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Dating of some Frankish Rings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The most important collection of Merovingian (Frankish) rings in America came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) in 1917 through the generosity of J. Pierpont Morgan. They were said to have come from northern France; about most of them nothing else was known. For some of them their provenance from ancient Frankish territories has since been confirmed by comparisons with similar rings found in Frankish cemeteries. Although several of these – especially those excavated in the last fifteen or twenty years in Germany – have been scientifically excavated, many others have not. Furthermore there is no comprehensive systematic chronology of Frankish rings although the recent chronology of rings from the Merovingian period in Switzerland by R. Moosbrugger-Leu is invaluable because of the close cultural exchanges between the Alemanni and the Franks¹. Thus, in many cases the dating of the MMA Frankish rings remains a problem. The bezels of some Frankish rings are so close in style and technique to some of the disk fibulae that they can probably be ascribed to the same period as the comparable fibula type. Although chronologies for the disk fibulae vary, the traditionally accepted one established by E. Salin will be followed in this paper². In the following chronological sampling of Frankish rings in the MMA collection – never attempted until now – some are dated by analogies of their bezels with Salin's disk fibula types, others are dated by comparisons with recently excavated rings and still others, following various criteria established by some of the scholars who have contributed to the study of Frankish rings³.

One of the most beautiful early rings in the MMA collection is made of gold with a small

¹ I am very indebted to Professor Stephen Foltiny for calling my attention to this reference as well as to several of the recent publications of excavations in Germany. – R. Moosbrugger-Leu, *Die Schweiz zur Merowingerzeit. Die arch. Hinterlassenschaft der Romanen, Burgunder und Alamannen* (1971) 212–216 pl. 54.

² E. Salin, *La civilisation mérovingienne 2. Les sépultures* (1952) 296 f., pl. and pp. 300–305 (hereafter cited as: *Les sépultures*).

³ M. Deloche, *Anneaux et cachets de l'époque mérovingienne*. *Revue Arch.* 14, 1889 (hereafter cited as: *Anneaux*); M. Deloche, *Etude historique et archéologique sur les anneaux sigillaires et autres des premières siècles du Moyen Age* (1900; hereafter cited as *Etude*); A. Bequet, *Les bagues franques et mérovingiennes du Musée de Namur*. *Ann. Soc. Arch. Namur* 20, 1893; E. Salin, *Les tombes gallo-romaines et mérovingiennes de la Basilique de Saint-Denis (fouilles de janvier-février 1957)*. *Mém. de l'Académie* 44, 1958 (hereafter cited as: *Les tombes*); M. C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection 2. Jewelry, Enamels and Art of the Migration Period* (1965) no. 177 (hereafter cited as: *Catalogue*); G. Fingerlin, *Die alamannischen Gräberfelder von Güttingen und Merdingen in Südbaden*. *Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit, Ser. A, Vol. 12* (1971); R. Pirling, *Das römisch-fränkische Gräberfeld von Krefeld-Gellep*. *Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit, Ser. B, Vol. 8* (1974).

low bezel set with red glass (fig. 1)⁴. Glass and glass paste were often used to imitate precious stones in Frankish rings. The hoop expands toward the bezel and is decorated with three rows of beaded wire. On each side of the bezel where it joins the hoop there are



1 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. – Scale ca. 1,5 : 1.

two large gold grains. Large gold grains flanking the bezel are also characteristic of Frankish rings⁵. This particular ring shares features with two other rings placed in the fifth century by A. Bequet. The first, which was found in the tomb of a Frankish warrior at Sualrée, Namur, is gold with a similar low bezel set with red glass und flanked by large gold grains. Of the coins contained in the tomb, none was later than the reign of Emperor Honorius (395–423). This indicates that the warrior probably was buried in the first half of the fifth century⁶. The other ring, which is also gold and has a bezel set with green glass paste, was found in the tomb of a woman at the cemetery of Samson, Namur. Like the hoop of the MMA ring, its hoop is decorated with three rows of beaded wire⁷.

