Some Unconventional Early Byzantine Rings

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Although many rings dating from the late 5th and early 6th century survive, no careful typological study of these has yet been undertaken. The various shapes of Early Byzantine rings are, however, adequately documented in publications of individual museum and private collections. These rings, like much of what is often termed the koiné style of Byzantine jewellery (found throughout the Empire), tend to fall into clear categories based on shape and technique, with a far more limited variety than was seen during the Roman Empire. Most of the shapes that emerged in the 6th century are distinctive and found in relatively large numbers, but there are some unusual types as well. This paper will examine three related aspects relating to the typology of Early Byzantine rings: some rare varieties of the late 5th century, some unconventional rings of the 6th–7th centuries, and the connection between rings of Byzantine origin and similar examples produced in the Germanic kingdoms in the West (Ostrogothic, Lombardic, Merovingian, Vandal, and Visigothic), a relationship that has not been particularly well documented.

Already by the mid-3rd century, after the fall of the Severan dynasty, a significant change in fashion is apparent. Gemstones were rarely engraved, and rings were set instead with old gems, unengraved gems, or coins. In the Constantinian period, rings became larger, with tubular hoops or hoops decorated with floral patterns (usually an acanthus wreath). Sometimes the hoops and bezels are hollow with embossed decoration.

Material from the late 4th and 5th centuries is poorly attested and difficult to classify, but evidence is provided by several late 5th century hoards of jewellery. Unfortunately, there is no trace of the greatest discovery of the period, the tomb of the empress Maria, wife of Honorius, who died around the year 400 and was buried in the now-destroyed chapel of St Petronilla in St Peter’s in Rome. When the chapel was demolished in 1544, workmen found the tomb which contained, according to contemporary accounts, two silver boxes full of rings. Nothing appears to have survived or was even recorded with the exception of the so-called ‘bulla,’ a gold pendant studded with emeralds and garnets enclosing a cameo in the shape of a chi-rho monogram composed of the names of Maria and her family. The use of emerald and garnet is typical of the changing tastes in gemstones in Late Antiquity; these stones, along with sapphire, amethyst, and rock crystal, become the most popular stones for use in jewellery.

The most important and best recorded hoard of the late 5th century material was found at Reggio Emilia in 1957. The hoard, evidently belonging to an eastern Germanic official of some standing, contained jewellery of the highest quality, including necklaces and earrings set with garnets, a pair of Gothic fibulae, a gold opus interrasile fibula of Constantinopolitan manufacture denoting the owner’s high official status, 15 gold rings, some set with gems, and gold coins of the late 5th century down to the time of Emperor Zeno (474–91). There is a notable variety of rings, but all display typically Late Antique characteristics, such as tubular hoops and hollow hoops with embossed floral (acanthus) decoration. Most of the rings are set with gems typical of the period (emerald, garnet, sapphire, and pearl), while other rings have bezels engraved with Gothic names or Latin monograms, a fashion introduced at the end of the 5th century.

One particular variety of ring is of special interest as it suggests ties to Constantinople. The shape is characterized by its ribbed, ‘calyx’-shaped bezel set with a gem and joined to either a tubular or octagonal hoop. Two examples were present in the Reggio Emilia hoard, one with an unengraved nicolo, the other with a garnet. A number of similar rings are known, including one example set with a much older engraved gem probably of 1st century bc date (Pls 1a–b), another in a hoard of Byzantine jewellery from Istria, Romania, set with a contemporary engraved garnet, and a third discovered in Georgia, also with an engraved garnet. Other examples without recorded provenance are known as well. An origin for the workshop in Constantinople is suggested by the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea provenance of a number of rings, as well as the frequent use of contemporary engraved garnets cut in what I have defined as a prolific ‘garnet workshop’ in late-5th century Constantinople. Around 70 examples of garnets from the workshop have now been recorded, all of distinctive shape, style, and iconography.

