

# Early Medieval Art and Archaeology in the Northern World

Studies in Honour of James Graham-Campbell

*Edited by*

Andrew Reynolds and Leslie Webster



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## A REMARKABLE ANGLO-SAXON GOLD FINGER-RING FROM BERKELEY CASTLE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Leslie Webster

Although most of the papers in this volume naturally celebrate the outstanding contribution that James Graham-Campbell has made to Viking and Celtic studies throughout a long and distinguished career, his publications on eighth- to eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon metalwork have always informed and enlivened the subject, whether in identifying another fragment of Trehiddle-style metalwork from the Cuerdale hoard that Wilson had failed to include in the British Museum's catalogue of late Anglo-Saxon metalwork, or shedding new light on the enduring problem of the River Witham Anglo-Saxon hanging bowl. This paper will for the first time offer a full description and discussion of an important but woefully neglected Anglo-Saxon piece, briefly reported in the nineteenth century and with a somewhat obscure history—a conundrum of just the sort that James himself has always enjoyed unpicking.

The magnificent gold finger-ring in the collections at Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire, is one of the grandest to have survived from before the tenth century (Figure 1 a–c; Figure 2). It has been in the collections of the Berkeley family at the Castle since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, but has been on public display only twice before 2010, and indeed has been for many years unavailable for study. In 2010, however, excavations carried out by Bristol University Department of Archaeology on two sites adjacent to the Castle, presumed to be related to the Anglo-Saxon monastery known to have existed at Berkeley from the eighth century, revived local interest in the ring. As a result of this, it was featured in a television programme on the excavations<sup>1</sup> and for the first time put on show at the Castle, from 5 September to 3 October 2010. Thanks to the kindness of the owners, and the Castle archivist, David Smith, the author was fortunate enough to have been allowed to study the ring and to arrange to have it drawn.

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<sup>1</sup> Digging for Britain, Anglo-Saxons, broadcast on BBC Channel 4, 2 September 2010.

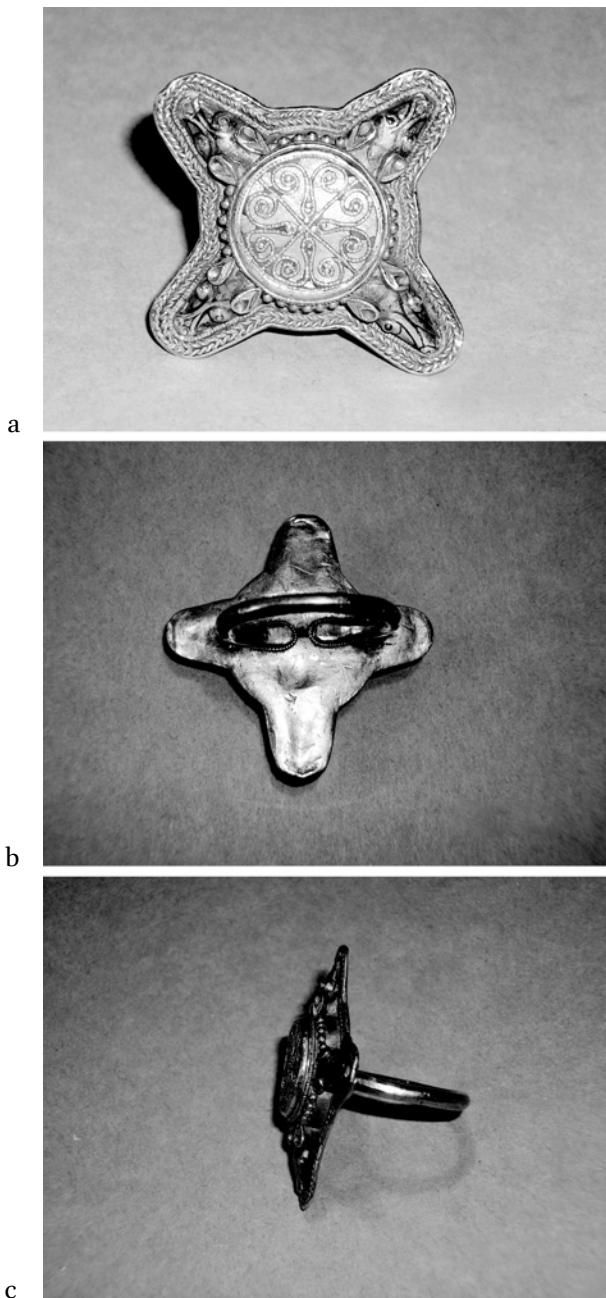


Figure 1 a–c. Anglo-Saxon gold ring from Berkeley, early ninth century: (a) front view (b) back view (c) side view. Photographs: L. Webster.

