Anglo-Saxon Inscribed Rings

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There are in existence twenty-two inscribed rings from the Anglo-Saxon period. In addition, there are four inscribed rings which are now lost. These four were recorded within the last two hundred years in sufficient detail that they can be included in the following discussion. Some of the inscribed rings have texts in Old English, some in Latin. Some are inscribed in runes but the majority have texts in roman script. Two have proved to be of particular interest to scholars because their texts contain an Anglo-Saxon royal name and title and are therefore datable: see plates 1, 2. A rather larger number of uninscribed rings are recorded from Anglo-Saxon England. The majority of the rings, and a large majority of the inscribed ones, date from the ninth or tenth centuries.

The twenty-six inscribed rings are listed below. In each case the following information, where it is known, is given in brief: circumstances and date of finding; present location; material; approximate diameter of ring in mm; date of ring; language of text; reading of text. The readings of the texts are given with word-division added and with diacritics as on the artefacts; damaged, or otherwise doubtful, letters are enclosed within square brackets and loss of text is indicated by a dash. Numbers 1-19 contain, or contained, texts in roman script, numbers 20-26 texts in runic script:

1. Attleborough: chance find, pre 1848; now in Norwich Castle Museum; silver; *c.* 20 mm diameter; ?11th century; probably Old English; *ethraldric on lvnd*, probably 'Ethrald...in London'[1]

2. Bodsham: chance find, 1968; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 22 mm diameter; 9th century; Old English; + *[g]armvnd mec ah im*, '[G]armund owns me...'[2]

3. Bossington: chance find, pre 1845; now in Ashmolean; gold; *c.* 25 mm diameter; 9th century; Latin; *in xpō nomen c[u]lla fīc̄*, 'in Christ my name has been changed to C[u]lla' [3]

4. Driffield: chance find, 1867; now lost; gold, with ?enamel; *c.* 22 mm diameter; ?9th century; Latin; + *ecce agnv[s] dī*, 'behold the Lamb of God'[4]

5. Essex: pre 1846; now lost; silver; dimensions and date unknown; probably Old English; *dolgbot*, probably 'compensation for a wound'[5]

6. Flixborough: found during excavation, 1989; now in Scunthorpe Museums; silver, with gilding; *c.* 20 mm diameter; 8th-9th century; partial alphabet; + *abcdefghikl*[6]

7. Lancashire (plate 3): pre 1705, in possession of Hans Sloan; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 22 mm diameter; 9th century; Old English; + *ædred mec ah eanred mec agrof*, 'Aedred owns me; Eanred engraved me'[7]

8. Laverstock (plate 1): chance find, *c.* 1780; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 27 mm diameter; 9th century; Latin; + *ethelvvlf rx:*, 'King Ethelwulf'[8]

9. Llysfaen: chance find, ?1753, certainly pre 1771; now in V&A; gold, with niello; *c.* 29 mm diameter; 9th century; personal name; + *alhstan*[9]

10. Rome: found with coins, pre 1859; now in V&A; gold; *c.* 22 mm diameter; ?9th century; personal name; + *a[v]fret* [10]

11. Sherburn (plate 2): chance find *c.* 1870; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 32 mm diameter; 9th century; Latin; *ā ð̄*; + *eaðelsvið regna*, 'Queen Eaðelswið'[11]

12. Sleaford: chance find *c.* 1992; present owner unknown; silver, with gilding; *c.* 22 mm diameter; ?8th century; Latin; + *anulum fidei*; + *eadberht*, 'ring of faith; eadberht'[12]

13. Steyning: found during excavation, 1989; now in Worthing Museum; gold; *c.* 20 mm diameter; 9th century; Old English; *æscwvlf mec ah*, 'Aescwulf owns me'[13]

14. Suffolk: found pre 1911; now in Moyse's Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds; silver alloy; *c.* 22 mm diameter; date uncertain, possibly post-Conquest; probably Old English; *iohnse beveriy arceb*; *[a.e.sta.] r[-] g[-]n*, probably 'John of Beverley archbishop; [athelstan]...'[14]

15. Swindon: found pre 1912; now in BM; gold; *c.* 22 mm diameter; 9th-10th century; Latin; + *bvredrvð + : w : a :*, 'Buredruð; *omega, alpha*'[15]

16. unprovenanced, 'eawen' ring: found pre 1897 ; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 29 mm diameter; 9th-10th century; Old English; + *: eawen : mie*

ah s petrvs : stan ces, probably 'Eawen owns me; may St Peter the Rock choose her'[16]

