



Rings on their fingers: Ring wearing from ancient times to the Renaissance

By Sandra
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Rings have played a vital role in our stories and rituals for thousands of years. Their lasting popularity accounts for their prominent and frequent appearance in written, artistic, and archaeological records. There are famous rings in Greek mythology, like the legendary “first” ring fashioned of iron and worn at Jupiter’s command by Prometheus after he was unshackled.¹ There is the ring Pharaoh gave to Joseph in the book of Genesis in the Bible, a ring that may still be extant, allegedly discovered in 1824 in the necropolis of Saqqārah. Indeed, ancient rings are commonly found in burial



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Fig. 1. Detail of the arm reliquary of Saint Blaise, German, 1030, with rings added over the centuries. Silver-gilt on a wood core, cameo, filigree, and semiprecious stones; height $20 \frac{3}{16}$ inches overall. *Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.*

Fig. 2. Travelers giving rings to Tibetan girls, illumination in Marco Polo (1254–1324), *Le Livre des merveilles du monde* (The Book of Wonders), Paris, 1410–1412. Tempera on parchment, $16 \frac{9}{16}$ by $11 \frac{7}{16}$ inches. *Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS fr. 2810, f. 52v.*



contexts—on the fingers of Egyptian mummies (see Fig. 6) or inside Greek urns. The desire to create costly, exotic, and unusual rings continues to the present day. In 2005 the *Guinness Book of World Records* identified the world's largest gold ring as the Star of Taiba, which was made out of 110 pounds of gold by a Saudi Arabian jeweler in Dubai and contains more than 10 pounds of precious stones.² Clearly,

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Fig. 3. Marriage rings. *Top:* Constantinople, seventh century. Gold and niello; diameter of hoop $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. *Bottom:* Early Christian, Rome, c. 500. Gold; diameter of hoop $1 \frac{1}{16}$ inch.

Fig. 4. Bishop Henry of Blois (c. 1100–1171) holding a ring, illumination in the *Golden Book of Saint Alban's*, English, c. 1380. Tempera on parchment. *British Library, London, Cotton Nero D. VII, f. 87v.*

Fig. 5. Bishop's rings. *Left:* French or possibly English, fourteenth century. Gold with sapphire; diameter of hoop $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. *Right:* Probably English, c. 1200. Gold with sapphire; diameter of hoop $\frac{7}{8}$ inch. *Private collection.*

this ring was not intended for wear, although devotees can order wearable human-scaled replicas.

Who wore rings during the Middle Ages and Renaissance? On which hand and which finger? Why? Many of the answers to these questions are fairly straightforward. Then, as now, both men and women (and sometimes children) wore rings on the fingers of both hands. They wore them for adornment and for symbolic reasons. But, if we delve just a little deeper, we learn that these questions provoke myriad



other answers and raise additional questions, from which we can learn a great deal about the role rings enjoyed in medieval culture.

Medieval and Renaissance rings were inevitably shaped by the powerful heritage of ancient Rome, and, generally speaking, most types of rings found in the medieval period already existed in ancient Rome: signet rings (which were intended for identification or for signing documents), betrothal rings, and even magical and devotional rings (these last engraved with religious symbols). Wearing gold rings was evidently a sign of class in ancient Roman times: senators, members of the military, physicians, and men of free birth had the right to wear gold rings, as confirmed by governmental decree in the year 23. Slaves and persons of lower rank or class could wear rings only of bronze and iron. Women often wore rings as signs of betrothal. In the first century, Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* (Natural History) recorded the earliest collections of rings belonging to famous Roman politicians.³ His contemporary the Roman poet Martial (c. 40–103) described a man who wore six rings on every finger day and night.

Around the same time, the Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger (4 BC–AD 65) noted that every finger joint was utilized for ring wearing, a fashion that the rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35–100) deplored, criticizing as bad taste one orator's wearing of rings on both hands, especially at the tops of his fingers. A century later, the Greek satirist Lucian (c. 125–180) described a man who wore sixteen heavy rings. Some of these sources suggest that rings, like clothes, were seasonal: for example, openwork rings for the summer months; solid ones during the winter.

The disproportionately large number of extant rings from republican and imperial Rome confirms the veracity of these accounts of enthusiastic ring wearing. They likewise attest to the fashions of the day: surviving rings come in all sizes, including many small "baby" rings, which were probably for the upper joints of adult fingers; and in many forms, including ones with double and triple bezels, which became all the rage in fourth-century Rome (see Fig. 7, bottom of the last two fingers).