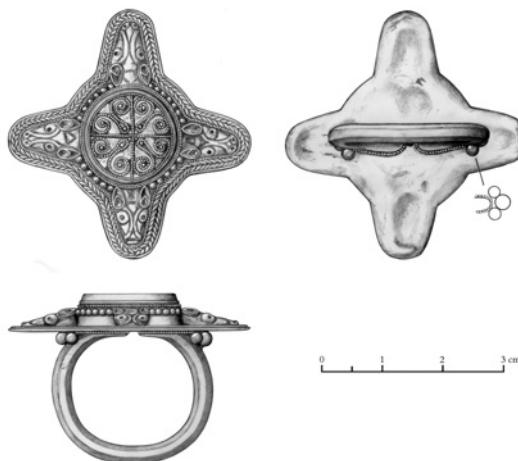


Figure 2. Three views of the Anglo-Saxon ring from Berkeley. Drawing: R. Bryant.

### *Composition and Construction*

The ring is of gold, and although it has not as yet been possible to have the metal analysed, the strong yellow colour suggests that its gold content is high. The large quatrefoil bezel is hollow in construction and has been soldered onto a flat base. It is composed of separate elements, their soldered joints mostly concealed beneath filigree and granulation; shallow indentations on the base plate shadow the voids behind the separate elements of the decoration on the upper plate. The hoop has been soldered on to the base. The ring is elaborately decorated with filigree wire and granulation, niello inlay and blue and amber glass insets.

### *Dimensions*

Bezel: width 40mm, height 41mm, thickness 7mm (max)

Hoop: diameter 26mm (max), thickness, 3mm

### *Description*

The bezel is of an approximate quatrefoil shape, consisting of a central raised disc from which four near-identical animal heads radiate, the whole framed by filigree wire-work. The central disc is decorated with a cruciform pattern executed in very fine beaded wire with individual

granules marking its intersections. Crosswise beaded wire divides the field into four quadrants, in each of which is a hooked double volute; a single pellet marks each curving element. The whole field is framed in beaded wire, and a further beaded wire encircles the side of the disc. The animal heads appear to be cast, not repoussé, but are evidently hollow. There are minute differences in execution, but they follow exactly the same pattern. Each has a long muzzle and pointed ears with a distinctive inner contour. Three of the heads have eyes inlaid with translucent blue glass, but the third has eyes of amber glass; when the ring is worn, the animal with the amber-coloured eyes sits either at the top or the bottom of the cruciform bezel. The eyes are emphasized by encircling niello frames; curving niello lines also descend from the brows, delineating the contours of the muzzle, and terminate in frames which encircle the nostrils. A further triangular panel outlined in niello decorates the upper brow, between the ears. Separating the heads, at the base of the central disc, are curving rows of large gold pellets, two of six, one of five and one of seven. The edges of this quatrefoil construction are framed by three borders of filigree wire; an inner one of fine beaded wire of the type seen on the central disc, surrounded by two opposed twisted wires, creating a plaited effect. The hoop is roughly octahedral in section, its two ends flattened where they are soldered to the base of the bezel. Three large pellets are soldered at the exterior edges of these soldered junctions, and the flattened ends are framed by fine beaded wire of the kind seen on the bezel. Between these ends, a small neat hole has been pierced into the base. This is probably original.

The first published mention of the ring is in 1863, when it is described in the catalogue of a gargantuan special exhibition of works of art held at the South Kensington Museum (subsequently the Victoria and Albert Museum) in June 1862.<sup>2</sup> Here it features in Section 33, unappetizingly titled *Miscellaneous Rings*, where is catalogued as No. 7,172; the catalogue entry gives a full and accurate description of the ring and goes on to add that ‘this very remarkable ring is of admirable workmanship, and may probably be as early as the 11th century, and perhaps of Irish origin’. This uncertainty about its date was to follow it well into the next century. No mention of its provenance or date of discovery is given in the

<sup>2</sup> Robinson 1863: 634. This was the inaugural loan exhibition in the newly opened South Court of the South Kensington Museum; it took place during the period of the adjacent 1862 International Exhibition on the site of what is now the Natural History Museum, and was evidently intended as a complementary display of mainly medieval and renaissance works of art.

entry, but the fact that the lender is named as Lord Fitzhardinge identifies its association with Berkeley Castle. This must refer to Maurice Berkeley (1788–1867), First Sea Lord and sometime Principal Naval Aide-de-Camp to Queen Victoria, who was created first Baron FitzHardinge of Bristol in 1861; he was the illegitimate son of the fifth Earl of Berkeley and had succeeded to the estate on the death of his brother in 1858. Thus, the ring was in the possession of the Berkeley family by the middle years of the nineteenth century.