17. unprovenanced, 'in deo' ring: found *c.* 1991; present owner unknown; gold; dimensions uncertain; late 11th - early 12th century; Latin; *in dō bī dꝭ in aiīum lm̄in ī dē liliosꝭ :*, probably 'in God, O God blessed eternally, pure in the light of God'[17]

18. unprovenanced, 'sigerie' ring: found pre 1850; now in Ashmolean; silver; *c.* 25 mm diameter; date uncertain; Old English; *: sigerie heð mea gevvircan*, 'Sigerie ordered me to be made'[18]

19. unprovenanced, 'ðancas' ring: found pre 1851; now lost; silver; dimensions and date unknown; Old English; + *ðancas* +, 'thanks'[19]

20. Bramham Moor, Yorkshire: chance find, pre 1736; now in Danish National Museum; gold, with niello; *c.* 29 mm diameter; 9th century; string of letters (runic); *ærkriuflt kriuriþon glæstæpontol*[20]

21. Coquet Island, Northumberland: chance find, pre 1866; now lost (disintegrated); lead; *c.* 26 mm; date uncertain; Old English (runic); + *þis is-* , 'this is ...'[21]

22. Cramond, Edinburgh: chance find in churchyard 1869-70; now in National Museum of Scotland; leaded bronze; *c.* 22 mm diameter; 9th -10th century; uninterpreted (runic); *[.]ewor[.]el[.]u*[22]

23. Kingmoor, Carlisle: chance find, 1817; now in BM; gold, with niello; *c.* 27 mm diameter; 9th century; string of letters (runic); *ærkriufltkriuriþonglæstæpon tol*[23]

24. Linstock Castle, Cumbria (probable find-place): first mentioned 1824; now in BM; agate; *c.* 29 mm diameter; possibly 9th century; string of letters (runic); *ery.ri.uf.dol.yri.uri.þol.wles.te.pote.nol*[24]

25. Thames Exchange, London: metal-detector find on archaeological site 1989; now in Museum of London; copper alloy; *c.* 15 mm diameter; date uncertain; possibly partial *fuþorc* and personal name (runic); *[.]fuþni ine*[25]

26. Wheatley Hill, Durham: chance find, 1993; now in BM; gilded silver alloy; *c.* 19 mm diameter; late 8th century; Old English; runic: *[h]ring ic hatt[æ]*, 'I am called a ring'[26]

Some of these rings have had more scholarly attention than others. This may well be because some are more aesthetically pleasing than others, or because some of them have been on display for many years in well-visited museums. Almost all the inscribed rings have been previously published, some on many

occasions, but they have not previously been examined as a complete group. In this paper the inscribed rings are discussed as a group and the question is posed as to why a ring would be inscribed. Anglo-Saxon rings in general are also discussed, both their function and their relationship to the rings mentioned with such frequency in Old English literature.

Where any details survive of the early history of the inscribed rings, it is clear that the majority of them were chance finds. This is unsurprising since the objects are small and easily lost. Two of the rings, those from Llysfaen and Cramond, were indeed found outside the borders of Anglo-Saxon England, in Wales and Scotland respectively. Only two of the more recent finds, those from Flixborough and Steyning, both found in 1989, were discovered during excavation, and in neither case do the circumstances of their discovery yield much information: Flixborough was an unstratified find from top soil and Steyning was discovered in a rubbish pit. The find-places of the group of inscribed rings do not therefore furnish much useful information about the rings, their owners or their functions.

Most of the inscribed rings that can be dated on artistic grounds are from the ninth or tenth centuries, although the rings from Flixborough, Sleaford and Wheatley Hill are more likely to be eighth-century in date, while the ring from Attleborough may be eleventh-century and the 'in deo' and Suffolk rings are likely to date from the early post-Conquest period. As noted above, uninscribed rings have been found from Anglo-Saxon England, but not in large numbers. Wilson, for example, lists only some fifteen examples from outside the British Museum, as opposed to eleven inscribed ones.[27] Some further examples are given by Oman, including some of Viking date.[28] Taking inscribed and uninscribed rings together, Hinton lists over forty dating from the eighth to ninth centuries, and a similar number from the tenth to eleventh centuries.[29] Some further examples have been found in the last twenty years, especially through metal-detector finds.