Engraved garnets from this workshop are also found set in a group of finely embossed rings, most of which have been discovered in Italy. One example was present in the Reggio Emilia hoard; its hoop is embossed with a floral pattern, and the garnet is engraved with a dolphin. Another hoard of jewellery and silver, said to have been discovered at or in the vicinity of Desana (Vercelli), contained nine gold rings, similar to the variety found in the Reggio Emilia hoard, including one of the embossed type set with a garnet engraved with a hare. A third embossed ring, set with an unengraved garnet, was found in a Gothic grave at Torriano, which also contained a pair of fibulae of Gothic type and a belt buckle. The finest
Plate 2a-c Gold ring set with an engraved garnet, Byzantine, late 5th century. London, British Museum (PE 72,6-4,313)

Plate 3a-c Gold ring set with an engraved garnet portrait of Theodosius II (401–50). Private collection

Plate 4a-b Gold ring set with an engraved garnet, Byzantine, 5th century. Vidin (Bulgaria), Historical Museum

Plate 5a-b Gold ring with niello inlay, Byzantine, late 5th century. Formerly Christie’s, New York, Antiquities, 18 December 1998, lot 160
example of the embossed group, a ring in the British Museum, may also have been discovered in Italy (although no find site is recorded, it was purchased from the Roman dealer Alessandro Castellani) (Pl. 2). The engraved garnet shows an unusual image of a seated figure, his hands raised in prayer, likely depicting the emperor flanked by crosses. The hoop is finely embossed with floral motifs, tendrils, and birds. Although most of these rings have been found in Italy, the garnets are certainly from Constantinopolitan workshops, and the rings, too, were most likely produced there. The date for the group must be in the late 5th century in view of the coins in the Reggio Emilia hoard and the style of the gems. The rings, like the fine opus interrasile gold fibulae, were likely gifts bestowed as signs of official status and demonstrate direct communication between the Byzantine court and Gothic officials in Italy.

Engraved garnets from the same workshop in Constantinople are found in some other rings of similar date and related style and technique. They have different forms of ‘calyx’ bezel, often of high, stepped form. The finest and earliest datable example is the very large, hollow gold ring with ‘calyx’ bezel, often of high, stepped form. The finest and related style and technique. They have different forms of Constantinople are found in some other rings of similar date officials in Italy.

Also around this date (the mid- to late 5th century), ring bezels began to be engraved with personal names and monograms, a fashion that became increasingly popular. Rings bearing Latin monograms and both Roman and Gothic names were present in the Reggio Emilia and Desana hoards and have been found elsewhere in Italy as well. One ring from Reggio Emilia is inscribed with the names of a Gothic couple, Stafara and Ettila. A ring in the Desana hoard records the names Stefanus and Valatruda, perhaps a mixed marriage between a Roman and a Gothic woman. Similarly, the grave of a Gothic, perhaps Gepidic, aristocrat discovered at Apahida in Romania contained spectacular gold and garnet jewellery, buckles, and fibulae, including an opus interrasile example from Constantinople, together with three rings. One ring is inscribed in Latin with the Gothic name Omharus, very likely the owner of the treasure. A second ring bears an engraved monogram that has been read as also representing the name Omharus. The letter forms are, however, Greek, and the identical monogram is used elsewhere for the common name Marias (the genitive form of Maria). This ring was an import from Constantinople, and although the commonly found, ‘off-the-shelf’ monogram could have been selected to denote Omharus, perhaps it is more likely that the ring belonged to the Gothic official’s wife (a Greek?), named Maria. In any event, the fashion for rings with monograms, which had reached Gothic Italy by the late 5th century, certainly originated in Constantinople. Rings with Greek monograms of block type were widely used, and the style continued well into the 6th century, eventually to be replaced by cruciform monograms around 550.

Several other distinctive varieties of rings originated in Constantinople in the late 5th century and served as prototypes for Western copies. The Byzantine origin of one such group has become clear recently thanks to the appearance of several previously unpublished examples. The rings have broad hoops, usually curved slightly inward, with flattened, triangular shoulders decorated with niello inlay and sometimes monograms. The bezels are stepped, with the top either engraved or set with a stone. The finest extant example has a partridge engraved on the bezel, niello-inlaid floral motifs and spirals on the shoulders, inlaid patterns of steps and waves on the sides of the bezel and hoop, and two engraved names EYTYXHOY and MAPIAC, ‘(of) Eutychios (and) Maria’ (Pl. 5). A second example, seemingly by the same goldsmith, has similar niello decoration on the shoulders and around the bezel but not on the hoop, and there are no names; the bezel is set with a cabochon garnet (Pl. 6). A third specimen is much smaller and lighter, with a cruder pattern of palmettes inlaid with niello on the shoulders; engraved on the top of the bezel is the Greek monogram for Marias, ‘(of) Maria’ (Pl. 7). An example in silver with gilded top, in the Schmidt collection in Munich, is engraved with two monograms on the shoulders (Pl. 8). All these are certainly eastern, likely from Constantinople.
The bezel is set with an emerald and two garnets. The Latin inscription around the bezel reads, micael mecv vivas in deo, ‘Michael, live with me in God’. The fine floral decoration on the shoulders finds a close parallel on the remarkable gold reliquary cross discovered in 1863 in the church of San Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome and now in the Vatican Museums collection, which in addition bears block monograms and Latin inscriptions.

