleton in preparation (b), no. 295).

#### References

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