Did the Romans favor certain fingers or hands for their rings? It is hard to say, but based on the evidence, practicalities appear to have dictated



directly from that finger to the heart. The fact that ancient rings rarely show evidence of resizing confirms the idea that they were simply worn where they fit best.⁴ Such patterns of ring wearing persisted into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, with some variations.

The beginning of the Middle Ages was marked by the increasing dominance of Christianity in Europe, and Christianity could not help but put its stamp on what rings looked like and how they functioned. In spite of misgivings about the dangers of vanity, which was thought to be inherent in personal adornment, it seems that church authorities could not easily curtail the use of rings and other objects that possessed such deep and long-standing social and symbolic significance. Latin and Greek church fathers of the early Middle Ages discouraged the flagrant display of gold jewelry, but made exceptions, primarily for rings with seals and those of betrothed couples. Already in the third century, Saint Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–211/216) had allowed the wearing of rings with Christian symbols such as fish, birds, and inscriptions of a religious nature.⁵

Pliny mentions the frequency of iron betrothal rings in ancient times, although none appear to survive. Surviving marriage rings from the days of the early medieval church bear engraved "portraits" of the betrothed couple facing each other or with Christ between them (see Fig. 3), or sometimes just show clasped hands, which refer to the handshake that sealed a marriage and symbolized harmony between the couple. Although such rings were worn, they may not have been used in actual ceremonies until much later in the Middle Ages. Instead, they were probably exchanged as symbolic tokens in the privacy of the bedchamber, as a sixth-century life of Saint Alexis recounts.⁶ Writing in the early seventh century, the encyclopedist bishop Isidore (c. 560–636) of Seville specified that a marital ring should be worn on the fourth finger:

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Fig. 6. Detail of a mummy mask of a high-born lady with rings, Thebes, c. 1370–1250 BC. Painted and gilded cartonnage, height 22 13/16 inches overall. *British Museum, London.*

Fig. 7. Baby rings and two-finger ring, Roman and Byzantine, fourth to fifth centuries. Gold with glass and semiprecious stones; diameters 7/16 and 5/16 inch. *Les Enluminures photograph.*

“The ring is given by the espouser to the espoused either for a sign of mutual fidelity or still more to join their hearts by this pledge; and therefore the ring is placed on the fourth finger because a certain vein, it is said, flows thence to the heart.”⁷ The custom of wearing wedding (and engagement) rings on the fourth finger persists to this day.

Significant additional textual or visual support for the wearing of rings in the early medieval period is lacking. However there is a revealing and substantial body of archaeological evidence regarding the rings of the Merovingians, the Frankish dynasty that reigned from the mid-fifth to the eighth century in Gaul, a region that overlaps modern-day France.⁸ It confirms that both men and women wore rings on all their fingers except the index finger, including the thumb. Evidence from more than sixty necropolises shows that the left hand was significantly more popular than the right hand, in conformity with Roman customs. Rings worn on the right hand are thought to have signaled an unmarried state.

Nuns were given plain gold rings to indicate their espousal of the church, and bishop’s rings, another exception to the early church’s ban on ring wearing, were important throughout the Middle Ages (see Fig. 5). As early as the sixth century there is plentiful evidence that such rings marked a bishop’s consecration and that monks swore their profession on them.⁹ Many bishop’s rings vaguely resemble a stirrup in shape, so they are also known as stirrup rings. Worn on the middle finger of the right hand, they were often set with one or more precious stones; sapphires were the preferred gem—as the color of the heavens and a symbol of chastity—but examples with rubies also exist. Surviving examples are often large because they were frequently worn over a glove. A fourteenth-century miniature (Fig. 4) from the *Golden Book of Saint Alban’s* shows Henry of Blois, the bishop of Winchester, holding up his huge ring, which is mounted with a ruby. Another miniature, this time from the margins of the *Luttrell Psalter*, shows a bishop fully costumed displaying the sapphire ring he wears over his gloved hand.¹⁰ Among surviv-



Fig. 8. *Portrait of Lysbeth van Duvenvoorde (d. 1472), northern Netherlands, c. 1430.* Inscribed “Mi verdriet lange te hopen, wie is hi die zijn hert houdt open” (My sorrow has been long, who is it that opens his heart) in the banderole at right; at top left are the siter’s family’s coat of arms and those of her fiancé Simon van Adrichem. Oil on parchment, 12 ¹³/₁₆ by 8 ¹/₁₆ inches. *Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*



ing rings from the Middle Ages, bishop's rings are especially abundant because a bishop was customarily buried with his ring and many have been retrieved from graves.

