

A SIGNET RING FROM THE APOLLONIA-ARSUF EXCAVATIONS¹

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Apollonia-Arsuf, located on a limestone ridge above the beach of Herzliya, overlooking the natural anchorage west of Nof-Yam, has been excavated since 1977 by the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University under the direction of Prof. Israel Roll. A number of strata have been uncovered, dating from the Persian Period to the Crusader Period (see Roll and Ayalon 1989:23–117; Roll 1991).

During the 8th season of excavation in 1991 a signet ring of interest was found in Locus 1500, at a depth of 1 m. below the surface (Basket 13003; Inventory No. I/6444 1992–1498). The archaeological context was unclear and dating is problematic. Most of the ceramic finds date to the Byzantine Period, but include Late Roman and Early Arabic material as well.

The Ring

The ring is poorly preserved, and apart from the steatite stone and the gold filigree (Fig. 1:a), most of the material from which the ring was fashioned has decomposed (probably silver or some other precious metal, Fig. 1:b). The ring was apparently octagonal, with the mounting of the ring forming an extended eighth side.² The internal diameter is 2 cm. with a thickness of 2 mm. — designed for a diminutive hand. The mounting of the ring comprises a stone set within a circlet of precious metal (diameter 1.7 cm., thickness 0.5 cm.), with revolving pivots fixed on opposite sides allowing exposure of both faces of the stone. The stone is a flat circle of black steatite, covered on one side by a lattice of fine gold filigree, 1.2 cm. in diameter. The stone is 3.5 mm. thick and is incised on both sides with a series of straight lines crossing each other at right angles, forming an abstract geometric design. No recognizable sign, script or letter could be discerned³ (Fig. 1:c).

The filigree lattice is composed of gold wire with a square cross-section, formed into six adjoining symmetrical arabesques arranged around a small central circle (Fig. 1:a).

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2 The octagonal shape is known from "Samaritan Rings", see e.g. Reich 1989; Zertal 1977.

3 This is unlike the Samaritan Rings, whose inscriptions have proven indecipherable, although the letters can be recognized.

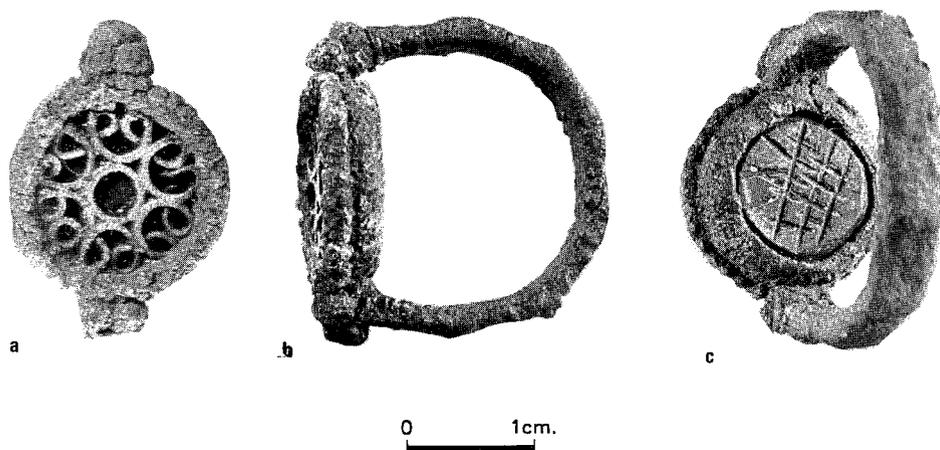


Fig. 1

Parallels

The motif of arabesques arranged around a central circle can be found in a variety of jewellery types — rings, necklaces, earrings, etc. It also appears on clay utensils of the Late Roman C ware, dating to the end of the Roman Period (Hayes 1972:357; Fig. 74:33i). Examples include bowls from Beth-yerah, which are imports from North Africa, known as “African Red-slip Ware”.

Johns and Potter (1973:21–23) associate gold filigree design with the “Club of Hercules” style, comprising a large range of Roman jewellery generally found in contexts dating to the end of the 4th century C.E., though in England a small number have been found in 2nd century C.E. contexts.

A ring similar to our example was found in Grave IV on the western slopes of Beth-yerah (Delougaz 1960: 28–29; Fig. 8; Pl. 45; Israel Museum No. 30445). It is made of silver with a filigree bezel set within a circlet. The filigree is constructed of four arabesques soldered together in a fashion similar to the ring from Apollonia, but without the central element. The ring from Beth-yerah has a simple circlet which can be reversed like that from Apollonia. The Beth-yerah ring is dated to the Byzantine Period, along with the rest of the finds at the burial site (*ibid.*).

Another ring with a similar mounting was found in a treasure trove — the Thetford Treasure — from a Roman farming site in England (Johns and Potter 1973:60–61, 93; Fig. 16:21), and is dated to the 5th century C.E.⁴ A gold filigree lattice which resembles the one from Apollonia is set inside a flat plate of green glass, which is in turn set into a circlet (*ibid.*: No. 21, p. 18). However, apart from the

4 It should be noted that the end of the Roman Period in England was later than in Israel.

appearance of the filigree lattice, the Thetford ring is quite different in shape and is made of 96% gold.

On a necklace found in a trove of jewellery from the East Tower at Caesarea, five adjoining arabesques of worked gold are found on either side of the clasp (Dell'Amore 1965:241–242; Fig. 291,e–299). The necklace is dated to the 6th–7th centuries C.E. by the excavators.

Two Fatimid earrings recovered in the excavations at Jerusalem and dated to the 7th–8th centuries C.E. (Ben-Dov 1982:323–341; Fig. on p. 333), each comprise two circles containing gold tracery. The tracery varies in the number of arabesques used, and a central circle element was used in one of the earrings, but not in the other. The work in the earrings is of lesser quality than that of the ring found at Apollonia, and may be a later imitation of the style of the ring.

A well-known ring type of the Byzantine period consists of a strip of bronze folded into an octagonal shape, and features inscriptions and designs on the outer surfaces (Vikan 1984:69, 83–85). Vikan (1991:1796) defines two types of rings when he notes the Roman predilection for “gemstone intaglios with figural devices”, as opposed to “metal bezels with incised inscription” associated with the Byzantine Period. However, the ring from Apollonia is quite different from both these types, closer perhaps to the Roman style.

Summary

The geometric designs inscribed on both sides of the black steatite stone are probably the seal of the wearer of the ring. The gold filigree is set into the mounting and covers one side of the stone, preventing use of that side of the seal. A number of possible reasons for this are: the continued use of the ring by a woman after marriage; inheritance of the ring; a mistake made by the craftsman when inscribing the stone. Any of these situations would have required a new inscription on the second side of the stone, and the covering of the earlier inscription.

The ring from Apollonia comprises design motifs used in jewellery and clay utensils found in contexts of the Late Roman Period (end of 4th-early 5th century C.E.), Byzantine Period and later. Although rings of the same design are unknown, comparable examples of the ring's most prominent feature — the gold filigree, can be found in other rings and jewellery pieces.

It should be emphasized that the dating of precious items according to the archaeological context in which they were found can be misleading. The inherent value of jewellery generally results in its continued use over decades, even centuries, thus the decorative style may predate the context of the final use of an item. In light of the above, it seems that the signet ring from Apollonia dates to the Late Roman Period, 4th–5th centuries C.E.

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