It seems to have taken over 50 years for the ring to appear in print again, when it is briefly mentioned in a 1926 paper on Berkeley Castle in the *Bristol and Gloucester Transactions*.<sup>3</sup> It is also illustrated here, apparently for the first time, with a caption stating that it was found ‘at Berkeley Castle before 1800, of uncertain date’. It is not discussed in the main text, but a footnote to a mention of late Saxon sculpture on page 141 gives it short shrift: ‘A ring of about this period was found long ago at Berkeley and has been figured in other books and attributed sometimes to a far earlier date than it requires. Plate 1’. These two statements reflect both the author’s rather trenchant style, and his distinct vagueness about the ring and its find circumstances. Certainly, they are not wholly compatible in terms either of the provenance—was it found at Berkeley Castle or in Berkeley the town?—or dating options ascribed. The reference to illustration and dating of the ring in other books is intriguing, as the statement clearly cannot refer to the 1863 description, where it is not illustrated and a late, i.e., eleventh-century date is tentatively proposed, and I have so far been unable to track down any other publication of it between 1863 and 1926. These inconsistencies and the unsubstantiated reference to other publications raise doubts about Baddeley’s reliability as a source, and indeed, this was questioned at the time. Many of the statements in his paper were vigorously rebutted by the Earl of Berkeley in a rejoinder in the following volume of the *Bristol and Gloucester Transactions*,<sup>4</sup> stating that it is ‘imperative to point out the numerous errors [Baddeley] has fallen into’. Unfortunately, the Earl did not clarify or pass any judgment on Baddeley’s statements about the ring’s provenance or publication history, but given the low profile that the ring has within Baddeley’s paper, it may not have been thought worth further discussion, given the numerous more serious errors of substance that the Earl was concerned to address. Subsequent

<sup>3</sup> Baddeley 1926: 141, footnote and pl. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Earl of Berkeley 1927: 183–193.

publications by Talbot Rice, Oman, and Scarisbrick and Taylor, have shed no additional light on its provenance and early history, clearly relying on one or the other of Baddeley's two references to its find place;<sup>5</sup> nor is there any independent record or tradition at the Castle itself concerning the ring and its discovery. However, circumstantial evidence supports the tradition that the ring is most probably a local find. The Castle contains a number of fragments of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, some certainly from the vicinity, others probably so. This suggests that finds of local origin were entering the family collections from at least the nineteenth century. The sculptures include three decorated fragments which were found built into the castle fabric and in one case under a floor; other important Anglo-Saxon pieces in the collections include two eighth- and ninth-century sculptural fragments found in the adjacent church and acquired in the earlier twentieth century, and a very fine eighth-century fragment with opposed birds, built into the wall of the Treasury in the Castle, which is likely to have entered the collections during the nineteenth century at latest.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the recent excavations carried out in the adjacent High Street Garden/Nelme's Paddock site by Bristol University have yielded traces of Anglo-Saxon buildings, Anglo-Saxon pottery, and a number of pieces of Anglo-Saxon metalwork, including an eighth-century sceat, and a ninth-century strap-end.<sup>7</sup> It has been plausibly suggested that the buildings are associated with the Anglo-Saxon religious community known to have existed at Berkeley until it was suppressed in the mid-eleventh century; it is attested in two charters, of 804 and 824 respectively, which mention the community at Berkeley in connexion with disputes about landholdings in the area.<sup>8</sup> It seems very likely that the Anglo-Saxon sculptural fragments housed in the Castle also derive from this ecclesiastical site. The ring sits comfortably within this local context of middle-to-late Anglo-Saxon activity, and since it has been in the collections at the Castle

<sup>5</sup> Talbot Rice 1951: 236, where it is erroneously stated that Baddeley dates the ring to the reign of Alfred, and the page reference is incorrect; Oman 1974: 16, pl. 9c; Scarisbrick and Taylor 1978: no. 231, where the glass insets are incorrectly described as red. Opinions are divided as to the date of the ring: Talbot Rice, having identified the animal heads as bats, evasively describes the ring as 'probably fairly early'; Oman states that 'an eleventh century date is generally accepted'; Scarisbrick and Taylor come nearest, with a verdict of 'C8–11, perhaps C9'.

