

ON RINGS AS OBJECTS OF ARCHÆOLOGICAL INTEREST.

In calling your attention to some rings on the table, I would make a few observations on rings as objects of archæological interest; their importance has ever been recognised by antiquaries; and whether they are considered in an useful or an ornamental point of view, they awaken recollections of the religion, the superstition, the love, the poetry, the heraldry, and even the business of life in by-gone ages. All nations—those of old as well as those now in existence—have used them: the majestic Assyrian sculptures, the monstrous products of Egypt, the classical forms of Greece, and the mystical rites of Rome, all furnish us with examples; nor can we forget that the divinely-chosen nation, the Hebrews, have left us memorials of their devotion, their superstition, and their domestic customs upon rings.

In the Holy Scriptures rings are frequently mentioned; the earliest notice of one is a signet spoken of in the Book of Genesis. In Egypt, when Pharaoh advanced Joseph to high dignity in his kingdom, he “took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph’s hand.”* “Rings” are mentioned as part of the spoils, together with “jewels of gold, chains, bracelets, and ear-rings,” which were taken from the Midianites, and offered by the Israelites as an oblation to the Lord.† Six centuries before Christ, the Prophet Jeremiah spoke of the “signet worn on the right hand.”‡ A century later, Haggai was commissioned to declare to Zerubbabel that “the Lord of Hosts would make him as a signet;”§ and shortly after, we read that King Darius “sealed the stone placed over the mouth of the den

* Gen. xli. 42.

† Numbers, xxxi. 50.

‡ Jer. xxii. 24.

§ Haggai, ii. 23.

of lions, into which Daniel was cast, with his own signet.* Ahasuerus "took his ring from his hand, and gave it to Haman,"† and afterwards to Mordecai‡, as a token of authority, and they sealed their letters with the king's ring, which made their contents irreversible. So, also, in the New Testament, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, a "ring was put on his hand," as a mark of honour; and St. James also alludes to the custom of wearing gold rings.§

The plain circlet has almost universally been considered the symbol of eternity, and when the imagination lent its aid, the serpent, a favourite emblem, was converted into a ring by its tail being inserted into its mouth to complete the symbol. A silver ring of this description was found on a skeleton close to the Oratory of St. Pirian, in the sand (Perran zabuloe) near Truro.¶ But what was at first intended as a religious memento, is generally perverted by superstition; and to this origin we trace the gnostic, talismanic, cabalistic, toad-stone, and other charm rings of later centuries.

The rings, however, which have been discovered, or have been in use, in this country, are those which I purpose especially to notice: and in doing so, I shall speak not of the merely ornamental, but of the useful class of rings.

First in place amongst the useful class are the Signet or Seal Rings. Of these many examples have been found in this country, but, none, I believe, earlier than the Roman period; for though we find Assyrian heads engraven on some, as on that exhibited by our Secretary at the meeting of the Institute, held at Eye, in April, 1854, yet we cannot call it anything but Roman work. There have also been brought to this country Egyptian signet rings. One was sold in 1835, at the sale of the collection of the late Mr. Salt, Consul-General in Egypt; it bore on its facet the name of the Egyptian King Amunoth III., who reigned about 1500 years before Christ. Another was sold by Mr. Sotheby, in 1852, which bore on it the scarabæus, or sacred beetle, surrounded by hieroglyphics.

* Daniel, vi. 17.

† Esther, iii. 10.

‡ Idem. viii. 2.

§ James, ii. 2.

¶ See Rev. W. Haslam's Account of this Oratory, p. 146.

Many Roman rings have been found in England. On the table is a ring of lead, picked up from the earth thrown out of a grave in the Churchyard at Bury St. Edmund's, in 1853, which I submitted to the Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, who pronounced it to be unquestionably Roman; it bears a goat, or chamois, and the letter A beneath it, and probably has reference to some mystic rites. Mr. Wilson, of Stowlangtoft, exhibited a Roman ring of gold at one of our meetings, which bore on its facet lions devouring their prey: these and other examples may not, perhaps, be truly called signet rings, but they are seal rings, and doubtless were used by the Romans as symbolic.

