

# Ancient Rings: Style, Meaning, and History

Jeffrey Spier

Perhaps no other man-made object contains such depth of meaning as the finger ring. The ring is intimately connected to the individual wearer yet conveys broad messages about the society in which he lives. Rings are signs of identity, serving as marks of social status, statements of political allegiance, or guarantees in business transactions. They may also have a more personal significance, as bonds of marriage or religious devotion. Although rings served these many symbolic functions, they were above all beautiful and luxurious objects, worn to delight the viewer. A sense of purpose combined with superb craftsmanship characterize the many rings collected here, which are drawn from the various cultures of the ancient Mediterranean and their borders, dating from the late Bronze Age of the second millennium BC to the flourishing of the Roman Empire.

Rings were an important part of Egyptian court culture, where examples bearing the names of the pharaoh were presented to courtiers and officials as marks of status. One such ring of exceptional quality, **cat. 2**, is carved entirely from cornelian and incised with the names of the pharaoh Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC). Another, in silver (**cat. 3**), bears the name of Amenhotep II (1427–1401 BC). Other rings of different shape, in both gold and silver, were engraved in hieroglyphs with the personal names and titles of priests and court officials (**cat. 4**). In addition to the inscriptions, the shapes and materials of the rings denoted the official status of the wearer.

In the Near East, engraved stone seals served an important administrative function, and rings, too, were used to mark clay tablets on which were written official letters and records. In the Hittite Empire, which controlled all of Anatolia and northern Syria in the mid-second millennium BC, stamp seals were typically employed, but recent discoveries of archives of clay tablets show that rings, too, were used. The gold ring, **cat. 5**, is a rare surviving example of this type, engraved in a style attested in seal impressions from archives in north Syria, suggesting an origin there rather than in the Hittite heartland.

In the tenth century BC, following the collapse of many of the Bronze Age cultures in the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians rose to prominence as sea traders and colonizers in the West, from Carthage in North Africa to Sicily, Sardinia, and southern Spain. Egyptian influence on Phoenician art was considerable, as can be plainly seen in the rings. Stone scarabs engraved with Egyptianizing motifs were set in swivel rings of Egyptian design (**cat. 10–12**), and cartouche rings with engraved metal bezels were also popular (**cat. 8–9**). The function of these rings in Phoenician society is not well understood, but certainly there was a love for fine craftsmanship, as is evident in the careful construction, the use of filigree and granulation, and the finely carved stones.

Over the course of the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Greece emerged from a dark age to become a cultural and political power in the Mediterranean. Through their relations with Phoenician traders and colonists, they acquired a taste for fine jewelry, especially for the rings set with scarabs carved from precious stone and the gold bezels engraved with sophisticated images. Both types were popular in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, and Greek artists achieved a high level of skill. Their engraved gems and rings display a taste for mythological themes and an interest in complex composition and pose (**cat. 20–23**), which are indeed characteristic of Greek art in general.

A special category of Greek ring was purely decorative and could not have been used for sealing. One distinctive type, **cat. 24**, is richly ornamented with filigree. Another remarkable group of rings has swivel bezels decorated with figures in gold foil set on colored glass and covered with clear glass or rock crystal (**cat. 25**).

Although their artistic achievements were considerable, the Greeks were a small nation, overshadowed by the vast Persian Empire, which arose in the early sixth century BC. The Achaemenid Persians quickly subdued an area reaching from Thrace in the West, all across Asia Minor, the Near East, and Persia, to as far as northern India in the East. Vast amounts of tribute made the Persians wealthy and brought a taste for luxury. Gold and silver jewelry was popular, although rings were not traditionally worn in Persia. It seems, however, that Greek fashion appealed to the Persians, and their engraved rings of the sixth and fifth centuries BC copied the shapes of Greek rings, although typically the images were suited to Persian taste (**cat. 14**).

This particular collection also contains several highly unusual rings made on the borders of the Persian Empire that warrant attention for their high quality and would profit from further study. A gold ring engraved with two standing ibex displays later Persian (Parthian or Sasanian?) stylistic traits (**cat. 15**), but its precise origin is unknown. It may have been on the eastern border, perhaps in Bactria. Similarly, a gold ring set with an engraved garnet (**cat. 16**) is generally of Sasanian style, but the image is not conventional and is hard to localize. Rings from northern India (modern Afghanistan) in the late Hellenistic and Kushan periods (second century BC–third century AD) are very rare and poorly recorded, but some remarkable examples have come to light in recent years, including specimens of unusual shape set with very fine gems of local origin, including rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. The ring set with two diamonds and a green chalcidony (**cat. 17**) is one such piece. The Scythians, nomadic warriors who ranged across Central Asia, are noted for their fine gold work, and **cat. 18**, depicting a stylized lion, is a rare example of a ring in their distinctive style.

Hostility between the Greeks and Persians was considerable, and the Greeks always felt that their cities in Asia Minor were oppressed under Persian rule. Alexander the Great of Macedon (ruled 336–323 BC) achieved the greatest ambition of the Greeks by marching into Persian territory and defeating the Persian Empire with remarkable speed, reaching as far as the Ganges River in India. With Alexander's death, his new empire fractured, but the Greeks remained in the former Persian territories, creating new kingdoms in Egypt, Syria, and as far as Bactria (modern Afghanistan). The riches of the East, previously little seen in Greece, flowed westward, and a new taste for luxurious materials and ostentatious display spread throughout Greece. Gold was widely available, as the abundance of surviving Hellenistic jewelry attests, and rare stones previously little known in Greece, such as garnet, citrine, aquamarine, emerald, sapphire, and diamond, were imported and displayed in superb settings.