<sup>6</sup> I am very grateful to Michael Hare and Richard Bryant for supplying information on the Anglo-Saxon sculpture in the Castle collection.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall 2010; Prior & Silversides 2010: 135–136.

<sup>8</sup> Electronic Sawyer, S 1187, S 1433.

from at least the middle of the nineteenth century, it is reasonable to presume that it is an old find, discovered nearby.

The ring itself is unique in its shape and unusually large and elaborate in its execution, its raised bezel and supporting three-dimensional animal heads giving it an architectural quality. Rings of this scale and complexity are very rare before the tenth century. A small number of imposing Anglo-Saxon architectural rings have survived from the late tenth and eleventh centuries, including specimens with large lozenge-shaped filigree-decorated bezels from the Iona hoard and from Hitchin, and an even more grandiose example from the hoard of gold rings and bullion found in West Yorkshire in 2009.<sup>9</sup> However, there is a much earlier tradition of very grand architectural rings in Merovingian and other continental contexts; a possible example, of continental Germanic rather than Anglo-Saxon origin, was discovered by a detectorist near York in 2009.<sup>10</sup> This large and bold ring looks as if it ought to date to the late fifth or sixth century, on account of its red glass cloisonné in simple triangular cells, separated by small circular settings, though its central blue gemstone *en cabochon* is certainly exceptional.<sup>11</sup> If this early dating is correct, it is perhaps from such rings that the Berkeley ring ultimately derives; it is notable, for instance, that like the Yorkshire ring, it too has a cluster of three pellets at the external edge of the junction of the hoop with the back plate, in a Merovingian, ultimately late Antique, manner. The Berkeley ring thus seems to reflect an earlier tradition, but as we shall see, is earlier than the tenth-century examples, both in the kind of filigree that decorates it, and in the animal head decoration. It seems quite possible that it represents in fact a transitional type between earlier, continental, grandiose rings, and a later tradition of architectural rings in Anglo-Saxon England, both ultimately recalling late Antique and Byzantine tradition. The fact that there are no other Anglo-Saxon seventh-century examples of similarly elaborate rings should not surprise, given the general dearth of rings in burials of this period. A rare survival of a decorated ring of late seventh or, more probably, early eighth century, date, comes from Abingdon (Oxfordshire); it is a fine but unostentatious piece, with a disc-shaped bezel with a simple beaded wire cross motif and apparently bichrome (?millefiori) glass studs,

<sup>9</sup> Webster 1995; Cooper & Crowther 2010.

<sup>10</sup> *The Searcher* February 2011: 23.

<sup>11</sup> Fragments of garnet were also noted; perhaps some or all of the glass settings were replacements?

defining the shape of a larger cross with expanded arms.<sup>12</sup> From the later eighth century, the rings from Garrick Street (London) and Bossington (Hampshire), with their explicitly Christian designs, are both much simpler than the Berkeley ring;<sup>13</sup> the nearest example, in its complex design, and in the use of fine beaded wire to edge the ends of the hoop where it joins the back-plate, is an unprovenanced gold ring with a large filigree-decorated disc-shaped bezel, but it is very different in construction and style.<sup>14</sup> The few other surviving decorated rings that can be dated to the late eighth century, such as the Dorchester and Chelsea rings,<sup>15</sup> are also quite different in style and execution, as are the majority of ninth-century rings; these, like the two royal rings of Æthelwulf and Æthelswith, which are dated to the middle years of the century,<sup>16</sup> are generally characterised by niello-inlaid Trewhiddle style decoration and lack any filigree embellishment. A lost silver ring from the Trewhiddle hoard,<sup>17</sup> and a gold ring recently auctioned at Christie's,<sup>18</sup> both of mid-ninth-century date, do have bezels of quatrefoil shape, but they too are much less elaborate both in construction and design. They are made in one piece, lacking the architectural quality of the Berkeley ring, and the quatrefoils have small rounded lobes with nielloed decoration in the Trewhiddle manner, and lack filigree. If they have any connexion with the much more exaggerated and ambitious form of the Berkeley ring, it can only be a remote one.