Both ring and cross must come from the same mid-6th-century workshop, probably in Rome.

During the 6th century, a number of new varieties of rings were introduced by workshops in Constantinople, and some of these proved influential on tastes in the west. The most popular type of Byzantine ring had a tubular or octagonal hoop joined to a separately worked flat bezel (round, square, cruciform, or floral-shaped), which was engraved with a...
monogram, religious invocation, or iconographic device (such as Christ, the Virgin, a saint, or an eagle with wings spread). Somewhat surprisingly, rings of this type had little influence in the West. Other Byzantine rings were more elaborate, notably those with tall, conical, or calyx-shaped bezels ringed with pearls and set with rock crystal, garnet, emerald, sapphire or pearl, with broad hoops, sometimes embossed or executed in openwork. All these varieties of rings have been found together in hoards, demonstrating their contemporaneity. They may well derive from the same goldsmiths’ ateliers that produced other types of jewellery, such as earrings, necklaces, small crosses and various forms of pendants.

Two types of rings of relatively simple construction appear to have originated in Constantinople and achieved great popularity in the Gothic West in more elaborate versions. The Byzantine prototypes of both varieties were included in an interesting hoard of silver jewelry, including coins, belt buckles and tabs, a spoon, an amuletic silver armband, fragments of pendants, and at least eight rings, all datable to the mid-6th century, now in Toronto. The shape of one of the rings can be described as ‘architectural.’ The tubular hoop is attached to a bezel composed of a square platform and four pieces of filigree wire bent into semi-circles terminating in spirals, which support a hemispherical, dome-like element; additional pellets sometimes ornament the joins and the top of the dome (Pl. 12). In addition to the silver example in Toronto, specimens in gold are in the Benaki Museum and in the Stathatos Collection in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, the latter said to be from the island of Chios.

The architectural shape reached the West, but there became far more elaborate in decoration. An example found in the church of Madonna dell’ Orto in Rome has a heavy openwork hoop decorated with beaded wire; the filigree ‘columns’ on the bezel support a pyramidal ‘roof’ ornamented with granulation. Merovingian examples, which survive in some quantity, tend to be even more complex, adding filigree wire and granulation to band hoops and pyramidal tops, some set with garnets or other gems (Pl. 13). Examples reached Spain as well. Heavier versions, with squat ‘columns’ and bezels either engraved or set with gems, are typically found in Alamannic and Germanic sites in Germany and Eastern Europe, although at least one was discovered in Gaul.

The second variety of ring is not well attested in Byzantine finds, but three examples in silver were present in the Toronto hoard. Another example in gold, not from the hoard but certainly of Byzantine manufacture judging from its style, is in the same collection (Pl. 14). These rings have band hoops, curved inward, and are distinctive for their bezel decorated with two raised, diamond-shaped elements placed side-by-side and outlined in beaded wire filigree, with some additional filigree on the shoulders. This variety, too, reached the West, where typically they had broad bands and were decorated with elaborate filigree and granulation. They are well attested, both in gold and silver, at Lombardic sites, most notably the 6th–7th-century burials at Castel Trosino, near Rome (Pl. 15). A few Merovingian examples, very similar to those from Rome, have been found in Gaul.