Apparently one of the most prevalent types of early Frankish rings consisted of a large flat circular bezel inlaid in the cloisonné technique with radial sections of red glass or garnet around a central setting of bone, meershaum, glass paste or garnet and mounted on a plain hoop. Rings of this type are very close in style and technique to the earliest cloisonné disk fibulae (fig. 2), which have been placed by Salin in the second half of the fifth century⁸. Archaeological confirmation for this date is provided by the ring of this type found in Basel-Kleinhüningen which can be dated to the middle of the second half

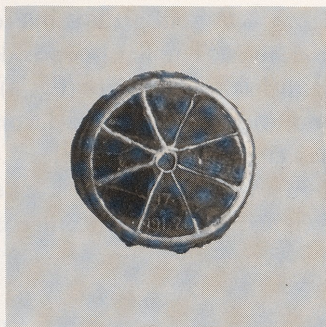
⁴ S. de Ricci, *Catalogue of a Collection of Gallo-Roman Antiquities belonging to J. Pierpont Morgan* (1911) pl. VI and no. 101 (hereafter cited as: Gallo-Roman); MMA Acc. No. 17.191.101.

⁵ Bequet op. cit. (note 3) 210 f.

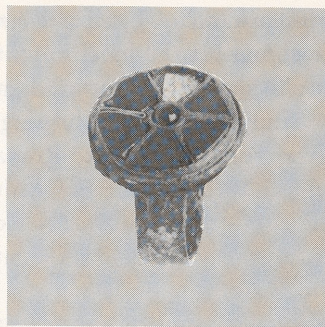
⁶ Bequet op. cit. (note 3) 214, no. III.

⁷ Bequet op. cit. (note 3) 219, no. VIII.

⁸ Salin, *Les sépultures* 296 f., pl. B, fig. 1.



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3



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2 Cloisonné disk fibula, Metropolitan Museum of Art. — Scale 1,5 : 1.

3 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. — Scale 1 : 1.

4 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. — Scale 1 : 1.

of the fifth century by coins found in a pendant suspended from a belt also found in the tomb⁹. Although Moosbrugger-Leu suggested that the ring type anticipated the cloisonné disk fibulae which he places in the sixth century, it seems more likely that the rings and the fibulae were contemporary, both dating to the second half of the fifth century. The MMA has three rings of this type: two made of silvered bronze, one with eight sections and one with six, of red glass around a central garnet cabochon (fig. 3)¹⁰ and the third made of gold with eight sections around a central setting of blue glass paste (fig. 4)¹¹. The Musée des Antiquités Nationales at St. Germain-en-Laye has three comparable examples: two in bronze and red glass from Pas de Calais and a third from the Forêt de Compiègne (Oise) with bone or meerschaum in the center surrounded by red glass¹². Other examples have been cited by M. Deloche¹³.

Another gold ring may also be placed in the second half of the fifth or in the early sixth century on the basis of its similarity in technique to the cloisonné disk and quatrefoil fibulae¹⁴. The ring has a cross-shaped bezel, bordered with twisted wire and set with red

⁹ Moosbrugger-Leu op. cit. (note 1) 215.

¹⁰ S. de Ricci, *Catalogue of a Collection of Merovingian Antiquities* belonging to J. Pierpont Morgan (1910) pl. XVI, no. 228 (hereafter cited as: Merovingian); MMA Acc. No. 17.192.228; de Ricci, *Gallo-Roman*, pl. XIV, no. 275; MMA Acc. No. 17.191.275.

¹¹ de Ricci, *Gallo-Roman*, pl. VI, no. 96; MMA Acc. No. 17.191.96.

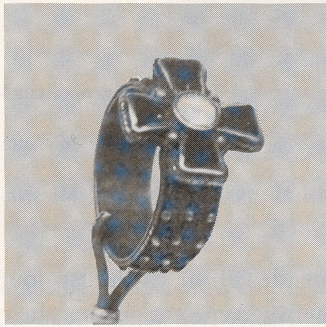
¹² I am indebted to Françoise Valet for making this information available to me and for all of her patient assistance during the two weeks I worked in her museum as an Exchange Curator from the MMA.

¹³ Deloche, *Etude 37*, example found at Pré de la Cuve (near Yverdon) and now in the local museum; p. 122, no. CXI another found in Samson (Province of Namur); p. 185, no. CLXXVI another found at Artres (Canton of Valenciennes).

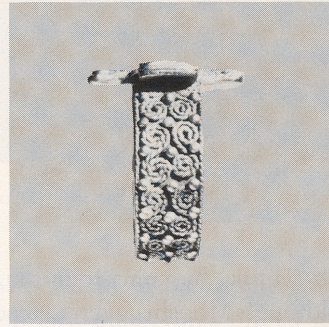
¹⁴ Salin, *Les sépultures 296 f.*, pl. B, figs. 1 and 3.

glass over foil around a white paste circular center (fig. 5)¹⁵. A gold grain is in each of the four inside corners at the juncture of the bezel and the hoop. The flat hoop is decorated all over with 'S' shaped volutes in filigree and large grains in the interstices (fig. 6). R. Pirling, in her study of the beautiful ring from Gellep, notes that this type of decoration on the hoop was common on late Roman rings and has cited several examples¹⁶. On the Gellep ring, and other later Frankish rings with comparable filigree work, the filigree seems to be confined to the area flanking the bezel whereas on the late Roman examples the filigree is more apt to cover the entire hoop. This is yet another argument for an early date for the MMA ring.

