

Notes

Early Leicestershire Castles: Archaeology and Landscape History

Oliver Creighton writes:

I am grateful for information received from Dr. P. J. Foss concerning the identification of the supposed castle earthwork at Shackerstone, made in my article 'Early Leicestershire Castles: Archaeology and Landscape History' (*TLAHS*, 71, p.27). Cartographic evidence, including a map of Shackerstone of 1785, and other plans associated with the construction of the Ashby canal, make it likely that the earthworks are indeed those of a motte and bailey, rather than a post-medieval garden feature.

A Roman Signet Ring from Hinckley, Leicestershire

Philip Wise

A Roman silver signet ring was found with a metal detector in 1994/5 on farmland near Hinckley, Leicestershire and was recently submitted by the finder for examination at the Warwickshire Museum. The find was made close to the Tweed River, a tributary of the Anker, within the parish of Peckleton. Although the line of the Roman road from Mancetter, Warwickshire to Leicester runs less than a mile to the north, there is little known about the Roman occupation of this part of Leicestershire.¹ The ring remains in private ownership.

The Hinckley ring has an internal diameter of 14mm x 17mm and a weight of 6.270g. The solid hoop displays minor surface scratches and areas of corrosion. It has a D-shaped cross-section and displays the incipient formation of shoulders before expanding to form a bezel. This is set with an oval intaglio, 10mm by 8mm in size. This has a dark blue colour, an abraded surface and has been rather roughly cut. It has been identified as 'nicolo glass', here used to imitate the gemstone blue onyx (nicolo). It shows Mars, nude except for a plumed helmet, standing with his body to the front and his head in profile to the left. In his left hand he holds a reversed spear and with his right he supports a shield (illus.).

The hoop of the ring seems to be a slender form of Henig's Type 5 and the setting is flat with a bevelled edge corresponding to Henig's F2 or F4². Type 5 rings first appear in the mid second century and remained popular into the early third century. During this period, 'nicolo glass' became much commoner as a setting for rings even of silver³. The Hinckley ring is probably of late second century date.

Comparable intaglios are known from Roman Britain and elsewhere in Europe. The closest parallels are four 'nicolo glass' intaglios of 'Mars Ultor' from French sites, dating to the second or third century. The sites in question are at Lalouquette, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Alésia, Côte d'Or, Angerville, Essonne and Le Héraple, near Cocheren, Moselle⁴. A very similar 'nicolo' intaglio is in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge although in this case a 'parazonium' or short sword, is added to the god's weapons.⁵

¹ Information from the Leicestershire Sites and Monuments record.

² M. Henig *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*, fig. 1, p.35, BAR 8, Oxford (second edition), 1978.

³ Henig 1978, as n.2, pp.37-8.

⁴ H. Guirard *Intailles et Camées de l'Époque Romaine en Gaule*, pp.98-99, nos. 106, 116-8, 48^e Supplément à GALLIA, Paris 1988.

⁵ M. Henig *Classical Gems – Ancient and Modern Intaglios and Cameos in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*, p.136, no. 269. Cambridge: University Press, 1994.



Roman Signet Ring from Hinckley, Leicestershire (3:1).

The intaglio from Wijk bij Duurstede, in the Netherlands, is clearly of the same general type, although here the god wears both helmet and cuirass and the gemstone is red jasper⁶. There are two gemstones from Britain with a similar design to the Leicestershire find. The first is an antiquarian find from Dorchester, Dorset known only from a wax impression in which the god is nude apart from a plumed helmet and military boots and has a spear, shield and 'parazonium'. It is recorded that the intaglio was of cornelian set in a bronze ring. The second from Richborough, Kent is likewise an early find, now lost. Here a trophy is added to the standard design and the gemstone is said to be red cornelian. There are a number of Mars intaglios from Britain in 'nicolo glass', but all show the god wearing tunic and cuirass rather than nude. These are from Hassocks, Sussex, Dorchester, Dorset, South Shields, Co. Durham and Chesterholm, Northumberland.⁷ In Britain, the combination of nude figure and 'nicolo glass' does not appear to have been previously recorded.

Mars is popularly associated with war as a result of his identification with the Greek god Ares. However, in early mythology Mars is concerned with the protection of agriculture and that is probably the symbolism that is intended here. There is evidence to suggest that in Britain a Celtic Mars was worshipped as an agricultural and healing god.⁸ It is surely significant that Mars was particularly venerated in the Cotswolds, as is shown by his presence on a number of altars. Thus for example the god appears on three altars from King's Stanley, Gloucestershire and on each he is represented with a spear in his right hand and a shield in his left.⁹ The similarity with Mars' depiction on the Hinckley ring is remarkable. Perhaps this Leicestershire find should be viewed as a northern outlier of the cult of Mars in the Cotswold hills, although we may note, in addition, a Gritstone relief of a warrior god from Leicester, though this might possibly be a Dioscurus.¹⁰

⁶ M. Maaskant-Kleibrink *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems in the Royal Coin Cabinet, The Hague (now Leiden)*, p.270, no. 738, The Hague: Government Publishing Office, 1978.

⁷ Henig 1978, as n.2, p.196, nos 83-86, p.290, no. App.33.

⁸ M. Green *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 98-9, Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986 and M. Henig *Religion in Roman Britain* pp. 50-55, London, 1984.

⁹ M. Henig *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region*, pp. 18-19, nos 48-50, *Corpus Signorum Imperi Romani*, Vol. 1, fasc. 7. Oxford: University Press 1993.

¹⁰ J. Huskinson *Roman Sculpture from Eastern England*, p.11, no. 21, *Corpus Signorum Imperi Romani*, vol. 1, fasc. 8, Oxford: University Press.