

A Roman Intaglio Ring from a Native Fort on Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh

by R. B. K. Stevenson

The Ring (pl 25)

A Roman sardonyx intaglio set in an iron ring was claimed for the Crown in 1969 by the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer and given to the National Museum after a reward had been paid. The finder, Mr D S Archibald, had sent it to the Museum for identification. He explained that some months earlier, while crossing the western slopes of Arthur's Seat, he had picked up a loose stone and noticed sticking up underneath it the two rusty points of the broken hoop of the ring. Later at home he found that the ring was decorated.

The intaglio is of unusual quality for a British find and Dr Martin Henig published a note on it in the *Burlington Magazine*,¹ which he has kindly allowed to be summarised here. The ring is typical of the Augustan period and resembles several in the Rhineland,² so that by the Agricolan advance into Scotland it might have been a century old; though iron became less fashionable for signet rings it continued with later types of ring into the second century.³ The stone, 19 × 13 mm rising 5 mm above the bezel, bears the profile bust of an ephebe, facing left, who wears an Athenian helmet with raised visor and long horsehair plume. This can be identified as representing Alexander the Great, like other idealised heroic heads worn as an amulet.⁴ The engraving of the figure is skilful, though there are provincial shortcomings, and a Mediterranean origin is postulated. (Catalogue number FT 97.)

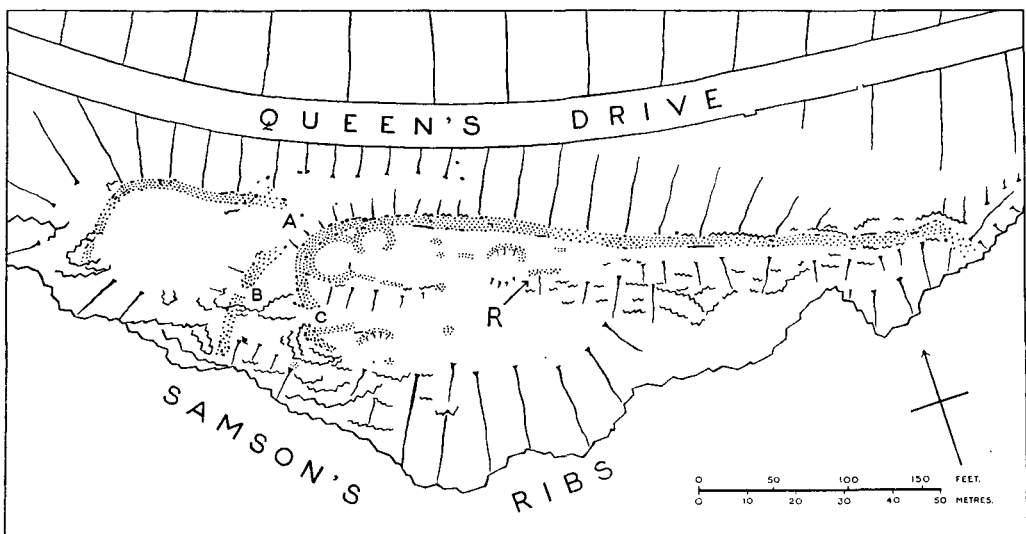


FIG 4 Fort on Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh, with find-spot of Roman finger ring (R)

The Fort and Hut Circles (fig 4)

The discovery of the ring and the natural questions, when had it been lost and how had it been preserved, led to a more critical inspection of the large hillside knoll on which it was found

(NT 275725). Some traces of old walls had been noticed there when other sites in the Park were being discovered and surveyed,⁵ but had been disregarded as ill-defined field-walls, no doubt because the possibility of a contour fort only a little over half a mile from that on Dunsapie Crag (RCAM *Midlothian*, no. 10) had seemed unlikely.

Now it became apparent that the whole ridge on top of Samson's Ribs had been fortified for 200 yards along its north-east side opposite the 200 ft high precipice, and that the larger remaining stones were still generally *in situ* and gave where measurable a normal wall thickness of 8 ft, except towards the south-east end where it thinned to 6 ft. The ground inside the fort is most irregular. The south-east half in particular is narrow overall and broken up with basalt outcrops; the fort wall ran along the highest line of these, set back a little from its edge, with a final lost curve to the outer cliff. At the opposite, north-west, end there is an outer annexe, grassier and relatively level. This is overlooked by the highest ground round which the main wall curves to enclose a settlement of at least three or four huts.

In the now very wide gap (A on the plan) where the annexe should join the main wall there may have been an outer entrance, rather than at the now also open north-west end. Within the gap there are the easily overlooked remains of a lower and probably earlier line of the main curved wall; it is crossed at right angles by a low outcrop crag on top of which there seem to be the foundations of one side of a gateway (B), though its gap is partly obscured by some rubble, and below the crag the wall had continued for 40 ft down a steep slope to the outer edge. The inner replacement line curves more sharply to make fuller use of the lie of the ground and then to form an oblique or overlapping-sided gateway (C), 12 ft wide, the south side of which crowned a jagged sloping mass of outcrop. A trace of walling at the foot of this suggests that the wall ran down across it, but much clearer is a short inner spur along the top. The roadway inside the gate seems to have been flanked by a narrow wall represented now by a line of rubble, beyond which there is the scarp and rubble of a hut-platform. Scattered rubble on the highest point represents two more circular huts, the larger 24 ft across inside and partly on or under the line of the curving fort wall. This might represent a period of 'open settlement' for which there is evidence at various forts in southern Scotland, but may rather be contemporary with the suggested older main line. The second hut, crescentic in plan and tangential to the wall and the first hut, is considerably more definite in appearance and supports the idea of a second period. Opposite its entrance a straight line of rubble along a change in slope may mark a sort of courtyard wall. Indefinite traces of structure, stippled on the plan, occur at other points. Most marked of all, however, there is about the middle of the fort close to the main wall a hut platform with back scarp and rather eroded front slope, again about 24 ft in diameter. There are indications of a straight wall projecting from it also, and possibly of the site of a smaller structure immediately further on.

Almost certainly it was a stone of the scatter of rubble of this straight wall which protected the intaglio ring, (R). In which case the ring may have been hidden under, or in a crevice of, the wall, or been covered by its collapse. A first or second century AD date for this is evidently possible.

NOTES

1. *Burlington Magazine*, CXII, no. 806, May 1970, 307.
2. Henkel, F, *Die Römischen Fingerringe des Rheinlands*, nos 126, 1431, 1435.
3. *TDGAS*, XLVI (1969), 100-7 - Carzield Antonine fort and burial near Glenluce.
4. *Britannia*, I (1970), 264.
5. *PSAS*, LXXXI (1946-7), 158-70.



Intaglio ring from Arthur's Seat (4:1)