

Some Roman-Iron Age Finger Rings

by Morna Simpson

A recent and valuable acquisition to the National Museum's Iron Age collection (p 295 below), is a bronze finger ring, of which two views are provided on fig 1, a. It was found some time before 1910 by Miss Martha Rollo on her family's estate, Duncrub, Dunning parish, Perthshire, during desultory investigations with an umbrella into a mound at Tarnavie. The east end of this feature is stressed as the most likely find-spot by Miss Rosalind Rollo, into whose keeping the ring subsequently fell; despite the local names of 'Ship' and 'Serpent' mound, there is no reason to suspect artificial construction.¹

The ring measures approximately 0.9 in (2.3 cm) in diameter across the hoop, the bezel being 0.65 in (1.7 cm) in diameter; its bronze seems in good condition with clear signs of wear along the internal arc of the hoop. The bezel bears a triquetral pattern executed in *champlévé* enamel of which two colours—red and yellow—are still well preserved, while a third – probably blue – is totally missing (though postulated with confidence, to ensure the balance and clear interpretation of the design). Masking the transition from bezel to hoop are twin arrangements of linked, lenticular swellings.

Given the lack of archaeological context, can any information as to date and cultural affiliations be extracted from the ring's appearance? The finger-ring type indigenous to the British Iron Age seems to be spiral,² whereas the bezelled hoop-form savours of Rome. Examples occur, for instance, in the Backworth, Northumberland treasure,³ and native variants, enamel being a poor man's substitute for the intaglio, are known in Scotland from Roxburghshire⁴, East Lothian,⁵ Fife,⁶ Morayshire⁷ and Sutherland. A long life is suggested by a fifth-century find at Ballinard, Co, Limerick with millefiori bezel.⁸

Few have any pretensions to decorative merit. The Tentsmuir piece displays a geometric juxtaposition of enamelled cells in a manner reminiscent of certain terrets, products in the main of North and Central England and Lowland Scotland in the late first and early second centuries AD⁹ (fig 1, b). Apart from the Tarnavie example, however, I know of only two finger rings bearing a triskelar design; that from Lowe Road, Forfar, Angus¹⁰ (fig 1, d) is not strictly relevant, for its openwork simplicity relates rather to the small series of Early Iron Age triquetral fobs,¹¹ or, alternatively, to the wider range of trumpet-scroll work, so frequently found in Romano-British and Gallo-Roman contexts of the later first and second centuries AD.¹² The second, from Lairg, Sutherland (fig 1, c) to whose presence in the Dunrobin Castle Museum my attention was drawn by Mr D Clarke of the National Museum, is more strictly comparable. Here, the central whorl of the Tarnavie piece is defined by three voids of a much less sophisticated and subtle outline, whose recession seems to call for an enamel insert, although none such remains, while the total absence of keying striations seems to militate against such a reconstruction.

The precise sequence of timing of the emergence of polychromy in British enamel work has never been solved, and little can be added to Françoise Henry's study of 1933.¹³ By the

second half of the first century AD, red and yellow are not infrequently combined with blue. A dark cobalt shade is obtained, first by the insertion of shaped panels of a glassy substance into prepared cells, then by the application of a thin wash over a red enamel ground; this makes its first appearance on 'Belgic' horse trappings,¹⁴ occurs rarely in North England¹⁵ and is to be