Two very similar cruciform bezels set with red glass or garnet may be noted: one on a gold ring of unknown provenance in the British Museum¹⁷ and another on a bronze ring excavated at Vouciennes (Marne) in the Musée des Antiquités Nationales at St. Germain-en-Laye¹⁸. The central stone is missing in the British Museum example and it is



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5-6 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. – Scale ca. 1 : 1.

blue in the St. Germain ring. The British Museum ring has been only generally dated sixth to seventh century and no specific date has been proposed for the ring from Vouciennes. However, the technique of these bezels is so similar to that of the cloisonné disk and quatrefoil fibulae that both rings as well as the MMA example can probably be placed in the second half of the fifth or early sixth century.

The low pyramidal bezel of this ring (fig. 7) consists of bronze overlaid with a sheet of gold secured by five rivets and inlaid with four triangular pieces of red glass suggesting a cross. Silver wire is wound around the bronze hoop¹⁹. A similar ring was excavated at Criel, north east of Dieppe, and is now in the Musée des Antiquités, Rouen²⁰. Another, in the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels, was excavated at Harmignies, Bel-

¹⁵ de Ricci, *Merovingian*, pl. XVI, no. 229, p. 44; MMA Acc. No. 17.192.229.

¹⁶ Pirling *op. cit.* (note 3) 126.

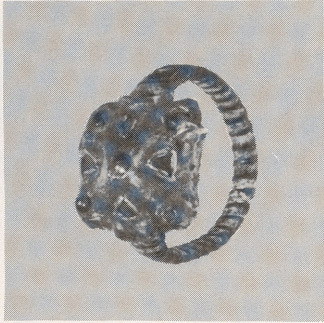
¹⁷ O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings in The British Museum, Franks Bequest (1912)* pl. I, no. 172.

¹⁸ I am again indebted to Françoise Valet for supplying me with information concerning this piece; Inv. No. 77.447 A.

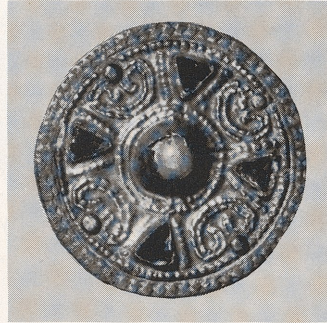
¹⁹ de Ricci, *Merovingian*, pl. XVI no. 226 and p. 43; MMA Acc. No. 17.192.226.

²⁰ I am indebted to Elisabeth Chirol for supplying me with this information and for her assistance and kindness in permitting me to study the excellent collection in Rouen.

gium²¹. Two additional similar bezels – the hoops are missing – can also be cited: one found in Gondorf, near Koblenz, now in the museum in Bonn²², and one from Waben, Pas de Calais, now in the museum at St. Germain-en-Laye²³. It is not possible to date any of these rings on the basis of information from the excavations. However, the type of



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7 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. – Slightly enlarged.

8 Fibula, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. – Scale ca. 1 : 1.

bezel is comparable in technique to a type of disk fibula also made of bronze overlaid with a sheet of gold or silver attached by rivets and inlaid with triangular pieces of red glass paste placed in a cruciform pattern around a central bead (fig. 8). The fibulae have stylized palmettes in repoussé between the arms of the cross. Similar palmettes, executed by laid-on wires are found on the ring from Harmignies. Although Salin did not include this particular type of fibula in his chronology, Ross dated the type ca. 600²⁴. On the basis of the similarity of the bezels of the rings to the fibulae, these rings can probably also be placed in the period ca. 600.

Rings on which architectural elements support the bezel were also popular among the Franks. On some of these the bezel is supported by several arches²⁵. Others – such as the one found at Ciply with a bezel somewhat comparable to those mentioned under MMA ring fig. 7 – have fine arcades supporting the setting²⁶. Still others, like the MMA example, have only colonettes with no arches (fig. 9). This gold ring has a plain octagonal hoop and four colonettes supporting an oval bezel with a Classical green glass paste intaglio which shows a female figure standing before a column to the base of which is tied a kneeling child²⁷. The closest to the MMA ring is one of several of this type from Gondorf, near Koblenz, now in the museum in Bonn²⁸.