A gnostic bronze signet ring of the 11th or 12th century was lately in the collection of that well known antiquary, Mr. C. Roach Smith.

Many early signet rings of an ecclesiastical character have been found in this country and in Ireland; some bearing a plain cross, others an ornamented cross, of the 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries; one of the last date was found at Colchester several years ago, bearing the inscription IN . HOC . SIG . VIN.—*In hoc signo vinco.*

Some rings of the 15th century bore merchant's marks, and were doubtless of great service in mercantile affairs; and in this and the following two centuries signet-rings were in general use in this country. John Baret, of Bury St. Edmund's, whose altar tomb is in the south aisle of St. Mary's Church, makes this bequest in his will, dated in 1463:—"Item, I geve and beqwethe my signet of gold, with a pellican and my armys grave therein, to Willm Baret, to his eyris and to hem that shal be occupyers of my hefd place for the tyme." And in 1535, Edmund Lee, of Bury St. Edmund's, esquire, in his will gave as follows:—"It, I gyf and bequethe to Thomas Brown, my clarke...my ryng wth my own seallè." And in 1613, Agatha Borrowdale, of Bury, widow, makes this bequest in her will:—"Alsoe I give and bequeathe unto the said Borrowdale Mileson, his great grandfather's, Mr. Richard Borrowdale's seale ring of gold."* On the table is a fine gold signet ring,

* Tynms's Bury Wills, pp. 38, 127, 161.

bearing the letter "I" between two olive branches, found in the Abbey at Bury St. Edmund's; another, of silver, having also the letter "I" between two branches, found in Mildenhall fen; another, also of silver, having the letter "R" crowned, found at Dunwich, engraved in "Gardner's Dunwich," plate 1, fig. 7, which may all be referred to the above periods. Sometimes we find them engraved with armorial bearings (as John Baret's just mentioned) especially in the 17th century; and sometimes with badges, as the chained antelope, a badge of Edward IV., and the double rose, emblematical of the union of the Houses of York and Lancaster.

Many rings are found attached to legal deeds between the 12th and 16th centuries. The "Journal of the Archæological Institute," vol. ii., p. 265, on the authority of "Monumenta Vetusta," p. 73, tells us that a ruby ring was described as attached to the "Charter of Poynings," in the will of Sir Michael de Poynings, in 1368. And Dugdale mentions that "Osbert de Camera, some time in the 12th century, being visited with a great sickness, granted unto the canons of St. Paul's, in pure alms for the health of his soul, certain lands and houses lying near Haggelane, in the parish of St. Benedict, giving possession of them with his gold ring, wherein was set a ruby; appointing that the said gold ring with his seal should be for ever fixed to the charter whereby he so disposed them." Dugdale also says that "Will. de Belmeis gave certain lands to St. Paul's Cathedral, and at the same time directed that his gold ring, set with a ruby, should, together with the seal, be affixed to the charter for ever."

Next, in the useful class, to the signet rings and those attached to legal deeds, are to be placed the official rings, subdivided into pontifical, episcopal, and those used in religious ceremonies. Only two pontifical rings have come under my notice. By pontifical rings are not meant those rings worn by the sovereign pontiffs themselves, but rings dispensed by the pontiff for various purposes; they are usually fabricated of base metal, gilt, and are set with coloured glass or some inferior jewel: the hoop bears on it the insignia of the Pope, viz., the triple crown and St. Peter's

keys. In the "Gentleman's Magazine" for June, 1848, p. 599, you will find one figured, which is there stated to bear the arms of Pius II., who died in 1464: it is of brass, formerly gilt, and is set with a topaz, in a massive square facet, on each side of which is placed in relief one of the four evangelistic symbols. Episcopal rings are much more costly, and are the very rings worn by the prelates themselves on their consecration, and at other ceremonies; they appear to be not only official as part of the prelate's costume, but also symbolic; for the jewels, generally sapphires, rubies, or emeralds set in gold, are usually so cut as to form capsules, or slightly raised bosses, on their surface, varying in number, perhaps in reference to Zechariah iii. 9, where Joshua, the High Priest, is represented as having laid before him "a stone upon which shall be seven eyes," the stone being symbolic of the promised Messiah, and the seven eyes denoting his perfections. In York cathedral I have seen the rings of Archbishops Sewell, A.D. 1258, and Greenfield, A.D. 1315, both set with rubies; and there are preserved in some other cathedrals, Chichester and Winchester I think, the rings worn by some of their bishops. The episcopal habit, indeed, was not complete without the ring, and hence we find it on the prelate's effigies on their monuments in this country in Roman Catholic times.