A final group of elaborately constructed rings with complex bezels set with precious stones is poorly documented, but these rings, too, appear to have originated in Byzantium and found favour in the Gothic west. Without further provenance information, however, it is difficult to form a clear picture of their development. One type is distinguished by its unusual double-bezel taking the form of a large central setting (oval, rectangular, or diamond-shaped) with an additional element, often a small cone outlined in filigree, attached to the side of the ring. Both elements are set with gems or pearls. Rings with double-bezels of this type may date as early as the 3rd century, but a number of examples are clearly of 6th or early 7th century date. A very fine gold example set with an emerald and a garnet appears to be Byzantine, as does another with a band hoop and ‘calyx’ bezel set with a garnet and a pearl. A remarkable variant in the Stathatos collection in Athens has a rectangular central element set with a large garnet and decorated with a border of granulated pyramids, while a small bezel on the side has a hinged gold foil cross that served as a cover for the compartment (perhaps for a relic?). A very similar example is in a private collection in Munich. Simpler versions, which have appeared on the market in recent years without recorded provenance, also may be Byzantine. Several others of slightly more ornate form have been discovered in Gaul and are likely of Merovingian origin.

A related type of ring adds an ‘architectural’ feature of four ‘columns’ supporting a rectangular bezel set with a gem. One example decorated with filigree and set with a large garnet is thought to be from Italy (Pls 16a–b). A ring in the Hashimoto collection combines this variety of ‘architectural’ ring with the double-bezel group by adding a small second bezel of conical shape to the side of the ring, along with filigree wire decoration (Pl. 17). Another example in a private collection is similar, but it is set with a rock crystal engraved with a cross (the engraved side set face down) and a garnet in the small, conical side bezel.
(Pls 18a–b). The engraved rock crystal very likely is a product of a late 6th- or early 7th-century workshop perhaps located in Antioch; other rock crystals of this type were set in pendants, although no other recorded specimen is in a ring. Like other rings of 6th–7th century date, these elaborately constructed double-bezel and architectural rings, although difficult to categorise with the little information available, appear also to have originated in Byzantium before finding their way West.

Notes
1 For the typology of rings dating from the imperial period, see the useful surveys in: F.H. Marshall, Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan and Roman, in the Departments of Antiquities British Museum, London, 1907, xiv–xliv; F. Henkel, Die römischen Fingerringe der Rheinlande, Berlin, 1913.
2 See, for example, M.C. Ross, Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, vol. 2, Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period, Washington DC, 1965; G. Vikan, ‘Early Christian and Byzantine Rings in the Zucker Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, vol. 2, 1996, 235–43; and for objects presented as imperial largess, see R. Hadjadj, Bagues mérovingiennes. Gaule du Nord, Paris, 2007, 290, no. 359, records several specimens from Gaul, but, like the examples from Italy, these are likely Byzantine imports.
3 Spier (n. 3), 87–92.
4 Degani (n. 5), 63, no. 15, and the commentary on the Gothic names on this and related rings, 79–110 (C.A. Mastrelli); for similar rings with Gothic names, see also: O.M. Dalton, Franks Bequest. Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later, London, 1912, 3, no. 11 (Blithia and monogram) and 23, no. 146 (Gundehildis); Hadjadj (n. 11), 343, no. 470.
5 Bierbrauer (n. 14), 318–20, pls 42–3; Spier (n. 3), 90, n. 8.
6 Spier (n. 3), 89 and 92, no. 522.
7 Ibid., 25–6, no. 76.
8 D. Giorgetti, ‘Tresor de parures d’or et d’objets d’argent’, Archeologia (Sofia) 3 (1988), 32, no. 4, fig. 6; Spier (n. 3), 89, no. 312.
9 Degani (n. 5), 63, no. 15, and the commentary on the Gothic names on this and related rings, 79–110 (C.A. Mastrelli); for similar rings with Gothic names, see also: O.M. Dalton, Franks Bequest. Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later, London, 1912, 3, no. 11 (Blithia and monogram) and 23, no. 146 (Gundehildis); Hadjadj (n. 11), 343, no. 470.
10 Bierbrauer (n. 14), 270, pl. 12, 7.
12 J. Werner, ‘Namensring und Siegelring aus dem gepidischen Grabfund von Apahida, Siebenbürgen’, Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte 9 (1967–68), 120–3, who recognized that the letter forms are Greek but believed the monogram should be resolved as Omharus, which is conceivable.
13 See the Byzantine ring, Pl. 7 above, and the garnet, Spier (n. 3), 90, no. 538.
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The group, but a number of additional examples have since come to light.

Christie’s, New York, Antiquities, 18 December 1998, lot 16. There are superb modern forgeries of this ring in both gold and silver.

Spier (n. 25), 329, fig. 4; collection C. S., Munich.

Dalton (n. 19), 28, no. 1764; for another gold ring of similar shape, said to be from S. Angelo dei Lombardi in Campania, see Marshall (n. 1), 138, no. 846.