The dates mentioned are in accordance with the evidence provided for Anglo-Saxon rings from archaeological finds and manuscript drawings. Using such evidence, Owen-Crocker suggested that in the fifth and sixth centuries finger-rings were rarely worn by men or women.[30] During the seventh and eighth centuries women's rings were still not common but they 'seem to have enjoyed a limited revival from the ninth century onwards'; there are also some men's examples.[31] In the tenth and eleventh centuries, rings remained more popular for women than for men.[32]

Most of the existing rings were made of gold or silver. That is, they were costly and prestigious objects, manufactured for the rich and powerful in society. Some of the gold rings were further decorated with niello, both as an ornamental device and, where there is a text, to make it stand out from the background. Eight of the inscribed rings were made of silver or silver alloy and three of them, those from Flixborough, Sleaford and Wheatley Hill were then gilded. Interestingly, these three rings are all likely to date from the eighth, rather than the ninth, century, although whether this is more than coincidence is unclear. In addition to its gilding, the Wheatley Hill ring contained settings for three gems; only one of these is now filled and the filling is red glass, not a jewel. These settings appear to date from after the inscribing of the runic text since two of them obscure two of the runes.

A few of the uninscribed rings were made from less prestigious material, for example bronze.[33] Four of the seven rings with runic texts were made from material other than gold or silver: one, from Coquet Island, was of lead although it has now disintegrated; the others are made from leaded bronze, from copper alloy and from agate. Although clearly seven runic rings are too few for generalisation to be valid, we could perhaps suggest that runic rings seem more likely than other inscribed rings to have been made of base material. This in turn might indicate that some at least of them were less prestigious and made for a less elite section of society than were the gold and silver rings.

It is usually assumed, from the size of the hoops, that these rings were finger-rings. The inscribed rings vary in size, the smallest hoop being some 15 mm in diameter, the largest some 32 mm. Those with the smaller diameters, for example 15 to 22 mm, were probably intended for women as they would be unlikely to have fitted a male hand. Indeed, the Thames ring (diameter 15 mm) would probably only have fitted the smallest finger on a female hand. Those with the larger diameters, 29 to 32 mm, may have been made for men since they would probably have been too loose on most women's hands, unless they were worn on the thumb. This leaves a group of rings with diameters in the middle of the range where we cannot be sure whether they were intended for men or for women.

It is of course possible that some rings were not made to be worn on the hands at all but, for example, to be attached to a larger object, or to be fastened on to a pendant to be worn around the neck. Gosling suggested that the Thames ring could have been 'some sort of hilt-band'.[34] However, unless there is evidence to the contrary, it seems safer to assume that finger-rings were normally intended to

be worn on the hands. Indeed some rings, notably those from Laverstock and Lancashire, both show signs of normal wear.[35]

It is possible that, at least on occasion, amulet rings were designed to be worn not on the hands but around the neck on pendants. Certainly this was sometimes the case when medical charms were written on other objects designed to be worn as amulets. The eleventh-century *Lacnunga* gives instances of such objects. Against an illness named *dweorh*, 'dwarf', for example, seven Mass wafers are to be inscribed, one with each of the names of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; a *mædenman*, 'virgin', is then to approach the sufferer and place one of these *on his sweoran*, 'on his neck'.[36] As a remedy against diarrhoea, one should take *swa langum bocfelle þæt hit mæge befon utan þæt heafod*, 'a piece of vellum long enough to surround the (patient's) head' and write on it a given text which contains Hebrew, Greek, Latin and possibly Irish: this text is described as *þysne pistol se ængel brohte to rome*, 'this epistle the angel brought to Rome'. This is then to be hung *on þæs mannes sweoran*.[37]

Three of the runic rings, those from Bramham Moor, Kingmoor and Linstock Castle, form a small group of apparently amulet rings. They all contain very similar texts consisting of a string of letters: the Bramham Moor texts reads, for example, *ærkriuflt kriuriþon glæstæpontol*.[38] These texts do not seem to form words in either Old English or in Latin. They are generally interpreted as 'magical gibberish' and hence the rings taken to be amulet rings.[39] The magic emanates from the actual runes, from the use of the number three and its multiples, and from the association of the texts with similar groups of letters in Anglo-Saxon medical charms.[40] The text on the Cramond ring is now largely illegible, but what can be read suggests that it was different from the other runic texts. It is possible, however, that its text was also a string of letters, in which case it might fit into this small group of amulet rings.