Next in order are the religious rings, worn either at ceremonies, such as the consecration of an abbot, abbess, prior, nun, &c.; or to designate the faith of the wearer. Some of the latter are engraved with a plain cross, "the dear remembrance of their dying Lord," some with a decorated cross, others with the letters I.H.S., as the small ring of lead now on the table, which was found in the ruins of the church of St. Crowche, at Norwich; others with the letters S.M.V. (Sancta Maria Virgo) or the motto "Ave Maria," &c.

John Baret, of Bury St. Edmund's, before mentioned, in 1463, made this bequest in his will, "Itm to Elizabeth Drury, my wyf, a ryng of gold, with an ymage of the Trinity;" and in 1554, Agnes Hals, of Bury St. Edmund's, widow, bequeathed to her "sonne" "her rynge of the Passion, of gold." An Irish copper-gilt ring of the 15th

century has rudely engraved busts of the Virgin and Child; and an English gold ring, of the same date, has its facet engraved with St. Christopher, bearing on his shoulder the infant Christ.

I cannot speak with certainty of the rings used at the consecration of abbots, priors, abbesses, nuns, &c, but I believe both by the metal and the jewel used, the purity of the wearer was represented, and the shape of the jewel also symbolized their faith; the small gold ring, set with a triangular sapphire, symbolic of the Trinity, now on the table, is, I imagine, a ring of this description; it was found at Rushford, Norfolk, in 1850, where a religious house formerly stood: one in the collection of Lady Londesborough is of gold, set with a ruby, and has on the inside of the hoop the very appropriate and significant word "irrevocabile."

That official rings were also worn by civilians, holding place and dignity, there is no doubt, for the pictures of such men generally pourtray them in their robes with a massive ring on the thumb or forefinger, and in Shakespeare's time even Aldermen were distinguished by this mark of dignity, for we find Falstaff declaring to Prince Hal, that when he was "about the Prince's years," he "could have crept into an Alderman's thumb-ring."*

We may, I think, class amongst the useful rings the betrothal rings of ancient days: those belonging to this country usually are of silver gilt, and are frequently formed to represent two hands clasped, with the legend I.H.C. NAZARENVS. REX. IVDORVM; or with abbreviations of it engraved on the hoop. I exhibited one of this description at a former meeting of our Institute; another was found amongst the earth thrown up in digging for the foundations of St. John's Church, Bury St. Edmund's, and is in the possession of the Rev. R. Rashdall, the Incumbent; and a remarkable one is now on the table, the clasped hands are surmounted by a crown, from which I am led to think that it was made for some royal or noble person. A similar one found at Carlisle, in 1788, is figured in the "Gentleman's Magazine" for August in that year. Brand, in his "Popular

* Henry IV. First Part, act ii. sc. 4.

Antiquities," tells us that anciently a "common token among betrothed lovers" was "a joint-ring,"* and he refers to Dryden's play of "Don Sebastian," where such a betrothal ring is thus spoken of—

"A curious artist wrought 'em,
With joynts so close as not to be perceiv'd,
Yet are they both each other's counterpart."

And in Herrick's "Hesperides," p. 201, such a betrothal ring is called "a jimmal ring, or true-love knot."

"Thou sent'st to me a true love-love knot; but I
Return'd a ring of Jimmals, to imply
Thy love had one knot, mine a triple-tye."

