

Gems from Roman Britain



There are few artefacts that provide such a tangible link with the people of the ancient world as do signet rings. **Ian Marshman** discusses how ancient jewellery can offer an insight into the lives of the people who wore it.

Signet rings, which were often manufactured from gold or silver and set with engraved gemstones, resist the ravages of time and appear today much as when they were worn. To archaeologists, their value lies not just in their materials or artistry but in the insight they provide into the lives of ancient people. Just as today we take care over our signature, or when choosing a Facebook photo, the wearer of a signet ring would carefully consider its imagery because it would be used to seal important documents, packages and letters.

These objects, therefore, help us understand how individuals wished to present themselves. Signet rings were first adopted in Britain when the indigenous population came under the sway of

the Roman empire, roughly 2,000 years ago. Roman Britain lay at the edge of the empire and today is often seen as a comparatively backward place, since it lacks the standing monuments of Italy, Asia Minor and North Africa.

However, it was at this time that many aspects of the country we live in today were established and the first cities, including Leicester – then called Ratae Corieltavorum – were developed under Roman occupation. By studying the use of signet rings and the types of images that were engraved on their gemstone settings, we get a glimpse into the lives of the individuals who lived in this period of great social change.

Examples of Roman jewellery:

This headline image depicts an amethyst gem engraved with Mercury flanked by his totemic animals, the goat and cockerel. The gem is from the palace at Fishbourne, West Sussex.

A wide range of other gems are also mentioned in the article, shown on the right-hand page.



1. Iron ring with a nicolo gem engraved with eagle, altar and standards from Great Casterton fort, Rutland.

2. Sard gem engraved with symbols of Rome's global ambitions (in modern mount) from the fort at Waddon Hill, Dorset.

3. Sard gem engraved with Diomedes seizing the Trojan Palladium. From the Roman town at St Albans, Hertfordshire.

4. Gold ring with nicolo gem engraved with two mice sharing a crumb from a rural cemetery at Bow, London.

5. Green jasper gem engraved with Fortuna, from Corbridge, Northumberland.

6. Red jasper gem engraved with an idealised scene of a rural sacrifice, from 'The Ditches' hillfort, Gloucestershire.

7. Gold ring with carnelian gem engraved with grapes containing human faces, from the Jewry Wall baths, Leicester.

8. Glass gem moulded with an image of a parrot from a small roman town near Milton Keynes.

9. Red jasper gem engraved with a shrimp and a fish from the military supply base at South Shields, near Newcastle.

10. Red jasper gem engraved with a male portrait bust from the fort on Hadrian's Wall at Birdoswald, Cumbria.

Soldiers and heroes

My preliminary results suggest that the wearing of signet rings was more common among soldiers than it was among the civilian population. The large number of artefacts found in forts around Britain show us the types of image that appealed to the Roman military mind. Amongst the most popular were eagles, such as on the signet ring from the fort at nearby Great Casterton, Rutland (1). The eagle was the sacred animal of Jupiter, the mightiest of the Roman gods and protector of the legions. The Great Casterton gem shows an eagle standing rather pompously upon a cylindrical altar covered in garlands, flanked by military standards. Such an image demonstrated the soldier's military way of life as well as the sacred element ascribed to Rome's imperial expansion.

“others hint at the mysterious elements of Roman religion”

Another gem found in a fort, at Waddon Hill in Dorset, may refer to the conquest of Britain itself and typifies Rome's global ambitions (2). In the grand narratives of history we can often overlook how warfare, then as now, represented great individual triumph and suffering. The gem from Waddon Hill shows Capricorn, the emblem of the Second Augustan Legion, leaping over a globe, holding the palm of victory, with the prow of a warship and a dolphin on either side. This legion was in the vanguard of the invasion of Britain, helping pacify the west through the construction of forts such as that at Waddon Hill. This gem attests to the comradeship of these men, and also their personal pride in having conquered new lands over The Ocean and helped to enlarge Rome's global empire.

Roman soldiers were well versed in historical warfare and many military signet rings show an interest in the exploits of the heroes of ancient Greek myth. One of the finest gems from Britain with such a theme comes from the Roman town at St Albans in Hertfordshire, and refers to the Fall of Troy (3). Although half of the gem is missing, the image can still be identified as Diomedes seizing the Palladium - an arcane wooden statue of the goddess Athena which made the city of Troy indestructible. Diomedes committed the great sacrilege of touching the icon with hands soaked in blood as he stole it to enable his comrades to enter the citadel using the infamous Trojan horse. To the Romans this myth was particularly significant, since they claimed that Diomedes carried the Palladium to Rome, and therefore they too were unconquerable. Whether or not this was the seal of a soldier, the image demonstrated its owner's knowledge of ancient mythology and its relevance to the present.

Roman relationships

Some signet rings carry images that challenge the assumptions we might have about the Romans, and show a softer side to what today is perceived as an unfeeling imperialist society. Signet rings that celebrate marriage are found in Roman Britain in both men's and women's sizes, and demonstrate that marital affection was important to the identities of both Roman men and women.

An elaborate gold ring found in a cemetery at a roadside settlement at Bow, just outside Roman London, expresses this theme in an unusual way (4). Two mice are shown sharing a crumb, which has probably fallen from the table at a banquet. It may have carried a message equivalent to 'share and share alike'. The ring was still worn by its middle-aged owner in her grave, along with an ornate necklace of beads. The grave lacked a coffin, leading some to suggest that she was a traveller passing through the area when she died. This is further supported by the large roof tile placed over her knees, an unusual addition that was perhaps intended to stop her spirit from haunting the small rural community.

Land of many gods

The Romans had a large pantheon of gods, but they were also tolerant and superstitious of those of other peoples. Consequently, many different deities appear on the signet rings of Roman Britain. The god most commonly portrayed on gems is Mercury, as seen on a gem from the Roman palace at Fishbourne, West Sussex (headline image). As the messenger of the gods, Mercury had a friendly ear to the prayers of mortals. He was also the god of trade and commerce, and is commonly shown carrying a purse laden with coins, and at death he acted as the guide to the underworld. This meant that Mercury was a good 'all rounder', and it is no surprise that he was so widely depicted.

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Also popular were semi-divine personifications of abundance, such as Fortuna (5) who is shown carrying a cornucopia, a horn of plenty, and steering human lives on a good course with her rudder. Some gems also give us a glimpse of rituals for which there is no direct archaeological evidence, such as the simple offering of incense over a flaming altar (7). Others hint at the mysterious elements of Roman religion such as the worship of Bacchus such as a gold ring set with a wine-red gemstone depicting three human faces in the form of a bunch of grapes (8) which is on display where it was discovered at the Jewry Wall baths in Leicester.

Weird and wonderful

Research would not be so worthwhile or interesting if it did not throw up the strange and the unexpected, and my project has already turned up several of both! For instance, it is difficult to explain the popularity of parrots on gems (9), considering they are thought not to have been imported to Britain from India until medieval times. The symbolism of a shrimp on a gem from a fort near Newcastle (10) is equally puzzling. It may reflect an interest in the fecundity of the sea, or perhaps it was just someone's favourite food. One of the most exciting artefacts I have recently examined, from Birdoswald fort on Hadrian's Wall, shows a bust of a man. Most of the busts used on signet rings show deities or emperors but this seems to fit neither category, and may be a rare portrait of the man who wore it. ■

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