Some of the texts inscribed in non-runic script are in Latin while some are in Old English and some contain only a personal name. The Flixborough ring has a text containing a partial alphabet, which can be compared with the runic Thames ring, which might contain a partial *fuþorc*. A small group contains texts that use maker, owner or commissioner formulae, personifying the ring by the use of the pronoun *me*. So, for example, the Steyning ring has a text reading *æscwvlf mec ah*, 'Aescwulf owns me', while the unprovenanced 'sigerie' ring has one reading *sigerie heð mea gevvircan*, presumably 'Sigerie ordered me to be made'. The unprovenanced 'eawen' ring, the ring from Bodsham and the ring from Lancashire all have variations on these forms of words. A similar text occurs on

the Wheatley Hill runic ring, using the word *ic* rather than *me*. Maker, owner and commissioner formulae occur on other objects as well as finger-rings, for example on other jewellery, on stones and on weapons.[41]

The other Old English texts on the rings are all different from each other, a situation not at all unusual in the context of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. The Attleborough ring has a text which is similar to those on some eleventh-century coins where *on lvnd(e)* might mean 'in London'. The lost Essex ring apparently had a text reading *dolgbot*, 'compensation for a wound', unless this is an odd and unrecorded personal name. The lost and unprovenanced 'ðancas' ring is said to have had a text reading *ðancas*, presumably for 'thanks', and the lost Coquet Island ring apparently had a runic text beginning *þis is-*, 'this is...'. Parts of the texts on the Suffolk ring may have been in Old English or early Middle English. One text is clear: *iohnse beveriy arceb*, probably 'John of Beverley archbishop'. The other text is very worn but might have read *[a.e.sta.] r[-] g[-]n* and have referred to King Athelstan.

The rings with texts in Latin are also heterogeneous in character. The text on the unprovenanced 'in deo' ring is heavily abbreviated but may perhaps be expanded to *in d(e)o b(ea)t(us) d(eu)s in ait(ern)um l(u)min(e) i(n) de(o) lilios(us)*. This might be interpreted as 'in God, O God blessed eternally, pure in the light of God'. The text on the Driffield ring apparently read *ecce agnv[s] dī* and thus is similar to part of the Sherburn text. On the Sherburn text, *ā ð̄* are clearly to be read. Since the two letters are set around a representation of the Lamb of God, this is presumably an odd, indeed unparalleled, abbreviation for *agnus dei*. The Sleaford ring has *anulum fidei*, 'ring of faith', probably referring to religious faith, and the Swindon ring contains *w a*, presumably for *omega* and *alpha*. The Bossington text reads *in xpō nomen c[u]lla fic̄*; if *fic̄* is expanded to *fic(tum est)*, this could be interpreted 'in Christ my name has been made (*that is*, changed to) C[u]lla'.

Eight of the twenty-four rings under discussion thus contain texts that are, at least in part, explicitly religious. The initial cross that begins many of the texts is also of course an explicitly Christian symbol, but since almost all Anglo-Saxon inscribed texts start with a cross, this is not of particular relevance here. One text, on the unprovenanced 'in deo' ring, is a completely religious text which includes the abbreviated word *dues*, 'God', three times. Other ring texts include a specific mention of Christ by name (Bossington) as well as three texts referring to Christ or God by symbol, two as the *agnus dei* (Driffield and Sherburn) and one as *alpha* and *omega* (Swindon). There are references to St Peter ('eawen' ring) and to an

archbishop, probably John of Beverley (Suffolk). The Sleaford text *anulum fidei*, 'ring of faith', probably refers to religious not to secular faith. A ninth text, on the now lost 'ðancas' ring, apparently had a text reading *ðancas*, 'thanks'. If this text was accurately read, it is possible that it too was religious, referring to gratitude directed towards God rather than towards a human individual.

Explicitly religious texts are more common than not amongst Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in general. However many Anglo-Saxon inscriptions are on stone and such stones are likely to be religious: frequently they are grave-stones, memorial stones or church dedication stones. Even on Anglo-Saxon inscriptions on material other than stone, explicitly religious texts and non-religious texts occur about as frequently as each other. Yet on the rings, explicitly religious texts are rather less common, forming only one third of the group.

This is perhaps the more surprising in the light of the two Old English riddles, nos 48 and 59, which describe the object to be identified as a *hring*. The objects to be guessed in Old English riddles are usually fairly typical examples of their class. In both these riddles, the *hring* is described as a valuable object of gold which is inscribed with a religious text. In addition, the *hring* of Riddle 59 is small enough to be passed from hand to hand and may have a personal name inscribed on it. I have argued elsewhere[42] that the *hring* in these two texts is an inscribed finger-ring, and this remains my view. However, this would suggest that typical Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings contained religious texts and, as demonstrated above, although religious texts are not uncommon on finger-rings, they are less usual than on other classes of inscribed object.