So also Shakespeare, in "Twelfth Night," alludes to the custom of betrothal rings, when he makes the Priest say to Olivia, in reference to her love-contract with Cæsario, "strengthened by interchangement of your rings,"† The custom still prevails in this country, though now no distinctive ring is used. The plant called "Sedum Telephium," or "Orpine,"‡ was supposed to have the virtue of shewing to a betrothed maiden, by the turning of its leaves to the right or the left on Midsummer Day (if she hung it up in her bedroom on the previous eve), whether her lover was true or false. Mrs. H. More makes mention of this custom in the cheap Repository Tract, called "Tawney Rachel,"§ and we find a singular confirmation of it on a small gold betrothal ring, exhibited to the Antiquarian Society, by John Topham, Esq., on January 22, 1801. It was found by the Rev. Dr. Bacon, of Wakefield, in a ploughed field near Cawood, Yorkshire, and bears on its facet two orpine sprays joined by a true-love knot, surmounted by the words "Ma fiance velt," while the motto below is "Joye l'amour feu."||

Hebrew betrothal rings are by no means uncommon; they are engraved with the words Mazullouv, in the Hebrew character, meaning "Joy be with you," or "good luck to you," and are ornamented with bosses, rosettes, fillagree-work, enamel, &c. Some represent the Temple, others bear figures typifying the great Jewish festivals; others have Adam

* Vol. ii. p. 93.

† Act v. scene 1.

‡ Commonly called "Midsummer-men."

§ Page 100.

|| Brand, vol. i. p. 330.

and Eve, surrounded by various animals, in Paradise; the bosses and rosettes vary in number, and are supposed to refer to the number of witnesses required at Jewish ceremonies.

Marriage rings are very different. They have been used from remote antiquity. Swinburne, in his "Treatise of Spousals" * quotes "Alberic de Rosa," and tells us that "the inventor of the ring was Prometheus, and the workman who made it was Tubal Cain; and Tubal Cain, by the counsel of our first parent, Adam, gave it unto his son to this end, that therewith he should espouse a wife;" the form and purpose of the ring is then described, which, however, is given much more poetically in "Herrick's Hesperides," p. 72,—

" And as this round
Is no where found
To flaw or else to sever;
So let our love
As endless prove,
And pure as gold for ever."

The Jews had their marriage as well as their betrothal rings, and we read in "Chilmead's Translation of Leo Modena's History of the Rites, Customs, &c., of the Jews," that at their marriage "the bridegroom putteth a ring upon the bride's finger in the presence of two witnesses." The hieroglyphics on them are various. The Romanists hallowed or consecrated the marriage ring, and we find, in the "Doctrine of the Masse Book,† from Wyttonberge, by Nicholas Dorcaster, 1554," the form of consecration: it was this custom, and its supposed heathen origin, which caused the marriage ring to be in disrepute among the Puritans during the Commonwealth, alluded to in "Hudibras," part 3, canto 2, lines 303-4:—

" Others were for abolishing
That tool of matrimony, a Ring."

Anne Baret, of Bury St. Edmund's, widow, says in her will, dated 1504, "Itm, I bequeth to our Lady of Walsingham my marryeng ring, wt all thyngys hangyng thereon:" and the will of Marion Chamber, of Bury, dated 1505, describes her "maryeng ryng" as having "a dyamond and

* See Brand, vol. ii. p. 102, note.

† See Brand, vol. ii. p. 106.

a rubie therein." One which I saw in the valuable collection of Mr. Whincopp, of Woodbridge, now unfortunately dispersed, was found near Bury St. Edmund's, and had this inscription on it :

" Mulier viro subjecta esto."

I doubt whether I ought to call a betrothal or marrying ring, a singular specimen, worn by a Bury lady, fifty years ago ; she had honoured four husbands with her hand, and to shew her high estimation, I suppose, of the marriage life, she wore a broad gold ring, engraven thus :

" If I survive,
I will have five."

Her husband, however, survived her, so that her marital wish was not realized.