However, so many stirrup rings exist from the Middle Ages—often with smaller, more modest stones and sligher bands (see bottom ring on the little finger in Fig. 1)—that it is necessary to look outside the community of bishops for their wearers. In Montauban in Gascony (and probably elsewhere) it was customary to give gold rings set with sapphires to girls who were intending to become nuns.¹¹ Perhaps the symbolism of the sapphire as the color of the Virgin's robes and a protector of chastity provided sufficient justification to fly in the face of repeated sanctions against the wearing of jewelry.

Like bishops and betrothed couples, long-dead saints also “wore” rings in the Middle Ages, in much the same way that votive statues received rings in antiquity and ancient Egyptian mummies were adorned with them. A famous example is the eleventh-century arm reliquary of Saint Blaise, patron saint of Braunschweig, Germany, made by order of the local countess Gertrude (1026–1077) (Fig. 1).¹² The reliquary is adorned with a bracelet decorated with gems donated by the countess herself, and its eerily realistic wood core—complete with veins and clipped fingernails—is covered with silver-gilt. The most striking feature, however, is the sixteen rings it displays, which call to mind those overly weighed-down Roman hands discussed earlier. The rings farthest down on the digits appear to be bishop's rings from as early as the eleventh century, whereas the ones at the tips of the fingers, dating as late as the sixteenth century, include plain gold bands and so-called posy rings—the name given to Tudor and Elizabethan gold bands inscribed with lines of “poesie,” or poetry. This chronological layering vividly conjures up a vision of the faithful who visited the shrine over five centuries. By donating their rings, and thus associating their personal belongings with the bones of the holy, ordinary people were able to take an active part in the liturgy of the church, and the devout cemented a bond with the saints whose protection they wished to enjoy.

Ecclesiastical authorities in the Middle Ages were never really comfortable with jew-

Fig. 9. Portrait of Heinrich (1479–1552), Duke of Mecklenburg, attributed to Jacopo de' Barbari (b. 1460–1470, d. c. 1516), 1507. Oil on wood, 23 3/8 by 14 3/4 inches. Mauritshuis, The Hague, Kroninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen.



elry unless it was intended to glorify the church. This fact possibly accounts for the proliferation of sumptuary laws starting in the late thirteenth century that regulated the wearing of all sorts of precious materials.¹³ At the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, Pope Gregory X (1210–1276) prohibited women from wearing excessive ornaments. Over the next several centuries, fueled by the mendicant orders that widely preached poverty, urban municipalities in France, Spain, and Italy followed suit. Sometimes these regulations appear intended to maintain distinctions of dress between social ranks, with the nobility retaining rights denied to craftsmen, merchants, and the bour-

Fig. 10. Portrait of George Gisze (b. c. 1498), by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), 1532. Oil on wood, 37 ¹⁵/₁₆ by 33 ³/₄ inches. *Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*; photograph by Jörg P. Anders by courtesy of Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York City.

Fig. 11. Signet rings. *Left:* Merchant's ring with swivel bezel, German, 1564. Gold with rock crystal over foil; diameter of hoop ⁷/₈ inch. *Right:* Merchant's ring, English, 1400–1500. Gold; diameter of hoop ⁷/₈ inch. *Private collection; Les Enluminures photograph.*

Fig. 12. Portrait of a jeweler and a young woman, by Paris Bordone (1500–1571), c. 1550. *Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen, Munich*; photograph by courtesy of ARTOTHEK.

geoisie. However, the prohibitions were so all-encompassing that women—and men—of all classes were affected: forbidden were pins, brooches, and veils; buttons of silver, gold, and pearls; gold and silver cord and embroidery; and all sorts of coifs (bejeweled headgear) and garlands. Girls below marrying age were especially singled out and forbidden to wear any bejeweled adornments. Wives of kings, dukes, and knights were sometimes exempt, because, as the poet and historian Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) wrote, such array “was established for them as being a thing due and pertaining to them.”¹⁴

These sumptuary laws played an important role in how medieval Europeans viewed the world. They also lend insight into the strange tales and customs recounted in Marco Polo's



mid-fourteenth-century travel account of his visit to Asia. In a rarely cited passage, he tells of how men in Tibet were forbidden to take a wife unless she had already been “used to consort with men”¹⁵ and that mothers offered their unmarried daughters to strangers when they came to town. The traveler was expected to reward the girl with a ring as a “lover's token,” and once she could show that she had obtained at least twenty rings she became sought after for marriage (see Fig. 2). The practice would have been shocking to Europeans not only in terms of the sexual morality issues it raised but also because the acquisition of so many rings stands in stark contrast to the regulations governing Polo's Italian contemporaries at home. (Assuming the story is true and that some of the travelers were Europeans, Tibet could be the unexpected last frontier for modern-day collectors seeking medieval rings!)