The complete text inscribed on the *hring* of Riddle 59 is not given but we are told that it named *hælend...tillfremmendra*, 'the saviour of those doing good deeds' (lines 6-7) and also *his dryhtnes naman*, 'the name of his lord' (line 8). The lord of the ring could, in the latter line, refer to God, to an earthly lord, or to both, but the former reference is clearly religious. The text on the *hring* of Riddle 48 is quoted exactly: *gehæle mec helpend gæste*, 'save me, helper of souls' (line 5). This text resembles the texts of existing Anglo-Saxon rings in its use of the pronoun *mec*, 'me', and in the religious purport of its text. The fact that its text is not exactly paralleled on any of the existing rings is no cause for concern since, as already noted, it is rare to find the same text repeated from one inscribed object to another.

Inscribed and decorated rings are not otherwise prominent in written sources from Anglo-Saxon England, although there is the occasional reference. For example, Wynflaed, in her will, bequeaths to her daughter Aethelflaed *hyre*

archbishop, probably John of Beverley (Suffolk). The Sleaford text *anulum fidei*, 'ring of faith', probably refers to religious not to secular faith. A ninth text, on the now lost 'ðancas' ring, apparently had a text reading *ðancas*, 'thanks'. If this text was accurately read, it is possible that it too was religious, referring to gratitude directed towards God rather than towards a human individual.

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agrafenan beah, 'her engraved ring'.[43] Whitelock, however, translates *beah* as 'bracelet'[44] and the Old English word can certainly have this meaning. In modern English the word 'ring' generally refers to a finger-ring, but the same is not true of *beag* and *hring* in Old English. There are, indeed, at least eleven different meanings or shades of meaning of *hring* alone.[45] What the majority of these share is the notion of circular shape: ornaments such as bracelets, brooches, even possibly necklets, could all be considered as circular.

Old English poetry abounds in references to the giving of rings as a part of the heroic code: there are a large number of such references in *Beowulf* alone. Instances of *hring* and *beag* occur both as simplexes[46] and in compounds.[47] It is not clear, however, whether such rings actually existed in Anglo-Saxon England or whether the references are to the heroic tradition, to literary convention, or to both.[48] If such rings did exist, it is also uncertain what size they were. Presumably on at least some occasions they were considerably larger than finger-rings. The imbalance between the large number of literary references to rings in Old English, and the rather small number of actual rings found, supports Hinton's view that these literary references are largely conventional.

The majority of the texts on the inscribed rings include a personal name, which fits the evidence of Riddle 59 as mentioned above. On the actual rings, the rings without personal names are the amulet rings with their strings of letters, the Wheatley Hill ring, the Flixborough ring with its partial alphabet, and the unprovenanced 'in deo' ring. The only other texts that do not appear to have contained personal names are those on the four rings which are now lost, those from Driffield, Coquet Island, the unprovenanced 'ðancas' ring and the Essex ring. This last observation casts some doubt on the texts of these lost rings, making it at least possible that some readings, made in the nineteenth century and not now verifiable, are less than reliable.

The personal names occurring in the texts are predominantly those of men. Of those where the reading is reasonably certain, three are the names of women, eleven apparently those of men. Gender imbalance in the primary sources for Anglo-Saxon England is well-documented.[49] What is more surprising is that the archaeological evidence mentioned above suggests that finger-rings were more often worn by women than by men. This seems to demand further scrutiny.

It was suggested above that those rings with diameters in the range of 15 to 22 mm were probably intended for women. The rings of this size that contain personal names are those from Attleborough, Bodsham, Lancashire, Rome, Sleaford, Steyning, Suffolk, Swindon and possibly the Thames ring. In only one

case, on the Swindon ring, is there a woman's name, *Buredruð*, and she is not actually stated to be the owner. On the other hand, three of these rings seem to state that their owner was a man: Bodsham was owned by *[G]armund*, Lancashire by *Aedred* and Steyning by *Aescwulf*. In addition, the Sleaford ring contains the male name *Eadberht* and the Thames ring may contain the male name *Ine*.

Four of the rings fall in the range of diameter 29 to 32 mm, a size suggested above as being too large for female fingers. Two of these rings contain male names, Laverstock and Llysfaen, while one, Sherburn, contains a female name and one, the unprovenanced 'eawen' ring, names *Eawen* as the female owner. Could Eawen have worn her ring on her thumb, or fastened to another object? There is no evidence to substantiate such practices, but they do not seem any more unreasonable than envisaging Eawen in continual danger of losing her ring through its slipping from her finger.