Memorial rings were formerly much in use ; they bore reference to the person whom they commemorated, or had on them a " death's head." Agnes Hals, whose will I have already referred to, bequeaths in it, " her ringe with the dead mane's head." Jasper Despotin, a " doctor of physicke," of Bury St. Edmund's, by his will, in 1648, directs " ten rings of gold to be made, of the value of twenty shillings a-piece sterling, with a death's head upon some of them—to be disposed of amongst my friends ;" and the Lady Drury, of Hardwick, in 1621, bequeathed " twenty pounds to be bestowed in ringes of tenne shillings amongst my freinds."* On the table is a plain gold ring, having a very rude attempt to delineate a " death's head" on the outer surface, and on the inner, the words " Prepare to follow ;" it was found in pulling down an old house at Rickinghall, July, 1854. Another on the table is of much later date (1750), it is of gold enamelled, and is set with a table diamond, under which appears a death's head and cross bones ; the hoop, divided into scroll compartments, bears the name, age, and date of death. Another of still later date (1768), is formed in the shape of a heart—to contain hair—surmounted by a true-lovè knot formed of diamonds and rubies, the enamelled hoop, as before, bears the name, age, and date of death.

* Tynms's Bury Wills, pp. 146, 167, 201.

Memorial rings of Charles I. are still extant; it is said by some writers that twelve of these rings were made; others assert that the number was only seven. One was in the possession of the late Duke of Northumberland; another, of the late Capt. Toup Nicholas; a third, of the late Mrs. Hennand, of Chelsea; a fourth, of Horace Walpole, given to him by Lady Murray Elliott; and a fifth is made mention of in the "Gentleman's Magazine" for September, 1788. The first and last of these rings seem to be alike; they* are entirely of gold, and the facet turns on a swivel; on one side of it is a portrait of Charles I.; on the other a death's head, surmounted by a celestial crown, having beneath it a terrestrial crown. On one side of the death's head is the word "Gloria;" on the other, "Vanitas" as a legend. On the inside of the hoop is engraved "Emigravit Gloria Angl. Jan. the 30th, 1648." The second ring†, above mentioned, is also of gold; the facet, which was set with four diamonds, opens, and exhibits a miniature of Charles I. enamelled on a turquoise. Mrs. Hennand's ring‡ was of gold, with an oval white enamelled facet, divided into four compartments, in each of which was painted one of the four cardinal virtues; on touching a secret spring the facet opened and exposed to view an enamelled portrait of Charles raised on the back of the facet, a death's head and cross-bones also in enamel, on a dark ground. Horace Walpole's ring§ had on its facet a death's head between the letters "C. R.," and at its back the king's portrait; on the hoop, "Prepared be to follow me."

Other descriptions of rings, formerly much in use, were the cabalistic, talismanic, charm, and toadstone rings. In the "Journal of the Archæological Institute," vol. iii. p. 359, a ring is mentioned as having been found in Coventry Park, which had on it the word "ANANYZAPTA," and the Stockhold MS., which is an English medical MS., apparently of the 14th century, and has been published by the Antiquarian Society||, tells us that this mystic word was

* Gent. Mag. Sept. 1788.

† Gent. Mag. July, 1823.

‡ Ibid. Sept. 1823.

§ Ibid. Oct. 1823.

|| Archæologia, xxx. p. 399.

a charm against epilepsy: "For y^e fally'g ewell, sey y^e word anamzaptus in hys ere qhwa' he is fallyn down in y^e ewyll, and also in a womany's ere anamzapta, and yei schall nevere more affir fele y^e ewyll." On the table is a Hebrew cabalistic ring, which I obtained in the Isle of Wight. Rings, engraved with a figure of St. Christopher, were worn as a charm against drowning. Others, set with a bloodstone, were considered efficacious against bleeding of the nose, the words "*sanguis mane in te*" being thrice repeated, as the ring was applied to that organ. And turquoise rings were put to the same use, as we learn from Scot's "Discovery of Witchcraft," wherein he says, "the turquoise hath virtue against venome, and staieth bleeding at the nose, being often put thereto." This gem, indeed, was believed to have the additional power of indicating the health of the wearer. Dr. Donne, in his "Anatomie of the World," a funeral elegy on the daughter of Sir Robert Drury, of Hawsted Place, who died in 1610, in her 15th year, says

"As a compassionate turcoyse, which doth tell,
By looking pale, the wearer is not well."

And Ben Johnson, in his tragedy of "Sejanus' Fall," alludes to the same quality,

"And true as the turkoise in the dear Lord's ring,
Look well or ill with him."