The decoration of the ring is particularly striking and has features which can help to date it fairly closely. Beaded wire and granulation, as noted above, are not seen on mid- or later ninth-century rings, and the fine beaded wire of the Berkeley ring is technically and in appearance quite different from the serrated band filigree wire employed on rings of tenth- and early eleventh-century date, where scrolled and clasped plant patterns dominate, echoing foliage patterns in contemporary manuscripts and sculpture. Pseudo-plait filigree, formed of opposed twisted wires, as on the Berkeley ring, is also absent in these tenth-century rings. It does however, appear on late sixth- and seventh-century jewellery and continues into the late eighth and early ninth centuries, where it is prominent on the Garrick Street and Bossington rings; their one-piece construction,

<sup>12</sup> Youngs 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Hinton 1974: cat. no. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Hinton 1974: cat. no. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Hinton 1974: cat. 8; Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 175.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson 1964: cat. nos. 31, 1; Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. nos. 243, 244.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson & Blunt 1961: 85, pl. xvii, c.

<sup>18</sup> Christie's, 9 June 2010, lot 123.



Figure 3. Unprovenanced silver-gilt strap fitting, late eighth- or early ninth-century. Not to scale. Photograph: British Museum.

and their flattish, metallic, shape may be very different in style and execution from the Berkeley ring, but the same distinctive filigree style appears on it, suggesting that its appearance on the ring could support a date not much beyond the early ninth century.

More diagnostic are the four delicately modelled and patterned animal heads, set at the ring's cardinal points. Animal heads or masks intended to be seen frontally, with dog-like features, pointed ears, prominent eyes and nostrils, and long, usually decorated, muzzles, all start to appear in metalwork, manuscripts and sculpture from the later years of the eighth century and the early ninth century. Examples can be seen in the *Codex Aureus* (folios 11r and 8v) and the Barberini Gospels (folio 125),<sup>19</sup> and in the Breedon-on-the-Hill (Leicestershire) sculptural friezes;<sup>20</sup> and they occur widely in metalwork, for instance on dress-pins,<sup>21</sup> on the nasal of the York helmet,<sup>22</sup> the North Elmham censer suspension mounts,<sup>23</sup> and an unprovenanced strap fitting (Figure 3). Later, slightly different versions appear in

<sup>19</sup> Alexander 1978: cat. nos. 30, 36; Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat nos. 154, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Jewell 1986: pl. li, c.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. on a fragmentary pin from Old Romney, Kent, datable to the late eighth century; Gannon 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Tweddle 1991; Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 206.

the Canterbury Gospels (folios 4r and 6r).<sup>24</sup> The animal heads on the early/mid-ninth-century North Elmham censer have niello inlay on the brows, as on the ring, and muzzle decoration is particularly marked in the York helmet and the unprovenanced mount, both datable to the period around 800. This is also the case on the late eighth-century Ormside Bowl, where five of the eccentric quadrupeds which feed on the vine-scrolls have the classic visage, with long, patterned muzzles, prominent eyes and nostrils, and pointed ears; though chased, not cast, they are close in appearance to the heads on the ring.<sup>25</sup> In cast form, they are also seen on the ends of the four fittings around the rim of the bowl; and on the closely related Bischofshofen altar cross, very similar versions appear in volutes on the cross arms and stem.<sup>26</sup> And as the animals on the fittings of the bowl remind us, these distinctive heads soon migrate onto the terminals of Trehiddle-style and related strap-ends, where in various regional sub-forms, they become a *leitmotif* of ninth-century decoration, continuing up to the end of the ninth century on the terminal of the Alfred Jewel and one or two of its relations.<sup>27</sup> But in their earlier, late eighth- and earlier ninth-century manifestations, there seems to be a distinct correlation between this animal head type and the area of the Mercian supremacy. Thus, to take only some of these examples, the *Codex Aureus* and the Canterbury Gospels are manuscripts produced at Canterbury, in the middle years of the eighth century and the first quarter of the ninth century, respectively, during the period of Mercian overlordship; the Barberini Gospels is a later eighth-century manuscript which was probably made at Peterborough.<sup>28</sup> The distinctive hairspring vinescroll seen on the metal sides of the Bischofshofen cross is similar to that on some Derbyshire crosses, such as that at Eyam, suggesting again a Mercian connexion, and a Mercian origin has also been proposed for the late eighth-century St Petersburg Gospels, to which the York helmet is closely related.<sup>29</sup>

All of this suggests that the animal heads on the ring place it within a context of Mercian production; and indeed, the most striking parallel to the Berkeley ring comes from the western end of the Mercian hegemony—and much nearer home—in the form of some of the animal heads which

<sup>24</sup> Alexander 1978: cat. no. 37; Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 171.