In some of these cases, the personal names on the rings may not indicate personal possession. The Suffolk ring, for example, could have been a gift presented at the shrine of John of Beverley or a trophy brought from it.[50] In the case of the Laverstock and Sherburn rings, Wilson suggested that it 'would be too much of a coincidence to have the personal rings of two Anglo-Saxon monarchs' and that these rings might instead have been 'gifts of that monarch to a person or institution'.[51] In this case, the wear on the ring from Laverstock would represent use by the recipient rather than by the donor. Wilson's suggestion is perfectly possible when the text on a ring consists of a name only, and this may well be the explanation for Queen Eaðelswið's name on the large Sherburn ring. However this seems rather less likely when the personal name on the ring identifies that person as the actual owner of the ring.

There seems to be no reason why personal names inscribed on finger-rings should always have had the same function. Some could have indicated ownership while others had a different purpose. As suggested above, some could have recorded the name of the donor. One, the unprovenanced 'sigerie' ring, certainly gives the name of the commissioner of the object: *sigerie heð mea gevvircan*, 'Sigerie ordered me to be made'. Part of the text on the Lancashire ring gives the name of the engraver of the ring as *Eanred*.

Another possibility is that modern scholars have been too quick to think that they have fully understood the theory underlying Anglo-Saxon nomenclature. It is generally accepted by scholars as a clear principle that Old English dithematic names are male if the second element is grammatically masculine, female if it is grammatically feminine. The same connection between sex and

grammatical gender is held to be true in the case of monthematic names. This principle may not have been quite so clear to the Anglo-Saxons themselves, and indeed has now been questioned by some people, for example Colman.[52]

Evidence for concern lies in the fact that a small group of names, for example those with second elements *-noð* or *-mund*, seem always to refer to men although the Old English words *mund*, 'hand, power', and *noð*, 'temerity', always appear in manuscript texts as grammatically feminine.[53] In other cases the second elements of male names are formed from adjectives, like *heah*, 'high', or from neuter nouns, for example *wig*, 'war'.[54] Colman's evidence is based on the names of moneyers of the coins of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066). Since we know of no recorded instance in Anglo-Saxon England of a female moneyer, this evidence has seemed fairly conclusive. However an argument *ex silentio* can certainly be questioned.

Why should women not have been moneyers? The striking of coins required quite hard physical labour and it is likely that at all periods this was undertaken by men. When coins were first struck in Anglo-Saxon England, it is assumed that the actual striking was done by the moneyers named on the coins. In the later Anglo-Saxon period, however, moneyers appear to have enjoyed a higher status. In Winchester, for example, the names of five moneyers who held land T.R.E are noted;[55] Biddle describes them as a 'relatively wealthy group' and probably 'of burgess rank'.[56] Osulf, a late tenth-century York moneyer of Ethelred II, is described as *thein*, probably for *ðegn*.[57] Such moneyers presumably did not themselves physically strike coins. Moreover, there is the occasional moneyer's name which appears to be female, for example *Hild* in Stamford[58] and *Gife* in Lincoln[59]. Why could not the role of a moneyer, whose job in the later period may have been primarily to oversee the work, be undertaken by a woman as well as by a man?

As noted above, when male names appear to contain a feminine second element, the strategy in the past has been to assume that Old English nouns like *mund* and *noð* must have been grammatically masculine when forming personal names and grammatically feminine on all other occasions. This is a possible, if a somewhat implausible argument. In any case, it seems inherently unlikely that most parents would have been knowledgeable about the theoretical grammatical structure of their language. Choice of personal name is much more likely to have been governed by convention as to what were suitable names for females and males. It seems quite possible that we do not fully understand the conventions underlying Anglo-Saxon naming practices.

The apparently male owners' names on five of the small rings should then be re-examined. They are *[G]armund*, *Aedred*, *Aescwulf* and possibly *Eadberht* and *Ine*. It does not seem improbable, as suggested above, that the element *-mund* should on occasion form a female name, since Old English *mund* is a feminine noun. Although the Old English adjective *beorht*, 'bright', is always assumed to form male names, there is no actual evidence that female names could not be formed from it. In the case of *Aedred*, instead of the second element's being *-red*, could it be *-dred*, a recorded variant spelling of the feminine *-thryth*?[60] Although the Old English noun *wulf* is masculine, the feminine form *wylf*, 'female wolf', occurs. *Aescwulf* could possibly be a variant spelling of an unrecorded female name **Aescwylf*. The name *Ine* is known to us as the name of a seventh-century king, but could it conceivably be a spelling of the feminine name *Hune*?[61]

One question that remains to be addressed is why anyone in Anglo-Saxon England would want to inscribe a finger-ring. In a society with a limited level of literacy, such an undertaking does not appear to have enormous practical advantage. Certainly it would seem anachronistic to consider the texts containing personal names as comparable to modern name-tags, inscribed to aid identification and claim of lost rings.