Nevertheless, there are striking instances in

which these ubiquitous civic laws exempted rings. And there seems to have been a great deal of inconsistency among regulations regarding the number and type of rings that were acceptable. For example, fourteenth-century Florentine women were allowed to wear no more than two rings, and their dress in general was meant to be sober, while their Sieneese contemporaries could wear any number of rings, even those adorned with pearls, enamels, and precious stones, which were prohibited on other articles of clothing or adornment, except for paternoster prayer beads.¹⁶ Does this mean that rings were not considered to be a serious problem? Or does it mean that the Roman Catholic Church imagined that it already exercised sufficient control over ring wearing through religious foundations (bishop's rings), the sacraments (betrothal rings), and personal piety (devotional rings)?

With greater wealth and a loosening of church strictures, ring wearing proliferated at the end of the Middle Ages. Paintings provide plentiful evidence of this.¹⁷ As in ancient Rome, rings began to be worn on all the fingers and on different joints, sometimes many at a time. In the early fifteenth-century portrait of Lysbeth van Duvendoorde shown in Figure 8 she wears rings on her index, little, and fourth fingers, on both the lower and middle joints. Her hat, belt, and collar are also resplendent with the very types of ornamentation forbidden by sumptuary laws a century or so earlier.





Agnes and the Renaissance, and by the late sixteenth century the word *dactyliotheca* came to signify “ring collection” instead of box or case. In Petrus Christus’s famous mid-fifteenth-century portrait of a goldsmith (Fig. 14), there is a *dactyliotheca* on the first shelf behind the sitter, and in the portrait of a jeweler in Figure 12, painted by Paris Bordone about a century later, there is one on the table in the foreground. Whereas the rings appear to be held in place in slots in Bordone’s painting (much as in modern-day ring boxes), in Christus’s painting they are placed on rolled tubes, which in turn are inserted in the case. By the late Middle Ages rings were frequently stored on such round tubes, called in documents *bastons* in French or *bacula* in Latin, from the word for “branch.”²² The *Portrait of a Goldsmith* of about 1500 by Gerard David (c. 1460–1523) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna shows a jeweler-goldsmith presenting a group of rings on a *baculum*. The richly illuminated border of a page from a Ghent-Bruges type of Book of Hours (Fig. 16), which is strewn with images of gold brooches adorned with pearls

Fig. 13. *Sir Henry Lee* (1533–1611), by Antonis Mor (c. 1516–c. 1576), 1568. Oil on wood, 25 ¼ by 21 inches. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fig. 14. *Goldsmith in His Shop*, possibly *Saint Eligius*, by Petrus Christus (1410–1475/76), 1449. Oil on oak, 39 ¾ by 33 ¾ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Robert Lehman Collection.

Sometimes rings were suspended from chains worn around the neck, as in Antonis Mor’s sixteenth-century portrait *Sir Henry Lee* (Fig. 13). In another fascinating painting, the portrait of Heinrich, duke of Mecklenburg, attributed to Jacopo de’ Barbari shown in Figure 9, ten rings of different styles are strung through gold cords on the sitter’s stylish hat. Heinrich also wears a cusped sapphire ring on his index finger. Probably for ease when sealing, the index finger was usually the finger for signet rings (see Fig. 11). This is how Georg Gisze wears one of his rings in the painting in Figure 10, which belongs to a series of portraits painted by Hans Holbein the Younger in the 1530s of the Steelyard Merchants from the Hanseatic League.¹⁸ And a new ring-wearing fashion appeared in Tudor England: if the ring was too large for the finger or perhaps frightfully expen-

sive, it was secured by a cord tied to the wrist in much the same way that children’s mittens are still sometimes attached to strings so they do not get lost (see Fig. 15).¹⁹ As earlier, rings were sometimes worn over gloves as well.²⁰ One other thing is clear from these pictorial documents, namely that the size of a ring is rarely an indication of the identity of the wearer or of the size of his or her fingers.