A ring with a high bezel supported by architectural elements which was excavated at Rü-

²¹ I am indebted to Lisa Van Haecke for this information and other information on the Harmignies excavation which she intends to publish. I wish to thank her especially for her interest and her help.

²² Inv. No. 35, 169; I am indebted to F. Gelsdorf for his help with the material from Bonn.

²³ I am again indebted to Françoise Valet for her assistance. Inv. No. 4191 bis.

²⁴ M. Chauncey Ross, *Arts of the Migration Period in the Walters Art Gallery* (1961) 68 no. 25; the three examples of this type of fibula in the MMA collection are less well preserved than the Walters example.

²⁵ C. C. Oman, *Catalogue of Rings*, Victoria and Albert Museum (1930) no. 235; G. Faider-Feytmans, *Les collections d'archéologie régionale du Musée de Mariemont* 2,1 (1970) 156 fig. 17; 158.

²⁶ Faider-Feytmans 158 pl. 86.

²⁷ de Ricci, *Gallo-Roman*, pl. VI and p. 18 no. 102; MMA Acc. No. 17.191.102.

²⁸ F. Oelmann, *Bonner Jahrb.* 142, 1937, pl. 56, fig. 1 (ring on the left).

benach, has been placed in the period from 525–600 on the basis of other objects with which it was found²⁹. The Rügenach ring thus provides archaeological evidence for the fact that rings with high bezels of this type existed in the sixth century. However, Salin, in his publication of the rings excavated at St. Denis, noted that high bezels are characteristic of the seventh century³⁰. Even though he is not referring to bezels supported by architectural elements, it seems reasonable to assume that these too, by virtue of their height, continued to be popular in the seventh century. Moreover, in his chronology of the disk fibulae, Salin has noted that fibulae with high settings supporting cabochons appear in the last quarter of the sixth century and continue into the seventh century³¹. Consequently, the MMA ring and the rings from Gondorf can probably be placed in the period from the sixth to seventh century. It should be noted here that settings supported by architectural elements – specifically by fine arcades – were to become prevalent in Ottonian jewelry³².



9 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. – Scale 2,5 : 1.

The circular bezel of a large bronze ring displays a fantastic animal – a dragon or a griffin – twisting around and attempting to seize his tail with his open mouth (fig. 10). A fine beaded border surrounds the bezel which is flanked on either side by three pellets forming a triangle. On the reverse each end of the hoop terminates in two divergent volutes (fig. 11)³³. The motif of a fantastic animal twisting around and attempting to bite his tail in his open mouth appears to have been extremely popular, and, as noted by Stoll, the

²⁹ Ch. Neuffer-Müller and H. Ament, *Das fränkische Gräberfeld von Rügenach, Stadt Koblenz. Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit Ser. B, Vol. 7* (1973) 80 pl. 52 and pl. 9 grave 152.

³⁰ Salin, *Les tombes* 37.

³¹ Salin, *Les sépultures* 296, pl. B, fig. 9.

³² O. von Falke, *Der Mainzer Goldschmuck der Kaiserin Gisela* (1913) 28 fig. 24 star shaped brooches; H. Jantzen, *Ottonische Kunst* (1946) pl. 156 details of settings of imperial cross; F. Rademacher, *Zwei Ottonische Goldfibeln in: Festschr. Oxé* (1938) pl. 23 gold fibula in Nürnberg.

³³ S. de Ricci, *Catalogue of a Collection of Germanic Antiquities belonging to J. Pierpont Morgan* (1910) pl. II and no. 51; MMA Acc. No. 17.193.51.



10



11

10-11 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. - Scale ca. 2 : 1.

prototype for it must have been a lion³⁴. A ring with the same motif was found in the cemetery of Lézéville (Lorraine)³⁵, and another, from the cemetery of Revogne, Belgium, is now in the museum of Namur³⁶. Salin noted that similar motifs are found on certain buckle plates, primarily Burgundian ones, and that an almost identical representation appears on the obverse of an Anglo-Saxon coin of the sixth century in the British Museum³⁷. Seven rings with this motif were found in the region of Trier. All but one are made of bronze and all were excavated from seventh century levels. On some of the rings from the Trier region, the four-footed creatures have birds' heads, a feature which, according to K. Böhner, shows the influence of the Germanic animal style. On others, the animal is more like a winged horse or griffin with more of a snout than a beak that seems to correspond to those on objects from workshops in southern France, where many bronze buckles with animal motifs have been found. Böhner concludes that such rings, like the buckles, must have been made in Burgundian workshops³⁸.

