

A MEDIEVAL GOLD RING FOUND AT PILTON, DEVON

By JOHN CHERRY

A medieval gold ring was found at Pilton, Devon in 1867. Set with a sapphire, it is inscribed with a Hebrew inscription on the front of the bezel and a Latin inscription on the back. The back of the bezel is also pierced with seven holes. This short note describes the circumstances of the discovery of the ring and explores the meaning of the inscriptions, stone and holes. A possible history is suggested. The ring is now owned by the North Devon Athenaeum, to which it was presented in 1976 by Mrs K. Chanter.

The discovery of the ring

In 1867 a gold ring was found on the site of the Priory of St Mary at Pilton, near Barnstaple, in a ball of clay under the root of a tree. The Benedictine Priory of St. Mary was in existence in the twelfth century, but never seems to have been very large. There were only three monks in 1381 and 1534 and a prior and three monks at the time of the Dissolution (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 73).

The first mention of the discovery is in a letter of August 22nd 1867 from John Granville Grenfell, a 2nd Class Assistant in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum (Wilson 2002, 386), to Dr. Forester, of Barnstaple, North Devon. Grenfell asserted that ‘it is an ecclesiastical ring dating from 1100 to 1300 but most probably from around 1200 AD. It very probably belonged to a bishop ...’.

In 1873 Mr J. R. Chanter communicated to the Archaeological Institute an account of the ring and its discovery (Chanter 1873, 430). His account is amplified by a transcript of a note by J. R. Chanter in the North Devon Athenaeum (no archive reference and no registration number for the ring, but the inscription is listed in the North Devon Athenaeum Catalogue under the reference B81-39-06) which states:

‘In removing a hedge near Pilton church and the Priory Close under the roots of an oak tree was found the bole of another tree. In the centre of a cavity appeared a round ball over 10 inches in diameter which the workmen at first fancied was a cannon ball, but one of the men striking at it with his pickaxe, it turned out to be a ball of clay and split in two revealing the ring in the middle The hoop was slightly deformed by the pickaxe has been repaired and slightly reduced in diameter so that it now suits the finger rather than the thumb’.

Description of the ring

The ring is made of gold, and weighs some 131 grains. The diameter of the hoop is 23 mm. The length of the bezel is 19 mm, and the width is 15 mm. The hoop is circular in section and soldered to the back of the bezel. Between the two joins of the hoop and bezel is an oval opening from which engraved lines radiate, at the side of three circular holes above and three circular holes below the central oval opening. Around the back of the bezel is an inscription in Latin, and around the sapphire in the front of the bezel is a line of beading and an inscription in Hebrew.

The sapphire is held in the bezel by a lip of gold raised up around the stone. The shape of the ring and hoop suggests that it was made between 1200 and 1300, and a date in the thirteenth century is reasonable. The letter forms with triangular serifs confirm the suggestion of a date in the late twelfth or thirteenth century. A curious form of letter is



Fig. 1. Gold ring found at Pilton Abbey, Devon. Left, showing sapphire and Hebrew inscription; right, showing back of bezel, and Latin inscription (*North Devon Athenaeum. Photo Martin Haddrill*).

the letter D in Adonai, rather like a reversed G, which is paralleled by the letter D on the counter seal of Richard, Archbishop of Canterbury of 1174, and that of Nicholas of Meaux, Bishop of Man of 1203 (Kingsford 1929, 153).

The inscriptions

1. The Hebrew Inscription

The Hebrew inscription, which starts and ends with a triple colon, reads:

"אל אלהים יהוה ישו יהי עמנו"

Which literally means:

"God Elohim Jehovah Jesus may be with us"

The two words אל : עמנו (with us : god) can also be read as one continuance word / name עמנואל = Immanuel, applied to Jesus as the born messiah (Matthew 1:22–23). Hence the whole inscription can have this meaning:

"אלהים יהוה ישו יהי עמנואל"

Which literally means:

"Elohim Jehovah Jesus may be Immanu:el"

(reading by Dr. Ido Noy, Department of the History of Art, Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

2. The Latin inscription

The Latin inscription, which starts above the hoop joint, reads:

"NOBISCUM : SIT IhESU : AdONAY : I"

Which literally means :

“With us is Jesus the Lord”

I am uncertain as to the significance of the last letter (reading by John Cherry).

Dr Noy observes that Herr Deutsch, did not read the Hebrew inscription quite correctly. J. R. Chanter, in a note kept in the North Devon Athenaeum, noted that the late Herr Deutsch of the British Museum (presumably Emanuel Oscar Menahem Deutsch, the Semitic scholar and orientalist, 1829–1873) (Brier 2004), read the Hebrew inscription as meaning NOBISCUM SIT IESUS ADONAI which is the Latin inscription on the back of the bezel. This is derived from the Vulgate (2 John 1.3): Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love (*sit nobiscum gratia misericordia pax a Deo Patre et a Christo Iesu Filio Patris in veritate et caritate*).

The style of the engraving of the Hebrew inscription suggests a date after 1200. The script used is Ashkenazi, and suggests that the ring was made in England, Germany, France or northern Italy, but not in Spain. The quality of the Ashkenazi script suggests it was either engraved by a Jewish goldsmith or by a goldsmith under the close supervision of the patron who understood the Jewish script (Dr Ido Noy, personal communication). It is notable that the letters have small marks in the engraved furrows of the letters which would have stood out as decoration on any impression made from the bezel.