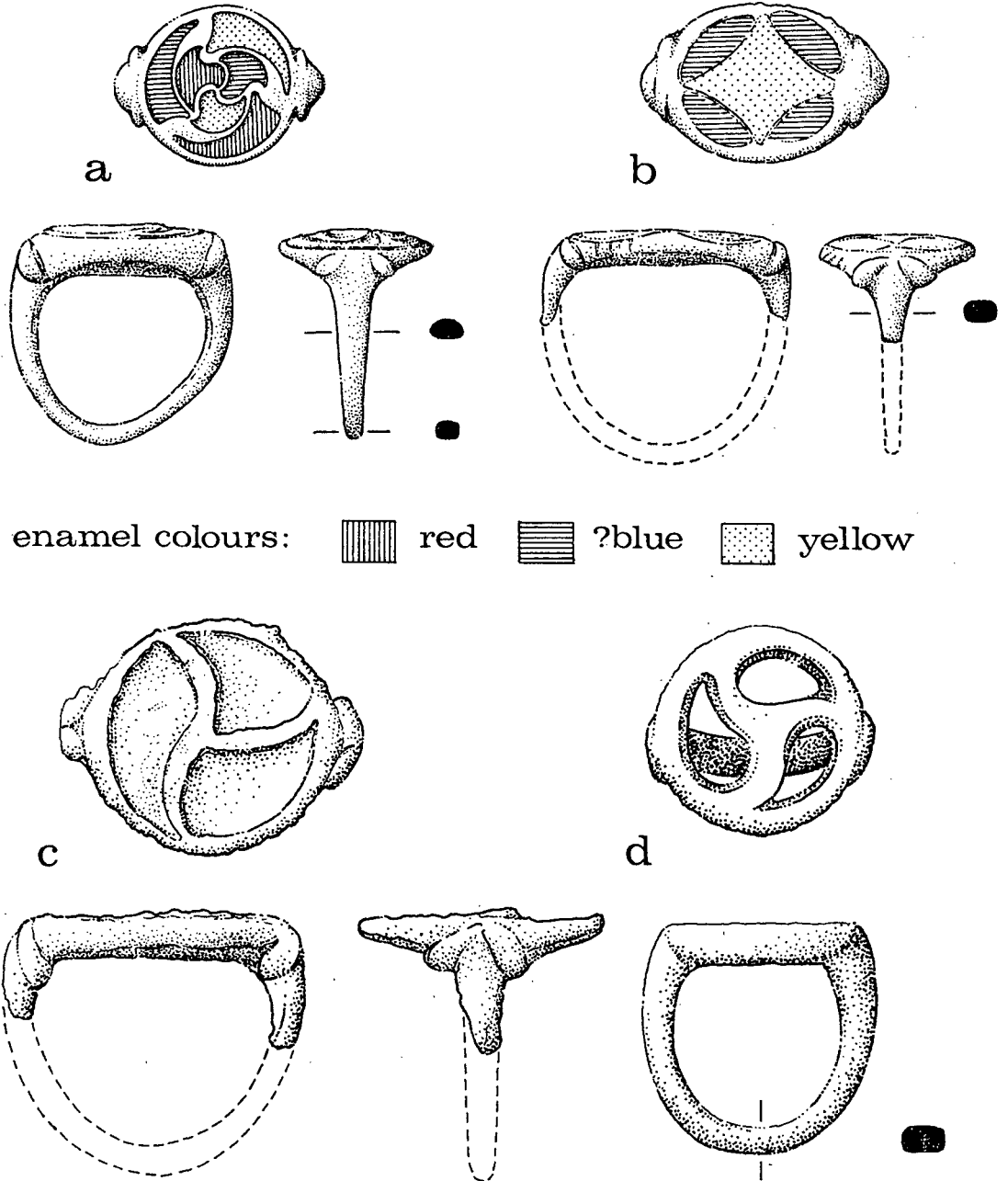


FIG 1 Roman-iron finger rings from Scotland: a. Tarnavie, Perthshire ($\frac{1}{2}$); b. Tentsmuir, Fife ($\frac{2}{3}$); c. Lairg, Sutherland ($\frac{2}{3}$); d. Forfar, Angus ($\frac{2}{3}$)

found *par excellence* on a strap-junction from Inchtuthil, Perthshire,¹⁶ there in a rigidly Agricolan context (AD 83/4–87/90). Insecure adhesion may have resulted in the loss of blue cell panels from the well-known Middlebie strap-junction,¹⁷ now restored in monochrome red. A pale turquoise was apparently favoured by Icenian craftsmen, working on the eve of tribal revolt;¹⁸ North English examples include two horse-trappings from Roman sources, of probable Flavian/Trajanic date, or at the very latest Antonine (i.e. AD 139).¹⁹ A prime Scottish find is the bridle-bit from Birrenswark, Dumfries.²⁰ There is no clue as to which of the blue shades was employed on the Tarnavie ring; but the comparative material, cited so far, emphasises the last half of the first century with a possible extension into the second century AD.

Stylistically, the Tarnavie bezel design is a surprise. Simple geometric layout is the rule in polychrome work,²¹ and yet, here, we have a swirling, three-legged arrangement defining a series of curved-sided triangles with a clear ancestry in the Llyn Cerrig plaque and its related 'Ashmolean' triskele.²² The chronological gap is not insuperable. Fox's 'three-sided voids'²³ became an essential ingredient of the Mirror Style,²⁴ and seem to have continued in use well into the first century AD upon such minor products as bronze spoons,²⁵ whose distribution is scattered throughout Britain and Ireland. Perhaps more credible is a comparison with one of several scabbard fitments from the mid/late first-century hoard at Lambay Island, Dublin²⁶ (an obvious export from Central England). There, one finds the same whirligig effect, the internal vortex spinning at complete variance with the peripheral arrangement of limbs, albeit executed in open-work and displaying less accurate versions of the 'curved voids'.

Finally, we must consider the pairs of almond-shaped swellings which flank the decorative diaphragm of the Tarnavie ring. From distant 'trumpet-coil' beginnings,²⁷ this motif grew in popularity to become a major feature of that last gasp of Iron Age decoration in North Britain, known as 'Petal-boss'.²⁸ Superior versions enhance the Mortonhall scabbard at its chape,²⁹ but closer to our interest are instances upon the late first-century tankard hold-fast from Carlingwark, Kirkcudbright,³⁰ while the buckle-shaped harness-fitting from Corbridge (already mentioned), together with a hilt guard and 'casket' strip³¹ from Newstead, further strengthen the likelihood of a date for our ring in the last quarter of the first century AD.