The proliferation of rings at the end of the Middle Ages created a greater need for solutions for storing them when they were not being worn. Writers already noted the existence of *dactyliotheca*, from the Greek roots, *dactyl* for finger and *theca* for box or case, in Roman times. Martial’s Roman patrician who wore all his rings day and night did so because he did not own a *dactyliotheca* in which to keep them.²¹ Such boxes persisted in the Middle



Fig. 15. Portrait of Lady Diana Cecil (d. 1633), Countess of Oxford, attributed to William Larkin (c. 1585–1619), 1614–1618. Oil on canvas, 81 1/16 by 47 1/2 inches. A detail appears on the cover. Suffolk Collection, on view at Kenwood House, London; photograph by courtesy of English Heritage Photo Library.

Fig. 16. Detail of a page from the *Hours of Johannes Meckis*, Leiden, c. 1500–1530, fol. 21. Illuminated manuscript on parchment, 5 3/4 by 3 3/4 inches overall. Private collec-

and precious gems, also includes an image of a *baculum*—with six rings—at the lower left (just above the bottom left brooch), as well as a ring attached to a rosary at the upper right. It is not known how *bacula* were formed, but perhaps they were composed of rolled pieces of parchment, which would easily serve the purpose.

The need for such specialized solutions for keeping one's precious rings testifies to their worth for their owners. The wearing of rings in medieval and Renaissance society announced their owner's wealth, marital, and class status or claims to pious devotion or ecclesiastical authority. They were used in private betrothal ceremonies and public church rituals. They figured in a complex medieval economy of death and salvation and adorned the holiest of bodies—from bishops and nuns to images of saints. They were honored and questioned, hoarded and displayed, banned and regulated, as well as bought and stored in great numbers. But, above all, they were worn with great pleasure and pride. And today? Medieval rings can still be worn. They can still incite great pleasure and pride. They survive as a most unusual wearable form of art that offers a powerful link to the past.

vrezou (Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge, and Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003), p. 217.

⁷ Isidore of Seville, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, XX, 8.

⁸ Reine Hadjadj, "Les bagues d'époque mérovingienne en Gaule du nord" (Ph.D. diss., Université Paris I/Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 216–222. For more on this subject, see Reine Hadjadj, *Bagues mérovingiennes, Gaule du nord* (Paris, 2007 [in press]).

¹⁶ Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁷ On rings in paintings, see Mozes Heiman Gans, *Juwelen en mensen* (Interbook International, Schiedam, 1979); and Marie-Christine Autin Graz, *Jewels in Painting* (Skira, Milan, 1999).

¹⁸ For more on these portraits, see Thomas S. Holman, "Holbein's Portraits of the Steelyard Merchants: An Investigation," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 14 (1978), pp. 139–158.

¹⁹ Diana Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery* (Tate Publishing, London, 1995), pp. 93–94.

²⁰ Dalton, *Franks Bequest: Catalogue of the Finger Rings*, p. xxv.

²¹ Kunz, *Rings for the Finger*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.



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⁹ O. M. Dalton, *Franks Bequest: Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later* (Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1912), pp. xxxiv–xxxv.

¹⁰ It is MS Add. 42130, fol. 85, British Library, London.

¹¹ Ronald W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery, with a Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1992), p. 92.

¹² Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints, What Do Speaking Reliquaries Say?" *Gesta*, vol. 36 (1997), pp. 20–31.

¹³ Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery*, pp. 79–80.

¹⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁵ Quoted in Marie-Helene Tesnière, François Avril, and Marie-Thérèse Gousset, *Le Livre des Merveilles [de Marco Polo]* (Renaissance du livre, Tournai, 1999), p. 117.

¹ On the rings of Prometheus and Joseph, see George Frederick Kunz, *Rings for the Finger: From the Earliest Known Times to the Present* (1917; reprint Dover Publications, New York, 1973), pp. 1–2.

² See www.taiba.net/awards.php.

³ For this and the following literary sources, see Frederick Henry Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the Departments of Antiquities, British Museum* (Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1907), pp. xx–xxv.

⁴ Gerald Taylor, and Diana Scarisbrick, *Finger Rings from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (Lund Humphries, London, for the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1978), p. 23.

⁵ Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings*, p. xxvii.

⁶ See *Byzantine Women and Their World*, ed. Ioli Kal-