It may be that sometimes an inscribed text was added to enhance the decorative appeal of the ring. This might well be the explanation for the *ā ð̄* on the Sherburn text. As noted above, these letters are presumably an abbreviation for *agnus dei* since the two letters are set around a representation of the Lamb of God. The letters do not label the figure of the Lamb in any helpful way. Indeed, we can only interpret the text because we can identify the picture, not vice versa, and no doubt the original audience would have been in the same position.

On other rings, some of the texts are functional in the sense that they provide information, for example, in giving the name of the maker or owner of the ring. These texts may have been inscribed out of pride in craftsmanship or ownership, even if the audience likely to benefit from this information was rather limited. If the rings containing royal names and titles were presents made to others, as opposed to being personal possessions, the texts would presumably have added to their value as royal gifts.

In conclusion, it is clear that the numbers of rings, both inscribed and uninscribed, that remain from Anglo-Saxon England is not large. This does not accord well with the frequent references in Old English poetry to rings and ring-giving. These poetic references to the giving of rings may then be primarily a literary convention, rather than a description of actual Anglo-Saxon practice.

Such a convention could of course have had its origins in actual practices, but in those dating from the pre-invasion period. It is possible that, insofar as Anglo-Saxon poets had actual objects in mind, the 'rings' they referred to were not necessarily finger-rings. They could have been thinking of any of a variety of circular objects of gold or silver, including not only finger-rings but also bracelets, necklets, perhaps even bowls or plates.

Although finger-rings made from base metal are known, the majority are made from more prestigious material. These must therefore have been the possessions of the well-to-do in society, those who could afford to purchase and own expensive items of jewellery. In mid to late Anglo-Saxon England, literacy itself seems to have been a mark of prestige. It has been suggested that, even in the eighth century, writing was taken as a symbol of power and authority.[62] By the late Anglo-Saxon period, the society has been described as one 'in which considerable respect was accorded to the written word'.[63] I have argued elsewhere that Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in general illustrate well these attitudes of respect for the power and prestige of literacy.[64]

As far as the inscribed finger-rings are concerned, explicitly religious texts are rather rarer than would be expected by comparison with other contemporary inscribed objects. This might suggest that inscribed finger-rings were, or became, fashionable amongst the secular elite of mid to late Anglo-Saxon England. Perhaps the rich and powerful, particularly those in secular society, were increasingly aware of the importance of writing and were not averse to being associated with it by having their own names, or other texts, inscribed on their expensive finger-rings.

Plate 1. Finger-ring from Laverstock, Wiltshire, now in the British Museum

Plate 2. Finger-ring from Sherburn, Yorkshire, now in the British Museum

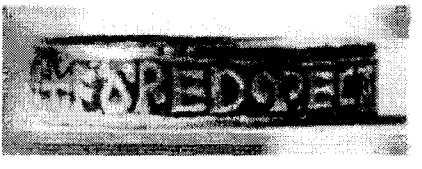

Plate 3. Finger-ring from Lancashire, now in the British Museum

NOTES

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[1] Elisabeth Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), no. 5, pp. 49-50.

[2] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 13, p. 55.

[3] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 14, p. 55.

[4] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 33, p. 67.

[5] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 36, p. 70.

[6] Elisabeth Okasha, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 21 (1992), no. 192, pp. 45-6.

[7] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 66, p. 89.

[8] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 70, pp. 91-2.

[9] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 86, pp. 98-9.

[10] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 103, pp. 107-8.

[11] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 107, pp. 112-13.

[12] This ring is unpublished.

[13] Okasha, 'second supplement' (as n. 6), no. 204, pp. 53-4.

[14] Elisabeth Okasha, 'A rediscovered medieval inscribed ring', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 (1973), 167-71.

[15] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 115, p. 117.

[16] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 155, p. 136.

[17] This ring is unpublished.

[18] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 156, pp. 136-7.

[19] Okasha, *Hand-list*, no. 157, p. 137.

[20] R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* 2nd ed. (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), p. 112.

[21] Page, *English Runes*, pp. 158-60.

[22] Page, *English Runes*, p. 157.

[23] Page, *English Runes*, p. 112.

[24] Page, *English Runes*, p. 112.