<sup>25</sup> Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 134.

<sup>26</sup> Webster & Backhouse 1991: cat. no. 133.

<sup>27</sup> Hinton 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey 2000; Farr 2000; Brown 2008: 52–53.

<sup>29</sup> Brown 2008: 52.



Figure 4. Painted decoration on one of the animals on the chancel arch, St Mary's church, Deerhurst, Gloucestershire; first half of the ninth century. Illustration: R. Bryant.

decorate the Anglo-Saxon priory church at Deerhurst, Gloucestershire—a half day's ride from Berkeley itself. These have recently been the subject of examination and analysis, revealing extensive traces of original red, yellow and black paintwork.<sup>30</sup> Particularly close are the two animal heads on the chancel arch, of which the one on the north side is the best preserved (Figure 4); this was originally covered with a yellow ground, which the authors suggest may have been intended to copy the gold or gilded appearance of metalwork; in addition, its eyes, ears, muzzle and nostrils were boldly emphasized in red paint. A particularly striking feature shared with the Berkeley animal heads is the inner contour of the ears, a feature not seen elsewhere, though something similar occurs in leaves in one of the Breedon animal frieze fragments.<sup>31</sup> Other animal heads in the porch at Deerhurst have sculpted detail on the muzzles and also share a general

<sup>30</sup> Gem et al. 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Jewell 1986, pl. li, a and c; Kendrick 1938: pl. lxxiii.

similarity with the creatures on the ring, and other heads in this group. The extremely close parallels between the ring and the chancel arch heads suggest that, although both belong within a wider Mercian tradition, they were produced within a local artistic milieu serving high-status patrons in the west of Gloucestershire. Direct or indirect, there must also surely have been some interchange between these two nearby important ecclesiastical centres in this period, a possibility supported by the two early ninth-century charters mentioned above, which hint at a connexion of some kind between the two.

Current opinion now places the Deerhurst chancel heads in the first half of the ninth century; this, and the similarity of the animal heads on the ring to the eighth-century Ormside and Bischofshofen animal heads, and, as we have seen, the nature of the filigree, all point to a date for the ring in the first third of the ninth century—a date which also sits comfortably with the historical and archaeological dating of the possible monastery site at Berkeley.

If, as seems likely, the ring was found at Berkeley, the presence of a wealthy religious foundation adjacent to and underlying the Castle grounds, and the discovery of high-quality Saxon sculpture of the eighth and ninth centuries provides a contemporary context in which the ring could have been lost. Might the ring even have belonged to a member of this community? Its cruciform design, with four animal heads radiating from the filigree cross pattern on the central disc, is constructed so as to present as a vertical cross, not a saltire, when worn. This might conceivably have been intended as a specifically Christian motif, the four animal heads which issue from the central cross possibly symbolising, for instance, the spreading of the Christian message through the four gospels; but if so, its iconography is certainly much less overt than that of late eighth-century rings with Christian motifs, such as the Garrick Street and Bossington rings (dominant cross design, Christian inscription) and the unprovenanced ring in the Ashmolean (bold central cross). Ninth-century rings with Christian iconography have equally explicit designs, such as the two royal rings, which depict, respectively, peacocks at the Fountain of Life, and the Agnus Dei; and an unprovenanced ring with crosses and an evangelist bust, in the British Museum.<sup>32</sup> And even if the decoration of the Berkeley ring does harbour an intentionally Christian scheme, that would not preclude secular ownership, as the above examples show. Its superb

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.artfund.org/artwork/9567/ring>.

workmanship and impressive size show that the ring was undoubtedly made for a wealthy owner, though whether it belonged to an ecclesiastic, or a high-status secular owner from Berkeley, or indeed elsewhere in the locality, remains unknowable. But that it is one of the most splendid and subtle rings to have survived from Anglo-Saxon England, a magnificent product of the final period of the Mercian supremacy, is without doubt.<sup>33</sup>

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