So Brand tells us that "other superstitious qualities are imputed to it, all of which were either monitory or preservative to the wearer:"* and he refers to Fenton, who, in his "Secrete Wonders of Nature," says, "the turkeys doth move when there is any peril prepared to him that weareth it."

Talismanic rings of the 14th century have been preserved. Some bear a Hebrew inscription in niello, which means, "May you be preserved from the evil eye." One of the 14th century, of base metal and plated with gold, and inscribed with the talismanic legend—THEBAIGVTHGVTHANI—was dug up near the churchyard of Bredicot, Worcester-shire.† Another of the 15th century was obtained by Mr. C. Roach Smith, from the bed of the river Thames, with a

* Brand, vol. iii. p. 281.

† Archæol. Journal, vol. iii. pp. 267. 258.

similar inscription, which is considered to be a charm against epilepsy; and others are mentioned in the "Archæologia" and the "Archæological Journal." Some are of gold, others of base metal. On some we find the names of the three kings of Cologne, Jaspas, Melchior, and Balthazar, whose legend was one of the most popular in the middle ages, and whose names were supposed to act as a charm.*

Other charm-rings were common in England. I need only refer to the custom of hallowing rings on Good Friday, by the king, which were supposed to preserve the wearers from the falling sickness and the cramp. This superstition is believed to have arisen from the legend of Edward the Confessor, who was canonized, and is represented as holding a ring in his right hand. In Henry VIII.'s reign, Lord Berners, writing to Cardinal Wolsey, says, "If your Grace remember me with some crampe-ryngs, ye shall doo a thing much looked for."† Hearne, in one of his MSS. diaries in the Bodleian Library, tells us that he had seen certain prayers used by Queen Mary, at the consecration of the cramp.‡ And a letter is preserved in the Harleian MSS., from Lord Chancellor Hatton to Sir Thomas Smith, dated 11th September, 158—, in which he writes, "I am likewise bold to commend my most humble duty to our dear mistress (Queen Elizabeth) by this letter and ring, which hath the virtue to expell infectious airs, and is (as it telleth me) to be worn betwixt the sweet duggs, the chaste nest of pure constancy. I trust, Sir, when the virtue is known, it shall not be refused for the value."§ A humbler ring is mentioned in "Withal's Little Dictionary."

"The bone of a haire's foot, closed in a ring,
Will drive away the cramp, when it doth ring."

We are not told of what metal these rings are made, but in our days (for the superstition still prevails) they are made of silver.

The last rings, which I shall mention as being used for

* Gent. Mag. Feb. 1749. Archæol. Journal, vol. iii. p. 359. "Chester Plays."

† Brand, vol. iii. p. 151.

‡ Brand, vol. i. p. 151.

§ Ibid. vol. iii. p. 301.

superstitious purposes, are called Toadstone rings, from the figure of a toad raised on the stone or shell of which they are made. Pennant, in his *Zoology*, says that "toadstones were formerly much esteemed for their imaginary virtues, and were set in gold, and worn as rings." Brand, vol. iii., p. 51, quotes this distich from Lluellin's *Poems*,

"Now, as the worst things have some things of stead,
And some toads treasure jewels in their head."

And Dr. Nares, in his *Glossary*, says, "It was currently supposed, in the time of Shakespeare, that every toad had a stone contained in its head, which was a sovereign remedy for many disorders," such as "touching any part envenomed, hurt or stung by rat, spider, waspe, or other venomous beast, ceases the pain or swelling thereof." The toadstone ring was known and alluded to both by Ben Jonson and Shakespeare: the former in his "*Volpone, or Fox*," act ii. scene 5, makes Corvino say,

"Were you enamour'd on his copper rings?
His saffron jewel, with the toadstone in it?"

And Shakespeare, in "*As You Like It*," act ii., scene 1, puts into the mouth of the Duke these words,

"Sweet are the uses of Adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head."

Two rings of this description, of the 15th century, made of silver-gilt, were exhibited at the meeting of the Archæological Association, in May, 1849.*

Of purely ornamental rings I shall now make no mention, as although they are highly interesting objects in archæology, it would lead me beyond the due limits of this paper.

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* *Archæol. Journal*, vol. iii. p. 359.