Place of manufacture is a thornier problem. Slender trumpet-coils, arranged in juxtaposed pairs,³² red and yellow enamel, even blue glass³³ are all known from the Highland zone of Scotland. It is, therefore, perfectly feasible to propose manufacture of the Tarnavie ring not far from its find-spot; an alternative might be that area of Britain nebulously named 'the Midlands', from which apparently came minor pieces of jewellery whose form may be Roman, but whose decoration reveals a debt to the Celtic repertoire.³⁴ Whatever the source, it is to be hoped that the Tarnavie ring is the first of many such charming discoveries.

NOTES

1. W J Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (1926), 248.
2. *PSAS*, LXXXIV (1949–50), 131–3; *Ulster Journ Archaeol*, xx (1957), 79–81.
3. British Museum, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1964), 25, fig 13, 1 & 5.
4. J Curle, *A Roman Frontier Post and its People* (1911), 333.
5. *PSAS*, LXXXIX (1955–6), 174.
6. *PSAS*, LVII (1922–3), 109–10.
7. *PSAS*, LXVII (1932–3), 32–3.
8. *Proc Roy Irish Acad*, LI (1947), 53, fig 4.

9. Compare, for example, with the fragment from Lanarkshire: N S Miller, *The Roman Fort at Balmuildy* (1922), pl LI, 4 & pl LIII, 2.
10. *PSAS*, LXXXIX (1944–5), pl xvii, 2.
11. The sole Scottish representative comes from Seamill, Ayrshire: *Arch Hist Coll Ayr Wigton*, III (1882), 63, fig 3.
12. O Brogan, *Roman Gaul*, (1953), 152; a strictly comparable openwork disc is amongst unpublished material from Corbridge, Northumberland.
13. *Préhistoire*, II (1933), 9–146.
14. E T Leeds, *Celtic Ornament in the British Isles down to A.D. 700* (1933), pl I, 3 & 6.
15. British Museum, *Guide to Early Iron Age Antiquities*, 2nd ed (1925), 103, pl viii, 4.
16. National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, FY 168.
17. V G Childe, *Prehistory of Scotland*, (1935), pl xv bottom right.
18. Terrets from Saham Toney, VCH *Norfolk*, I, opp 273, in particular Norwich Museum 6647; and Cambridge Fens (Brit Mus 80. 12–14. 11).
19. Both unpublished; one from Corbridge, Northumberland, now in site museum: the other from High Rochester, Northumberland. (Mus Ant Newcastle 1956. 162 I.A.).
20. D Wilson, *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (1863), 156–7, pl xi, fig 135.
21. Although more ambitious designs are to be found, for example, on seal boxes (*JRS*, xxxi (1941), pl vi, 7) and buckles (*Arch Camb*, xcv pt. 11 (1940), 131, 10).
22. Sir Cyril Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, (1958), 122, fig 75.
23. *ibid*, 148, fig 83, nos 98–101.
24. *ibid*, pl 56a, A2, B, G, H.
25. *Arch J*, xxvi (1869), 52–96.
26. *Proc Roy Irish Acad*, xxxviii (1928–9), pl xxiv, 5.
27. See, for instance, the Snettisham gold bracelet; Fox op cit, 45, fig 32.
28. Leeds op cit, III, fig 32.
29. *ibid*, a.
30. *PSAS*, LXXXVII (1952–3), 22, fig 4, C2.
31. Curle op cit, 186, fig 19, 1 and pl LXXV, 5.
32. On massive armlets, particularly Belhelvie, Aberdeen: J M Coles and D D A Simpson (eds), *Studies in Ancient Europe* (1968), 241, fig 58a; snake bracelets, especially the Culbin Sands example, 247, fig 62; the carnyx head from Deskford, Banff, *Ant J*, xxxix (1959), 19–32; and shield-shaped pendant from Perth vicinity, Perth Mus no. 140.
33. On massive armlets from Castle Newe and Pitkelloney, Perthshire, Coles and Simpson (eds), op cit, 241, fig 58b and 245, fig 61a and b, respectively; and strap-junction from Drumashie, Inverness, *PSAS*, LVIII (1923–4), 11–13; blue glass in the eyes of the Culbin Sands ‘snake’.
34. For example, strap bracelets from Derbyshire, VCH *Derbyshire*, I (1905), opp 234, fig 35; and Radnor, British Museum, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain*, (1964), pl III IC, 9; and brooches of many types: disc, W Boyd Dawkins, *Cave Hunting*, (1874), 95, fig 25; bow and fantail, Fox op cit, pl 14c; dragonesque, *Ant J*, xxxi (1951), 32–44.