The Ptolemaic kings of Egypt were especially noted for their love of gold and gems, which were crafted into fine works of art to glorify the royal family. The most extraordinary of such works do not survive, such as the over life-size statue of Queen Arsinoe, wife of Ptolemy II, carved from peridot, which is mentioned by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 37.107–108). Some remarkable objects, however, are known, including the Tazza Farnese, a bowl carved in cameo technique from a large block of agate (now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples) and a number of engraved gems in garnet, amethyst, and other rare materials signed by artists who worked for the royal court. Gems of this sort were celebrated in a series of poems by Posidippos, the court poet of Ptolemy II (ruled 283–246 BC). Ptolemaic rings of outstanding

quality are well represented in the present collection and include two examples of an elaborate construction set with large garnets and citrines (**cat. 28–29**), others set with amethyst (**cat. 27**) and garnet (**cat. 33**) finely engraved with mythological figures, and a ring of unique type set with an engraved garnet surrounded with a patterned border of stone inlay (**cat. 30**). Other new forms of rings created in the Ptolemaic court include examples with busts in relief decorating the bezel (**cat. 26**), others in the shape of entwined snakes inlaid with emerald (**cat. 32**), and some carved from colored glass (**cat. 31**).

The Hellenistic Greek kingdoms declined relatively quickly, losing most of their territory in Mesopotamia, Persia, and Bactria to the Parthians and other local rulers by the end of the third century BC. At the same time, the Roman Republic was extending its influence at the expense of the Greeks, first in Italy and then in Greece and Asia Minor. Over the course of the second century BC, Rome quickly conquered most of what remained of the Hellenistic kingdoms, with only Ptolemaic Egypt remaining independent until the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra by Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.

Although the Etruscans had learned to make jewelry and rings of great sophistication (such as **cat. 35**) from the Phoenicians and Greeks, the austere society of neighboring Rome disdained luxury and imposed severe rules for the display of wealth. According to the social history narrated by Pliny (*Natural History* 33.8–31), only iron rings were allowed at first, in keeping with Roman society's rejection of individual wealth. Gold rings were worn by official representatives on foreign mission and then relinquished to the state on their return. Over time, as the wealth of conquered Greece came to Rome, the social rules were relaxed (much to the disgust of the moralizing Pliny), and the right to wear gold rings was granted first to the upper classes and then to most other citizens. With the collapse of the Roman Republic and the establishment of the new empire under Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), the wearing of rings took on a new meaning, one borrowed from the Hellenistic kings. Greek goldsmiths and gem engravers came to Rome seeking new patrons, and Augustus himself promoted the imperial family and his heirs by distributing rings and cameos engraved with portraits and carefully constructed symbols (see **cat. 36**, with the bull as a personal symbol, and **cat. 39**, with the cameo portrait of Agrippina). The distribution of rings bearing the likeness of the emperor continued throughout the imperial period, a superb example in this collection being the large gold ring set with a gem engraved with the portrait of Septimius Severus (AD 193–211) (**cat. 50**).

The conspicuous display of wealth in the Roman Empire is apparent from the great amount of jewelry and numerous rings discovered in all parts of the empire, from Britain to Pompeii to Syria. The variety of designs for rings was considerable, and the present collection is notable for containing some of the more unusual types. Rings set with engraved gems were especially popular, and a number of fine examples in the collection display the diversity of images used (**cat. 36–38, 40–41, 51–52, and 59**). Other rings continued the Greek tradition of engraving the images on the bezel (**cat. 49, 53, and 54**).

In addition to rings with engraved bezels and rings set with engraved gems, there are more unconventional varieties notable for their elaborate gold work, their use of rare gems, or for being carved from unusual materials. Such rings are particularly well represented in the present collection. Rings set with unengraved, rare stones first appeared in Hellenistic times and remained fashionable with wealthy clients, perhaps connoisseurs of precious stones, in the Roman Imperial period. Two notable examples are **cat. 42**, set with a small diamond in natural crystal form, and **cat. 43**, with a large cabochon aquamarine. Both gems are set in openwork mounts that allow the

greatest degree of visibility. Clearly, the gems were highly valued, and the rings were specially designed to display them in the most attractive way possible. Other rings did not set the bezels with gems but instead decorated them with gold figures in relief, continuing a Hellenistic tradition (**cat. 44, 47, and 48**). A unique variety in the collection has a three-sided swivel bezel engraved with three female names, perhaps the daughters of the owner (**cat. 55**). Some unusual decorative rings were carved from non-metal materials. Amber, imported from the Baltic, had long been highly valued in Greece and Italy, and a workshop thought to be located in northern Italy produced ornate rings carved from large pieces of amber decorated with figures in high relief on the bezel or around the hoop (**cat. 45**). Other workshops carved rings entirely from gemstones, typically rock crystal (**cat. 46**).

The fashion for engraved gems declined rapidly during the third century AD, and many goldsmiths chose to set the bezels with unengraved examples or gold coins instead. The rings themselves at this time were often large, with hoops elaborately decorated with carved spirals, shields, wreaths, and openwork patterns (**cat. 56–58**). Many of these rings were likely worn by military officers. Although beyond the scope of this collection, large and often ornately decorated rings remained in fashion for the next few centuries, typically denoting social status even after the empire had converted to Christianity.

This diverse and informative collection presents a picture of how important rings were to the ancient Mediterranean cultures and allows the modern viewer a degree of insight into these societies. The rings are still able to communicate their function as marks of status or of religious devotion. The images they bear allude to a rich tradition of myth. Their superb artistry moves us as it did the original owners.