Like the MMA example, several of these rings have three pellets arranged to form a triangle on either side of the bezel. This detail is characteristic of a large number of signet rings and other rings which have been found in Frankish graves. Ross noted that an approximate date for the type can be established since the bezel of one ring set in this fashion and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, consists of a solidus of Constans II (641-668) while another from a woman's grave in Bermersheim, Rheinhessen, consists of a coin of Childebert III (695-711). These coins would seem to date the type in the second half of the seventh century or early eight century³⁹. The volutes on the back of the bezel

³⁴ H. Stoll, *Die Alamannengräber von Hailfingen in Württemberg*. Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit, Ser. A, vol. 4 (1939) 18 f.

³⁵ E. Salin, *Le cimetière barbare de Lézéville* (1922) 60 f.

³⁶ Bequet *op. cit.* (note 3) 224, no. XIII.

³⁷ Salin *op. cit.* (note 35) 60 f.

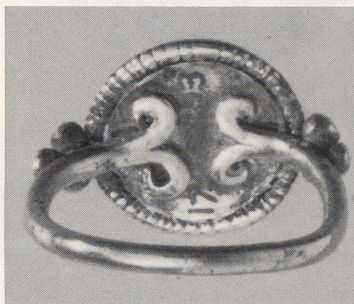
³⁸ K. Böhner, *Die fränkischen Altertümer des Trierer Landes*. Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit, Ser. B, Vol. 1 (1958) 120-122.

³⁹ Ross, *Catalogue*, no. 177; Ross' dating has since been confirmed by Fingerlin *op. cit.* (note 3) 66-69; Neuf-

of the MMA ring are another feature it shares with many Frankish rings (fig. 11)⁴⁰. One of these, excavated at Harmignies, Belgium, is similar in every respect to the MMA ring⁴¹. On both examples it is impossible to distinguish whether the head of the creature has a beak or a snout. Consequently, if one accepts Böhner's classification, it cannot be determined whether the workmanship of these two rings is Frankish or Burgundian. However, all of the rings of this type have been found in Frankish cemeteries; this fact permits us to assume a similar provenance for the MMA ring. The prevalence of this type of ring in seventh century levels in the Trier region, as well as the technical details of volutes and pellets which are associated with seventh century Frankish rings, lead us to a seventh century date for the MMA example.



12



13

12-13 Frankish ring, Metropolitan Museum of Art. - Scale ca. 2 : 1.

Volutes and pellets are also found on an electrum monogram ring in the MMA collection (figs. 12; 13). The flat round bezel has a fine beaded border similar to that on the ring described above. Rings with such details bearing an engraved monogram were especially popular in the seventh century. For many of these monograms, as for this one, it is not possible to propose a reading, even though it is known that the identifiable barred 'S' indicates *signum* (sign) or *sigillum* (seal) while the remaining letters in the monogram refer to the owner's name in the genitive. The letters in this particular monogram were read by S. de Ricci as 'E F E A O P and also doubtless I and T' (The barred 'S' appears below)⁴². Fortunately some of these monograms have been deciphered by M. Deloche. For example, a silver ring found on the right hand of a woman in a Frankish cemetery at Belvaux-Resteigne, Namur, bears a monogram read by him as 'BASINE': either the mother of Clovis I or one of the daughters of Chilperic (561-584)⁴³. Since the form and details of the Namur ring are those we now recognize as characteristic of the seventh century, it is possible to propose at this time that the ring must have belonged to Basine, daughter of King Chilperic.

fer-Müller and Ament *op. cit.* (note 29) 79, pl. 43 no. 19; Moosbrugger-Leu *op. cit.* (note 1) 215 although he stresses the fact that this feature begins in the first half of the seventh century.

⁴⁰ For several examples see: Oman *op. cit.* (note 25) no. 236 with bibliography; Neuffer-Müller and Ament, *op. cit.* (note 29) 79, pl. 43 no. 19; Moosbrugger-Leu *op. cit.* (note 1) 216 ring no. 5 from Basel-Kleinhünningen.

⁴¹ I am indebted to Lisa Van Haecke again for showing me this ring.

⁴² de Ricci, *Gallo-Roman*, pl. VI and no. 93; MMA Acc. No. 17.191.93.

⁴³ Deloche, *Anneaux* 311-313.