Hebrew on medieval rings is not common. Such inscriptions mainly relate to Jewish patronage and ownership. In addition to the well-known group of Jewish wedding rings inscribed *Mazel Tov*, of which that from the Colmar hoard (*Le Trésor de Colmar* 1999, 44, no. 8) is the most famous, there is a Jewish signet ring in the Victoria and Albert Museum dated to the seventeenth century (Oman 1930, no. 964 (V and A 742-1871). Two silver rings from the Jewish cemetery in Deza, Soria, Spain have Hebrew on the front of the bezels, and probably date from the 14th century (Ladero Quesada 2004, 158). However the use of the word IESUS in the inscription rules out the possibility that it was made for a Jewish scholar. The use of Hebrew may have been considered to have amuletic power.

The use of the phrase using the term Iesus suggests that this ring may have been made for an apostate Jew or a learned Christian ecclesiastical figure in the thirteenth century. Dr. Eva de Visscher has drawn attention to the way in which scholars such as Herbert of Bosham, Ralph Niger and Alexander Neckham all had Jewish teachers, and were keen to develop their knowledge of Hebrew (Visscher 2013, 175). This ring, through its amuletic significance and Hebrew inscription, probably represents a commission by a learned Christian scholar to show off his knowledge of Hebrew. It was almost certainly engraved before 1290, the date of the expulsion of the Jews from England.

There are other amuletic features in the ring. Seven – the number of openings in the back of the bezel – was the divine number of completion. In the nineteenth century the number of dots around the sapphire was counted as 70, and, if this is accurate, seventy would be a significant number in Jewish numerology.

The Sapphire

The sapphire is egg-shaped, and has been drilled and the hole filled with gold. This has slightly damaged the stone. The sapphire is large (10 mm in length and 8 mm in width, (I am grateful to Wendy Clarke for these measurements). Sapphires, which came at this time from Arabia or Persia, had an amuletic quality and were especially favoured in the medieval period for treatment of diseases of the eye. The stone was often used in bishops’ rings, as is shown by the thirteenth-century ring of Walter de Gray, Archbishop of York, (Ramm 1971, 126), though not all rings set with a sapphire belonged to a bishop. A sapphire also appears prominently on the later (fifteenth-century) Middleham Jewel, now at the

Yorkshire Museum (Cherry 1994). That the stone in the Pilton ring had an amuletic quality is suggested by the large and small holes at the back of the bezel, through which the power and virtue of the stone could come through to the wearer.

To conclude, the ring was probably commissioned in the thirteenth century for an apostate Jew or a learned Christian who wished to display his knowledge of Hebrew and had a strong belief in the amuletic power of stones, and numbers. It may have been a memory of this power, or a fear that the Hebrew script itself had some amuletic power, that caused someone, possibly at the Dissolution of the religious house of Pilton, to hide the ring in a ball of clay and bury it at the foot of an oak.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Wendy Clarke, Kirstin Kennedy, Marian Ramsay, Dr Ido Noy and Eva de Visscher for their help, the North Devon Athenaeum for permitting me to publish the ring, and to Martin Haddrill who took the photographs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brier, P. 2004: 'Deutsch, Emanuel Oscar Menahem (1829–1873)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press. [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7561>, accessed 26 Sept 2016]
- Chanter, J.R. 1873: 'An account of the ring'. In 'Annual Meeting at Exeter, 1873', *Archaeol. J.* 30, 412–51 [430].
- Cherry, J. 1994: *The Middleham Jewel and Ring* (York: Yorkshire Museum).
- Kingsford, H.S. 1929: 'The Epigraphy of Medieval English seals', *Archaeologia* 79, 149–78.
- Knowles, D. and Hadcock, R.N. 1971: *Medieval Religious Houses England and Wales* (London: Longman).
- Ladero Quesada, M.A. 2004: Castile: an Overview (Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries). In C. Cluse (ed.), *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries): Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Speyer, 20–25 October 2002* (Turnhout: Brepols), 151–62.
- Le Trésor de Colmar 1999*: Exposition présentée au Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, du 29 mai au 26 septembre 1999 (Coédition Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar / Somogy éditions d'Art).
- Oman, C.C. 1930: *Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue of Rings* (Ipswich: Anglia Publishing).
- Ramm, H. G. et al. 1971: 'The tombs of Archbishops Walter de Gray (1216–1253) and Godfrey Ludham (1258–65) in York Minster', *Archaeologia* 103, 101–146.
- The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages 2004*: Exhibition Catalogue, Speyer and Berlin, 2004–2005. Edited by Historisches Museum der Pfalz Speyer.
- Wilson, D.M. 2002: *The British Museum: a history* (London: British Museum Press).
- Visscher, E. de 2013: 'An Ave Maria in Hebrew : the translation of Hebrew learning from Jewish to Christian Scholars in Medieval England'. In S. Rees Jones and S. Watson (eds), *Christians and Jews in Angevin England: The York Massacre of 1190, Narratives and Contexts*, 174–84, (York Medieval Press).