Private collection, unpublished; see also, Wm. Reinhart, ‘Los anillos Hispano-Visigodos’, Archivo español de arqueología 20 (1947), 177, fig. 3, nos 65 and 69.

Spier (n. 3), 90 and 101, no. 579.

The earliest datable cruciform monograms are those of the Emperor Justin I (518–27), which appear on small bronze coins struck at Antioch, for which see M. Phillips and S. Tyler-Smith, ‘A sixth-century hoard of nummi and five-nummi pieces’, Numismatic Chronicle (1998), 318 and 322.

M. Deloche, Anneaux zigzagulaires, Paris, 1900, 306–7, no. CCLVI; Spier (n. 25), 330, fig. 6.


See, for example, the hoard of jewellery said to be from Syria and now in Washington, which includes six rings of different shapes; Ross (n. 2), 135–9, no. 179A-S.

Royal Ontario museum, inv. no. 986.101.102.

B. Segall, Katalog der Goldschmiede-arbeiten: Museum Benaki, Athen, Athens, 1938, 162, no. 356, pl. 50; E. Coche de la Ferté, Collection Hélène Stathatos: les objets byzantins et post-byzantins, Limoges, 1957, 15–17, pl. 1, 3; another silver example, said to have been found in Lebanon with other rings, is in Munich: L. Wamser and G. Zahlena (eds), Rom und Byzanz. Archäologische Kostbarkeiten aus Bayern, Munich, 1998, 217–8, no. 318; for a gold example with a cameo set in the bezel: Spier (n. 3), no. 751; and another set with an emerald: D. Scarisbrick, Historic Rings. Four Thousand Years of Craftsmanship, Tokyo, New York and London, 2004, 43–4, no. 104 (Hashimoto collection, Tokyo).

F. Gaultier and C. Metzger (eds), Trésors antiques. Bijoux de la collection Campana, Milan, 2005, 148, no. III.9; see also an example said to be from Milan: Dalton (n. 19), 27, no. 174.


A ring very similar to Merovingian examples was found at Torredonjimeno: Reinhart (n. 29), 169, fig. 1, 48; a more unusual ring set with a pearl, said to be from Alcudia (Elsie) and allegedly found with other rings, jewellery, and 4th-century coins, appears to date much later than the 4th century: see, H. Schlunk and T. Hauschild, Hispania Antique, Mainz, 1978, 157, pls 48b and 49b (private collection of A. Ramos Folqués).


Hadjadji (n. 11), nos 87 and 97, both silver, and an unpublished gold example.

Chadour (n. 40), 124, no. 426, set with emeralds.


Chadour (n. 40), 144, no. 484.

A. K. Orlando, Collection Hélène Stathatos: objets antiques et byzantins, Strasbourg, 1963, 289, no. 230bis, pl. 44; L. Körzcsche-Breitenberg, ‘Zum Ring des Gregor von Nyssa’, in E. Dassmann and K. Thraede (eds), Tesserae. Festschrift für Josef Engemann, Münster, 1991, 291–8, pl. 38. In the late 4th century, St Macrina, the sister of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, was said to have worn an iron ring which contained a piece of the True Cross (Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae), but no ring that served as a reliquary appears to survive.

Hadjadji (n. 11), 346–7, no. 474, Content collection, formerly Christie’s, New York, Ancient Jewellery, 7 December 2006, lot 309, set with an amethyst and a pearl; a very similar example set with a garnet appeared the following year: Christie’s, New York, Ancient Jewellery, 6 December 2007, lot 468; an example in the British Museum, Marshall (n. 1), 133, no. 415, set with a plasma and a partially drilled sapphire, does not have a recorded provenance.

Hadjadji (n. 11), 83 and 346–7, nos 173, 339, 403, 426 and 474, who discusses the group and notes further examples from Eastern Europe; see also the example set with a sapphire in the Victoria & Albert Museum, which is said to be Merovingian: Oman (n. 40), 65, no. 239.

Hindman (n. 38), 66–9 and 216–17, no. 9, as Lombardic, 7th century, although it may be earlier.

Scarisbrick (n. 36), 19, no. 103, formerly in the Adolphe Stoclet collection; the stones are missing.

Spier (n. 3), 115–26, nos 696–7 (crosses).