[25] K. Gosling, 'Recent finds from London', in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. by Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), pp. 191-4 (pp. 191-3).

[26] R. I. Page, 'An Anglo-Saxon Runic Ring', *Nytt om runer*, 12 (1998), 11-12.

[27] David M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1964), pp. 99-116.

[28] C. C. Oman, 'Anglo-Saxon Finger-Rings', *Apollo*, 14 (1931), 104-8.

[29] David A. Hinton, 'Late Saxon Treasure and Bullion', in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. by David Hill, *BAR British Series* 59 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), pp. 135-58 (pp. 150-8).

[30] Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 56-7, 83.

[31] Owen-Crocker, *Dress*, pp. 96-7, 129.

[32] Owen-Crocker, *Dress*, pp. 134, 173.

[33] Oman, 'Finger-Rings' (as n. 28), p. 105; Hinton, 'Late Saxon Treasure' (as n. 29), p. 158.

[34] Gosling, 'Recent finds' (as n. 25), p. 192.

[35] Ronald Jessup, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery* (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1974), pp. 80, 82.

[36] J. H. G. Grattan and C. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 160-3, *Lacnunga* XCIII b.

[37] Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, pp. 188-9, *Lacnunga* CLXVIII c.

[38] Page, *English Runes* (as n. 20), p. 112.

[39] Page, *English Runes*, p. 112.

[40] B. Dickins, 'Runic Rings and Old English Charms', *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen*, 167 (1935), 252.

[41] For a full discussion see Elisabeth Okasha, 'The Commissioners, Makers and Owners of Anglo-Saxon Inscriptions', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 7 (1994), 71-7.

[42] Elisabeth Okasha, 'Old English *hring* in Riddles 48 and 59', *Medium Ævum*, 62 (1993), 61-9.

[43] Christine E. Fell *et al.*, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London: British Museum, 1984), p. 107.

[44] *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), pp. 10-11.

[45] Okasha, 'Old English *hring*' (as n. 41), p. 64.

[46] For example, *se beag*, line 1211; *beages*, line 1216; *hring*, line 1203; *hringas*, line 1195; *beaga bryttan*, lines 35, 352 etc, 'giver of rings, lord'.

[47] For example, *hringsele*, line 2010 and *beahsele*, line 1177, 'hall where rings are given'; *beaggyfa*, line 1102, 'ring-giver, lord'.

[48] See the discussion in D. A. Hinton, 'Late Anglo-Saxon metal-work: an assessment', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 4 (1975), 171-80 (pp. 177-8).

[49] Elisabeth Okasha, 'Anglo-Saxon women: the evidence from inscriptions', in *Roman, Runes and Ogham: Medieval Inscriptions in the Insular World and on the Continent*, ed. by J. Higgitt *et al.* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2001), pp. 79-88.

[50] Okasha, 'rediscovered ring' (as n. 14).

[51] Wilson, *Ornamental Metalwork* (as n. 27), p. 56.

[52] Fran Colman, *Money Talks: Reconstructing Old English* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 54-5.

[53] See for example Colman, *Money Talks*, pp. 91, 77.

[54] For example Colman, *Money Talks*, pp. 76, 78.

[55] For example *Alwardus* and *Alestanus*: Martin Biddle ed., *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages: An Edition and Discussion of the Winton Domesday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 50, 56.

[56] Biddle, *Winchester*, pp. 401 and 421 respectively.

[57] Elizabeth J. E. Pirie, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, 21 *Coins in Yorkshire Collections* (London: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 1975), plate III, no. 75 and p. lii.

[58] Veronica Smart, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, 41 *Cumulative Index of Volumes 21-40* (Oxford: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 74; Anthony Gunstone, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, 27 *Coins in Lincolnshire Collections* (London: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 1981), plates XXXIX, nos. 1086-90.

[59] Smart, *Sylloge* 41, p. 64; Gunstone, *Sylloge* 27, plate II, no. 47 and plate XXVII, no. 746.

[60] See examples in Maria Boehler, *Die altenglischen Frauennamen* (Berlin: Germanische Studien, 1930), pp. 31-2, 152.

[61] Mats A. Redin, *Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1919), p. 115; Boehler, *Frauennamen*, p. 223.

[62] Susan Kelly, 'Anglo-Saxon lay society and the written word', in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* ed. by Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 36-62.

[63] Simon Keynes, 'Royal government and the written word in late Anglo-Saxon England', in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* ed. by Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 226-57 (p. 248).

[64] Elisabeth Okasha, 'Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence from inscriptions', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 8 (1995), 69-74.